



UNIVERSITY OF  
**OXFORD**

**BECOMING QUEEN:**  
Voices, Bodies, and Technologies in Drag Lip-Sync  
Performance

Doctor of Philosophy in Music (Musicology)

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*For my family, and for Miss Rose Wood*

*“Punish the Street”*

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## Abstract

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Lip-syncing is foundational to drag performance. While it may have had rather humble beginnings, responding to exigencies of frugality rather than artistry, drag lip-syncing has become a highly refined and stylised mode of performance, but also one that has been left relatively unexamined. This thesis seeks to interrogate drag lip-sync performance from a variety of angles, providing solid theoretical frameworks for how lip-syncing functions as well as its unique attraction and self-actualising benefits for the performing queen. To this end, I split the thesis into four sections – The Silent Voice, The Imaginary Voice, The Material Voice, and The Queer Voice – and draw my conclusions through the help of five London-based drag queens: ShayShay, Rodent, Sue, Bougie, and Ruby. I begin by looking at lip-syncing’s theoretical importance to voice studies, arguing that lip-syncing evidences a special type of “silent voice”, a voice that is generated through silence, and also a voice that reflects the extimate silence of all speech acts. In the second section, I am more concerned with why drag queens choose to lip-sync, and what benefits it holds for the queen. Through psychoanalytical and ethnographic work, I argue for a complex series of identifications that take place, across multiple bodies and voices. The third section attends to the affective materiality of lip-syncing, first by theorising the necessity of loud sound in lip-sync performance and an attendant type of listening I coin as “haptic aurality”, and second by exploring the limits of the body in lip-syncing through an analysis of a performance by ShayShay. Finally, I turn to the queer voice – a voice that speaks queerly in its structure, but also to queer people through affective ties of memory and sound. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to uncover what lip-syncing can teach us about more typical acts of voicing, and also to make clear the abundant variety of ways in which drag queens use lip-syncing creatively in order to gain confidence and self-surety. As such, lip-syncing is conceived of throughout as, at base, a political act. Lip-syncing is a site of relation, an active creative process, and one that aids the performing queen in a constant process of becoming.

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## Chapter 0

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*I'm not a man, I'm not a woman. I'm just a spirit, with a suitcase full of drag*

~ Miss Rose Wood

### *0.i – Through the 0*

What can one learn from the drag queen's lip-syncing mouth? What, as her mouth silently traces the words of another, is presented in her ecstatic song? I contend that out of the seeming emptiness of her mouth whole worlds pour. Leaving the following dyads pregnant with meaning by way of introduction, lip-syncing offers: silent mouths coupled with thunderous soundscapes; alien voices aiding in self-construction; the aping of singularity across a plurally distributed vocality; at base, a something coming from a nothing. As the drag queen performs onstage, she does so with a voice that seems decidedly her own, one that, if everything is just right, seems to be issuing from deep within her. But no voice comes out of her mouth: from no voice comes voice. Lip-syncing is the voice that isn't, or at least the voice that isn't in the typical sense. Here, the voice (or voices) of another is adopted by the queen, distributed across multiple bodies and technologies, creating a spread of voice that envelops the queen. The tensions of lip-syncing are held in its focal point: the lips. For, though lip-syncing is much more than its namesake and engages a full corporeality, it is to the lips that one's eyes are drawn, following the overdrawn, glittering mouth of the queen. And what does one see in the mouth of the drag queen? In discussing the movements of the mouth in all speech, Jacques Derrida remarked that: "il se touche" means that it or he self-touches itself or himself (in a

loop, with the mouth lip-syncing the looping – of a circle, literally of an *o* or a zero)”.<sup>1</sup> The lip-syncing mouth, constantly morphing around new words, undulates between new circular and elliptical configurations and silently traces the quintessential “nothing that is”: “an *o* or a zero”.<sup>2</sup> Such an observation does more than simply describe the movements of the mouth, for there is a more significant meaning in the lip-syncing mouth’s visual similarity to zero. Speaking of zero, Robert Kaplan writes that “if you look at zero you see nothing; but look through it and you will see the world [for] zero stands not for the closing of a ring: it is rather a gateway”.<sup>3</sup> Zero, the symbol of nothing from which previously unthinkable mathematical advancements unfolded, is an apposite metaphor for lip-syncing. The empty mouth in lip-syncing is a gateway, a rabbit hole, a journey through which that promises new ways of being. Naming but a few, lip-syncing: reconfigures relationships with the self; queers bodily inscriptions; and dismantles the common-sense understandings of what it means to have a voice. Through the emptiness of the mouth, the nothingness of lip-syncing, new worlds are spoken. Such new ways of being are what I hope to uncover in this thesis.

As this thesis unfolds, I will interrogate lip-syncing from a variety of different angles: I assess lip-syncing as a mode of speaking, employing phenomenological literatures; I question why drag queens enjoy lip-syncing so much, through a psychoanalytical lens; and I generate new theories from close ethnographic research with five exceptionally talented drag queens based in London. Before I begin these investigations, however, a few primary questions must be answered. What is lip-syncing? What is drag? How is drag lip-syncing different from other forms of lip-syncing? On whose authority will this thesis lean? I shall address these questions here, in this Chapter 0.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Kaplan, *The Nothing that is: A Natural History of Zero* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. i.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 1 & 3.

## *O.ii – Lip-Syncing*

In its simplest and most prosaic definition, lip-syncing is the act of moving one's lips in time with a voice that is being projected from a source other than the lip-syncer, during which the lip-syncer silently traces the contours of the words being sung or spoken, as though the voice were issuing from them: whether moving one's lips absent-mindedly around the words of a favourite song in the car or pretending to sing along in assembly as an embarrassed child, one is lip-syncing. While lip-syncing may have very quotidian iterations, drag queens have elevated it to a highly refined craft, and one that is utterly foundational to modern conceptions of drag. Drag queens move lip-syncing from the amateur's bedroom directly to the limelight, celebrating a performative medium that is dripping in glamour. Indeed, drag lip-sync performance works on both sides of glamour: at once glamorous, with impossibly stunning queens sashaying across the stage, lip-syncing the stratospheric belts of, say, Beyoncé or Mariah Carey; but also glamorous in its more arcane meaning, of enchantment and magic, bewitching the audience into believing that this voice so perfectly resides in this body.<sup>4</sup> Beyond simply miming to a single song, moreover, drag queens have pushed the limits of lip-syncing: drag queens stitch together tracks, making patchwork voices, layering identities and putting pressure on what it means to be or have a voice. And yet, while drag queens may now have honed lip-syncing into a highly stylised and refined art, its beginnings are far humbler, tracing a different lineage than one might expect.

There is a broad cultural history that evidences a perennial fascination with the relationship between body and voice. From ancient legends of the Oracle of Delphi, that Pythian priestess who would sit across a chasm and allow the upward-floating fumes from the ground to travel through her, thereby eliciting prophecies in which “air is transformed into speech”, to more recent examples of Victorian hoax ventriloquists who summoned the voices of the dearly-departed, the continued

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<sup>4</sup> It is fitting that “glamour” is also etymologically related to “grammar”, supplying a link with the drag queen's interrogation of linguistic structures, of which I speak throughout this thesis.

interest in the attachment of one voice to another body is clear.<sup>5</sup> Such intrigues then feed into more secular forms of entertainment, namely ventriloquism, in which a puppet is animated – literally, given *anima*, life or soul – by the voice of the ventriloquist.<sup>6</sup> Beyond an interest in ventriloquism acts themselves, such performance practices supply a constructive theoretical model for lip-syncing, that of the ventriloquial structure, in which, “just as ventriloquism depends upon the insufficiency of sound and the adjustment of sound by sight, so a ventriloquial structure is at work in the larger adjustments of sound, sight, and the other senses”.<sup>7</sup>

Lip-syncing is also ubiquitous on our screens, with lip-sync performances that are both disguised and laid bare appearing incessantly in television and film. For one, all film and television has a close affinity with lip-syncing, given that, as per my primary definition above, the sound of the voice issues from a source other than the speaking person’s mouth. For example, in the cinema, the sound of the voice is always coming from the speakers positioned around the room, and never pinpointed from the mouth on the screen; the voice is part of the track, which is then layered over the image. Rick Altman, in his analysis of cinema as ventriloquism, states that the viewer yokes sound and image by virtue of the moving lips of the actor: these lips “transfer the origin of the words, as perceived by the spectator/auditor, from sound ‘track’ and loudspeaker to a character within the film’s diegesis”.<sup>8</sup> More than a spatial disjuncture, though, filmic ventriloquism also involves a temporal displacement, in which the actors’ voices are recorded in postproduction and subsequently layered onto the moving image. These practices underscore an important asynchronicity, in which the voice is neither co-present nor coterminous. Indeed, for authors such as Mary Ann Doane, such a split between sound and image offers a potential danger, suggesting that “the dangers of post-

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<sup>5</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*; Darryl Hutton, *Ventriloquism* (London: Kaye & Ward, 1974).

<sup>7</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck*, p. 22; this idea is furthered by Charles Davis to encompass a ventriloquial identity, “Reading the Ventriloquist’s Lips: The Performance of Genre behind the Metaphor”, in *TDR* (1988-), Volume 42, Number 4 (Winter 1998), p. 134.

<sup>8</sup> Rick Altman, “Moving Lips: Cinema as Ventriloquism”, in *Yale French Studies*, Number 60, Cinema/Sound (1980), p. 69.

synchronization and looping stem from the fact that the voice is disengaged from its 'proper' space (the space conveyed by the visual image) and the credibility of that voice depends upon the technician's ability to return it to the site of its origin".<sup>9</sup> This cinematic unity between sound and image is what Michel Chion dubs "synchresis", a portmanteau of "synchronism" and "synthesis" which I will utilise further in Chapter 1, but by way of introduction is a term that describes the elision of sound and image as mutually constitutive simply by virtue of them happening at the same time.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the relationship between voice and image is one that is of critical importance to other artistic practices aside from lip-syncing.

The above filmic theories apply, though not restrictively, to voices that, while dislocated, still originally came from the bodies to which they are attached: but what of voices that find new homes? What of the Bollywood tradition of playback singing, in which onscreen actors always take on a different voice when singing? For example, Lata Mangeshkar, though never appearing visually in film, has "lent her voice to over twenty-five thousand songs" in Bollywood movies, and has become a household name whose "star identity has since eclipsed that of the actors to whom she lent her voice".<sup>11</sup> And while this process was never hidden in Bollywood, with playback singers such as Lata Mangeshkar enjoying considerable fame, its presence in Hollywood was intentionally obfuscated. For example, Rita Hayworth was dubbed in all of her musicals in the 1940s, and by different singers, as was Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady*.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Marni Nixon, whose voice can be heard in *My Fair Lady*, also sang for roles played by Deborah Kerr, Natalie Wood, and Marilyn Monroe, and even recently called for the return of such dubbing practices after watching the film adaptations of *Les*

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<sup>9</sup> Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in Cinema: The Articulation of the Body and Space", in *Yale French Studies*, Number 60, Cinema/Sound (1980), p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Chion, "Audio-Vision and Sound", in *Sound*, eds. Patricia Kruth & Henry Stobart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 205.

<sup>11</sup> Sangita Gopal & Sujata Moorti, "Introduction: Travels of Hindi Song and Dance", in *Global Bollywood: Travels of Hindi Song and Dance*, eds. Sangita Gopal & Sujata Moorti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 23; see also Neepa Majumdar, "The Embodied Voice: Song Sequences and Stardom in Popular Hindi Cinema", in *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music*, eds. Pamela Robertson Wojcik & Arthur Knight (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 163.

<sup>12</sup> Marsha Siefert, "Image/Music/Voice: Song Dubbing in Hollywood Musicals", in *Journal of Communication*, Volume 45, Number 2 (Spring 1995), pp. 48 & 53.

*Misérables* and *Mamma Mia!*<sup>13</sup> Such practices were famously dramatised in the movie *Singin' in the Rain*, whose plot revolves around the relationship between an actress, Lina, and her playback singer, Kathy; in the final scene, the curtain is literally pulled back, and the “true” identity of the singer is revealed.

To this list of filmic and televisual lip-syncs, one can also add much more overt examples of lip-syncing, evidenced most quintessentially in the movies of David Lynch, the television series of Dennis Potter, and movies including drag queens. In both *Blue Velvet* and *Mulholland Drive*, David Lynch toys with the necessary split of sound and image in film, portraying characters that openly lip-sync; chillingly, in *Mulholland Drive*, a woman is seen to be singing onstage until she suddenly drops dead as the voice continues on (the club, fittingly, is called *Silencio*). Similarly, Dennis Potter frequently uses lip-syncing in television series such as *Lipstick on Your Collar* in order to provide a deep insight into the inner emotional life of the characters onscreen, in lip-syncs that are highly stylised with no attempt at deception.<sup>14</sup> And, of course, films with drag queens so often feature lip-syncing, most memorably in the iconic scene from *Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*, in which drag queen Felicia Jollygoodfellow sits in a giant silver glittery stiletto-cum-throne, with metres of fabric billowing behind her, strapped atop an RV, hurtling through the Australian outback: drag is, if nothing else, excess.

And yet, while the above charts a pleasing narrative that no doubt partially informed the current trajectory of drag lip-syncing, lip-syncing began under far less artistically driven circumstances. Through the 1960s, as the clientele at live female impersonation shows dwindled and the exorbitant costs of musicians became untenable, “lip synching [*sic*] became the rage, cheap because it obviated both professional musicians and drag artistes”.<sup>15</sup> Rather than a milestone in the

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<sup>13</sup> Merrie Snell, *Lipsynching* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), pp. 36-38.

<sup>14</sup> Joshua Walden, “Lip-Sync in *Lipstick*: 1950s Popular Songs in a Television Series by Dennis Potter”, in *Journal of Musicological Research*, Volume 27 (2008), p. 171.

<sup>15</sup> Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 384; see also Carol Langley, “Borrowed Voice: The Art of Lip-Synching in Sydney Drag”, in *Australasian Drama Studies*, Volume 48 (April 2006), p. 7.

millennia-old obsession with body and voice mediated through modern-day recording abilities, lip-syncing was, for all intents and purposes, a necessary frugality. Indeed, lip-syncing's artistry was certainly up for debate, with Esther Newton noting in her landmark ethnography of drag queens in New York that "it is disparagingly said in the profession that 'anybody can mouth a record'".<sup>16</sup> Though this may at base be true, lip-syncing soon became a highly refined practice, and by the 1990s drag queens such as the legendary Lypsinka were elevating lip-syncing to dizzying artistic heights. Lypsinka was famed for her intricately edited routines that stitch together innumerable soundbites from Hollywood's chief divas, which she then meticulously rehearsed and lip-synced with effortless poise. She became something of a celebrity in the 1990s, performing on *The Joan Rivers Show* as well as on the runway for fashion haute couturier Thierry Mugler.<sup>17</sup> Today, lip-syncing is synonymous with drag, so much so that on the popular American – and Emmy award-winning – television show *RuPaul's Drag Race*, a reality show that pits America's best drag queens against each other for the title of "America's Next Drag Superstar", the two bottom-most queens of each week are placed in a head-to-head lip-sync battle, each lip-syncing the same song simultaneously as the eponymous RuPaul judges who is deserving to stay. Lip-syncing isn't just something drag queens do, but *what* drag queens do; and while not every drag queen may choose to lip-sync, to separate drag from lip-syncing is unthinkable.

Lip-syncing has now proliferated to an astonishing degree. With the rise of television shows such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* lip-syncing has become a cultural commodity in a way it simply wasn't before. Indeed, there are now shows devoted to lip-syncing. For example, Paramount's *Lip-Sync Battle!* has capitalised on this newly popularised medium, inviting celebrities to come onto the show and lip-sync to famous pop songs. Interestingly, these performances often involve some sort of gender play, as well as sometimes being upended by a surprise appearance of the actual singer during the performance, generating a fascinating web of voices and bodies. Similarly, the mobile app

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<sup>16</sup> Esther Newton, *Mother Camp* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1972), p. 44.

<sup>17</sup> Julian Fleisher, *The Drag Queens of New York: An Illustrated Field Guide* (London: Pandora, 1996), pp. 139-141.

TikTok, on which users create short videos that often feature lip-syncing to both songs and spoken-word audio, has grown exponentially since its first iteration as Musical.ly in 2014, reaching over a billion downloads in 2018 and superseding Instagram by some 219 million downloads that year.<sup>18</sup>

And yet, where lip-syncing is in many instances something to be praised, it has a complicated cultural history. The Hollywood examples I mention above, of Hepburn, Monroe, Wood, Hayworth and *Singin' in the Rain*, intimate the negative associations of lip-syncing: lip-syncing is somehow inauthentic, deceptive, even downright immoral. The quintessential *cause célèbre* is Milli Vanilli, a musical duo who rose to popularity toward the end of the 1980s, and who were described on their album cover as the “Brothers of Soul”.<sup>19</sup> However, by mid-November 1990 their fame soured into infamy after they revealed that the voices on their (now ironically named) album *Girl You Know It's True* were not their own. This admittance led to a revoked Grammy, and even compensation for fans who had bought cassettes, CDs and concert tickets.<sup>20</sup> People were outraged by the perceived lack of authenticity, feeling themselves to have been duped. Indeed, “Milli Vanilli” became synonymous with deception and fakery, with Luciano Pavarotti being described as “pulling a Milli Vanilli” after lip-syncing a 1992 performance in Italy.<sup>21</sup> While there were certainly other reasons for the hatred directed toward Milli Vanilli, not least potential homophobia, the moral outrage toward lip-syncing resurfaces consistently. When Beyoncé was found to be lip-syncing to her own voice at Barack Obama’s second inauguration, people were outraged, some even claiming it nullified the consecration of Obama as president; such live performance practices are not uncommon, however, and Whitney Houston sang the National Anthem with the microphone turned off at her iconic 1991

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<sup>18</sup> Isobel Asher Hamilton, “TikTok Was Bigger than Instagram Last Year After Passing the 1 Billion Download Mark”, on *Business Insider* (February 2019) <https://www.businessinsider.com/tiktok-hit-1-billion-downloads-surpassing-instagram-in-2018-2019-2?r=US&IR=T> (accessed on: 7<sup>th</sup> of October 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Chris Martin, “Traditional Criticism of Popular Music and the Making of a Lip-Synching Scandal”, in *Popular Music & Society*, Volume 17, Number 4 (1993), p. 64; see also Philip Auslander, *Liveness* (Oxford: Taylor and Francis, 1999), pp. 61-62 and Merrie Snell, *Lipsynching*, p. 46.

<sup>20</sup> Chris Martin, “Traditional Criticism of Popular Music and the Making of a Lip-Synching Scandal”, p. 64.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 76.

Superbowl performance, the voice the assembled stadium heard having been pre-recorded (and, as with Beyoncé and Pavarotti, pre-recorded for the ultimate purpose of being lip-synced to).<sup>22</sup>

To this list, one can add the vitriolic attacks levelled at Britney Spears for lip-syncing to her 2009 *Circus Tour*, ridiculing her after her public 2007 breakdown.<sup>23</sup> While the vituperations of such performances are shrouded in discussions of authenticity and legitimacy, what seems to be beneath most of them is a patent political agenda: Beyoncé's lip-syncing is sacrilege to those who didn't want Obama to be president; Britney lip-syncing, as explained by Merrie Snell, is deplorable to the misogynist YouTube commenters, whereas examples of male heteronormative singers lip-syncing, such as Stone Temple Pilots leadman Scott Weiland, are either disbelieved or considered necessities of touring life.<sup>24</sup> What these negative associations show is that lip-syncing matters. In the act, there are things at stake when one lip-syncs, matters one forfeits, but also possibilities that one embraces.

Given the breadth of lip-syncing in the cultural milieu, it is surprising that so little has been written on lip-syncing and drag lip-syncing in particular. While filmic examples are well analysed, though often restricted to the cherry-picked examples of *Singin' in the Rain*, David Lynch, and Bollywood, there is only a sparse array of articles pertaining to drag lip-syncing. Articles and chapters by Leila Riszko and Freya Jarman are brilliant additions to the literature, yet there is certainly still a lot more space for future research.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Merrie Snell, in her recent monograph on lip-syncing, chooses to eschew drag lip-syncing and, instead, suggests that "drag lipsynching [*sic*] deserves a volume unto itself", a task I undertake here.<sup>26</sup> It is my intention to interrogate lip-syncing primarily as it pertains to voice and identity, building on the fascinating voice literatures that have proliferated

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<sup>22</sup> Freya Jarman, "Watch My Lips: The Limits of Camp in Lip-Syncing Scenes", in *Music and Camp*, eds. Christopher Moore & Philip Purvis (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), p. 96.

<sup>23</sup> Merrie Snell, *Lipsynching*, p. 47.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 49.

<sup>25</sup> Leila Riszko, "Breaching Bodily Boundaries: Posthuman (Dis)embodiment and Ecstatic Speech in Lip-Synch Performances by Boychild", in *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, Volume 13, Number 2 (2017), pp. 153-169; Freya Jarman, "Watch My Lips", pp. 95-117.

<sup>26</sup> Merrie Snell, *Lipsynching*, p. 9.

over the past few years.<sup>27</sup> I have two central questions. The first: *How does lip-syncing function?* To this end, I want to discover how one lip-syncs, what one has to do to provide a believable lip-sync, but also what is happening with the voice during lip-syncing. Where is the voice? Whose voice? Is lip-syncing all that structurally different from speaking? What can it tell us about speech? The second: *Why do drag queens lip-sync?* In contrast to the economic reasons outlined above, why do drag queens continue to lip-sync? More than this, why do they choose to lip-sync when so often they can sing themselves? What is it about lip-syncing that is so enjoyable? In this way, I hope to move from *theoria* to *praxis*, i.e. to move from a “theory [that] is never merely *theoria*, in the sense of disengaged contemplation, and to [one that] is fully political”.<sup>28</sup> The answers to these twin central questions, I believe, yield poignant responses to the powerful benefits of lip-syncing in drag performance.

The beginnings of answers can be found in an exceptionally touching lip-sync performance by artist Dickie Beau.<sup>29</sup> In Beau’s performance entitled “Olden Lobes”, they lip-sync to a lecture given by Peter Sellars about the qualities of Greek theatre, as though this were Beau’s acceptance speech at the Golden Globe awards. Beau’s lip-sync begins with a discussion of puppetry and ventriloquism, stating that puppetry entered a new stage with the advent of recorded sound, because it meant that the ventriloquist no longer had to worry about making the voice but could now focus their whole attention on listening to the voice and manipulating the puppet. When not speaking, one has the capacity for a deeper listening. Beau (via Sellars) relates this process of deep listening to the Greek amphitheatres, described as giant ears carved into the sides of mountains, marvellous acoustical

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<sup>27</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck*; Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006); Martha Feldman, “Why Voice Now?”, in *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Volume 68, Number 3 (Fall 2015), pp. 653-685; Martha Feldman & Judith Zeitlin, eds. *The Voice as Something More: Essays Toward Materiality* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2020).

<sup>28</sup> Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”, in *inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 14.

<sup>29</sup> Dickie Beau, “Dickie Beau’s OLDEN LOBES Speech – In Full” (January 2017) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIM1CPQD\\_4g&t=1s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIM1CPQD_4g&t=1s) (accessed on: 20<sup>th</sup> of July 2020).

devices that meant that each and every person could hear the voice of just one. The theatre was a space of deep listening, but more than that it was a social device, in which the audience would hear the voices of those not acknowledged by society: women, slaves, foreigners. Beau reminds us that every play left to us from antiquity is the name of such a person, someone whose voice most typically wasn't (and, isn't) given space to be heard. At the theatre, all ears were on this voice.

Why does Beau choose to lip-sync to something like this? Because this is what lip-syncing is. While my primary definition above stands, lip-syncing, surely, is before anything else *listening* – hearing the words, internalising them, and perhaps, therefore, engaging a deeper understanding of them. Lip-syncing requires a deep listening, a listening that can only come about when one stops talking. What happens when one listens so intently to themselves? What can one learn about oneself through others? These questions, I believe, are answered by the drag queen's silent mouth.

### *0.iii – Drag*

At its core, drag is a theatrical play with gender. While many may assume that drag involves a gender flip, as it were, this is not necessarily the case. Drag plays with gender, showing its weaknesses rather than bolstering it, all through dramatic spectacles of artifice. Indeed, Esther Newton states that “*all* drag, whether formal, informal, or professional, has a theatrical structure and style. There is no drag without an actor and his audience, and there is no drag without drama” [emphasis in original].<sup>30</sup> I certainly agree with this statement, though, as shall become apparent throughout this thesis, I contend that the actor and audience are essentially conflated in the act of being in drag: even without an actual audience, being in drag is performing to oneself, performer and audience, queen and creator, as one, exhibiting an essential identification with the self that generates a form of subjectivity.

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<sup>30</sup> Esther Newton, *Mother Camp*, p. 37.

Though all drag may be theatrical, there are manifold types. Newton outlines four in her ethnography: glamour, tacky, transy, and comedy.<sup>31</sup> “The glamour image”, Newton writes, “is central to drag performances”; as I write above, glamour is paramount to drag and is in no small part its radical power, a fact that Newton corroborates in affording it pride of place in the drag world.<sup>32</sup> Tacky drag, on the other hand, is “a poor quality imitation of a high quality item”, i.e. a queen who strives for glamour, but is left in its sequin-strewn wake.<sup>33</sup> Transy drag is a term better left in a pre-PC 1970s world, intended to denote “not so much cheapness as deviance” (why being trans should denote either is perturbing).<sup>34</sup> In Newton’s account, the people who work within this mode of drag seem less to be performers, but “the real transvestites [...] whose individual and private experiments with female attire are described as ‘freakish’”.<sup>35</sup> Again, this category (to be sure, Newton’s interlocutors’ rather than her own) is redolent of a transphobia. And finally, the comedy queen is the stand-up comic, often employing slapstick humour to entertain her audience.

Whatever their style, the process of getting into drag remains a Sisyphean one, a seemingly endless routine of makeup, wiggery, and costuming in order to become their drag alter ego. Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, in their ethnography of the 801 Cabaret in Key West, Florida, make an extensive, though in no way exhaustive, taxonomy of the dressing process:

After finishing the makeup, they begin to get dressed. This is an elaborate procedure, involving many layers of undergarments that, piece by piece, create the illusion that they have breasts and women’s waists and hips. First they [...] tuck their penises and testicles between their legs, using a gaff, or several, to make sure everything stays out of sight. [...] After the gaffs they put on panty hose, sometimes several layers of thick ones. Then even those who don’t shave their

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p. 49-52.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p. 52.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 49.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* p. 51.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 51.

legs have no visible hair. [...] Over the panty hose go corsets and waist cinchers; some lace more tightly than others.<sup>36</sup>

Much could be added to this list. Before the clothing, there is, of course, the makeup. These are thick pan-stick foundations, multiple pairs of lashes, stuck on with, more often than not, dubiously eye-safe weave-bonding glues or spirit gums (an adhesive that boasts “corrosive” on the label). The foundations (for many queens use three – a light, medium, and dark) are set with powders (often, similarly, a light, medium, and dark), and then the skin is brought back to life and dimension with blush and highlight. The lips, overdrawn and lined with pencil, are then filled in with lipsticks or liquid lipsticks, and topped with gloss or glitter. Then there’s the pinning back of the hair, sometimes even with duct tape to give a temporary face lift, before the wig is glued in place and similarly pinned. And then, to set the whole thing, a few good seconds of hairspray directly to the face to counteract any sweat. The process is long, uncomfortable, and potentially dangerous, but it’s also glamorous, affirming, and nymphic.

The drag queens that both Newton and Taylor and Rupp address view their drag, in all of its subversion, along a binary: gender is inverted, and such an inversion calls into question the genders of either side. Indeed, Judith Butler, in her theorisation of gender, uses Newton’s ethnography as an essential tool. Butler cites Newton, quoting that drag is

a double inversion that says, “appearance is an illusion”. Drag says [Newton’s curious personification] “my ‘outside’ appearance is feminine, but my essence ‘inside’ [the body] is masculine”. At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; “my appearance ‘outside’ [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence ‘inside’ is feminine”.<sup>37</sup>

Drag (here drag is positioned only as a male-to-female flip) works first by showing that while one’s outside appears feminine, these queens are masculine on the inside, but second by showing that when not in drag their outsides may appear masculine, despite the fact that some essential part of

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<sup>36</sup> Leila Rupp & Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 20.

<sup>37</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 174.

them is feminine. It is such a double-move that causes Butler to argue that “drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity”.<sup>38</sup> The conclusions of Butler’s argument are well-known, that since “the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and [since] a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity”.<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere, drag becomes for Butler a kind of model through which gender works, rather than an example of how gender works. For example, she writes that “drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalised, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation”.<sup>40</sup> As such, drag becomes what we all do all the time, evincing world-famous drag queen RuPaul’s catchphrase: “we’re all born naked and the rest is drag”.<sup>41</sup>

Butler’s theorisation goes further than Newton’s and aligns more closely with how drag is generally perceived today, especially by my interlocutors. While *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is often maligned with arguments that it reifies a static and binary form of drag, certain drag communities, particularly the East London scene I focus on, conceive of drag less as a gender flip (even if in such a flipping, as Newton attests, there is a subversion) but a free play of gender signifiers.<sup>42</sup> There is a *mélange* of signifiers acting on the surface of the body, ones that might seem to stand in tension with each other because of heteronormative dicta, but ones that point to a much more heterodox understanding of gender. José Esteban Muñoz writes eloquently about the tensions that arise between drag styles that cement certain gendered understandings and those that rally against them. For example, Muñoz writes that “commercial drag presents a sanitized and desexualised queer subject for mass

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* p. 174.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p. 174.

<sup>40</sup> Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”, p. 21.

<sup>41</sup> RuPaul, *Workin’ It! RuPaul’s Guide to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Style* (New York: Harper & Collins, 2010), p. ix.

<sup>42</sup> Hugh Montgomery, “Is *RuPaul’s Drag Race* Good for Drag?”, on *BBC Culture* (October 2019) <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20191002-is-rupauls-drag-race-a-good-thing-for-drag> (accessed on: 18<sup>th</sup> of November 2020).

consumption”, in this instance commercial drag being a style of drag that ruffles no feathers, projects heteronormative ideals, and is ready for consumption by those outside of the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>43</sup> To counter commercial drag, Muñoz posits “*terrorist drag* – terrorist in that she is performing the nation’s internal terrors around race, gender and sexuality [...] the drag queen is disidentifying, sometimes critically and sometimes not, with [...] the ideal woman and femininity that is a tenet of gender-normative thinking” [emphasis in original].<sup>44</sup> While terrorist drag is too far for my work here, coined as it is in relation to the specific drag performer Vaginal Davis, Muñoz’s call for drag that seeks to engage critically with feminine ideals is relevant here. To this end, Muñoz quotes Félix Guattari, who claims that “the question is no longer to know whether one will play feminine against masculine or the reverse [as Newton would have it], but to make bodies, all bodies, break away from the representations and restraints on the ‘social body’”.<sup>45</sup> Such an intention is clearly evidenced in the understandings of drag and gender espoused by my five interlocutors. Rather than give an absolute definition of drag, therefore, I will present each of my five ethnographic subjects now, allowing them to describe their drag. The following vignettes are gleaned from a series of interviews conducted with each queen individually between 2015 and 2020.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 99.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p. 100.

<sup>45</sup> Felix Guattari, quoted in *ibid.* p. 100.

<sup>46</sup> See the appendix for a list of all formal interviews.

*0.iv – All Rise for the Queens*

*i. Rodent*



Fig. 1: Rodent

“I think drag has evolved to the point where it’s no longer a binary gender swap illusion”, Rodent tells me, when asking them about their drag.<sup>47</sup> “My drag, despite being very feminine and using feminine reference points for the look and the construction of it, isn’t necessarily trying to *look* convincingly like a woman, or trying to *do* a gender illusion. It’s taking feminine beauty, but not trying

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<sup>47</sup> Some interview quotations have been edited for ease of comprehension, with occasional repetitions and “discourse markers” or “filled pauses” omitted.

to be it”.<sup>48</sup> Rodent is a 26-year-old drag queen, hailing from Birmingham and now living and working in London since their time at university. Rodent certainly cuts an imposing figure. A remarkably tall drag queen, towering at over two metres, they stalk across the stage, their mannerisms melting between a captivating elegance and frantic paroxysms. Their drag, they tell me, has evolved over time: “I’m looking at Dita Von Teese a lot at the moment, and a very vampy, 50s, *femme fatale*, Elvira-y kind of vibe; but then earlier on I was wearing lots of military fatigues and berets and I was going for this quite aggressive, young character, something like Alice Sass, or Grimes. And way back beforehand it was Taylor Momsen when I was doing the whole emo thing. It’s changed and fluctuated all the time”. Here, Rodent cites Dita Von Teese, Elvira, and Taylor Momsen as their stylistic icons, which certainly makes for an enticing triptych: Von Teese supplies Rodent’s glamour, their pin-up qualities, pale skin and intense lips, a knowing coyness and a subversion of the gaze; 1980s cult icon Elvira, the veritable “Mistress of the Dark”, lacquers Rodent with a healthy smattering of camp, and a visual aesthetic that marries Von Teese’s sexuality with a decidedly gothic sensibility; and Taylor Momsen gives Rodent their teen punk edge, a middle finger to the world coupled with an angsty mentality. This triple inheritance has served Rodent well, and they have carved an enviable career in London’s drag queen circuit; running their own club nights, being awarded a star position in London’s premier drag troupe Sink the Pink (Rodent was Miss Sink the Pink in 2014), as well as winning the highly competitive *LIPSYNC1000* at The Glory in East London, Rodent has most definitely made a name for themselves.<sup>49</sup> This final accolade, winning *LIPSYNC1000*, is an especial gratification. Drag queens from all over London, and, indeed, from its surrounding cities, come to a small bar in Haggerston to compete for the illustrious title, proving their merit at the foundational mode of drag performance: lip-syncing.

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<sup>48</sup> Any italics in interview quotations will always represent stresses made by the interviewee, unless explicitly mentioned otherwise.

<sup>49</sup> As a non-binary person, Rodent’s pronouns are they/them/theirs. Note also that, while the *Oxford English Dictionary* does not list “themselves” as an acceptable formal singular of the numerically neutral “themselves”, here I use it when referring to Rodent themselves for the sake of clarity.

Drag found Rodent by chance, a side interest from their degree in theatre: “I started doing drag when I was asked to perform at Yeast [a former cabaret evening in East London] by Oozing Gloop, who was my drag mother. And I had performed before but never in drag, and I had met Gloop doing a performance cabaret course, and then she invited me to come and perform, and then later she asked me to come on and actually co-run it with her and Lewis Burton. But I first started performing in drag at Halloween of 2013; I did this weird *CocoRosie*, *Twin Peaks* performance that was, to be fair, more risky than the shit I’m doing now”. Rather than being drawn to performing in drag, necessarily, Rodent was simply drawn to performing, and drag provided a pragmatic avenue: “I think now, retrospectively, I could think of very valid reasons for [performing in drag], but I think in the moment it was just because I enjoyed drag more and felt like that was a performance route and a performance platform that was accessible at the time, through Gloop. And so, I wanted to perform, Gloop was offering me this drag thing, I already had a long interest in drag, and I decided to marry the two together. Now, I could say it’s about the creation of Otherness that’s evolved with the drag, which I’m interested in now, but at the time it wasn’t that much of an intellectual decision, it was more pragmatic”. Having stumbled into drag, however, drag became a tool to explore what fascinated Rodent most: “the idea of the monstrous Other is something I find quite attractive and appealing, as something to take up as a signifier for yourself. And so I think that, with drag, the ability to transform yourself so much is an interesting way to do that, because you get to play with all the makeup, and I know there are ways of performing which don’t involve makeup but I think it’s a really fun way to experiment with the face and with transforming the way you look”. For Rodent, drag becomes a way of navigating identity, interrogating what it means to be oneself to oneself. If Newton claims that drag always involves an actor and an audience, here Rodent suggests that drag always involves a self and an Other, a theory that will be instrumental throughout this thesis.

Beyond the simply theatrical, Rodent also describes drag as “a strategy for gender expression”. Rodent tells me that drag allows them to explore their gender in a safe way. In defining their gender, they tell me “I would say it’s a kind of fluidity, but I don’t want to engage in any rigid

definition or category". As such, they use they/them pronouns, both in and out of drag. They tell me that they "don't do a lot of femme presenting in the day time, I don't really wear lipstick or don't try and alter myself that much in the daytime, but then with the drag it's this massive hyper-construction in a place that feels safer, because I don't know how comfortable I would be as someone who's 6'2", quite obviously looks like a man, with lippie and stuff on". Drag provides a space of play with gender, an exploration, beyond what they are allowed to do in everyday life. Drag is bound up with more than the stage, it is a technology of the self.

ii. *Ruby Wednesday*



Fig. 2: Ruby Wednesday

With dyed blue hair and ripped fishnet stockings, Ruby Wednesday is decidedly a goth queen. Indeed, one of her key drag references is Nancy Downs from the 1996 movie *The Craft*, telling me “I took huge influence from her as a character for Ruby Wednesday, that mania”. Ruby is certainly a manic queen, with her performances foregrounding a frenetic, volatile energy, with pained contortions and violent movements throughout. More than this, Ruby tells me that “*The Craft* was my introduction to witchcraft, and I study witchcraft now, and I’m in a coven, and [Nancy] was also

representative of air within the film, and I'm a Gemini which is one of the air signs". Witchy, punky, and a little bit manic: herein lies the captivating Ruby Wednesday.

Much like Rodent, Ruby seemingly fell into drag. "I started doing drag because I was studying Fine Art at University of Arts London in Wimbledon and I was exploring documentary-based photography and a lot to do with Nan Goldin specifically. I was super into that and Mapplethorpe and so I started going to drag shows and photographing drag queens as they were performing and getting ready, and it was kind of like a win-win situation because I would get photos out of it and they would get photos out of it as well. And then I met Meth [a queen on the scene] when she just had become Meth, when she was doing her really gothic stuff. And then we had a really good night at Tranny Shack actually [a now disbanded queer club night]. So yeah, we had a really good night there. And then I remember I was having a really shit time with my partner at the time, so spending loads of time in Soho just on my own, wandering around and stuff. I was in Soho too early so I texted Meth, who I met a couple of weeks prior or something, and I just said 'do you want to hang out?' And so I went over to hers and she was asking what my interest was in drag and stuff, and she was like, 'well, if you ever need a drag mum!'" And thus Ruby Wednesday was born.

Much like Gloop for Rodent, Meth is Ruby's drag mother, an affectionate term for the person who teaches you about makeup, where to buy shoes, gets you your first gig, and the like. Much like biological families, drag families are for life. Ruby tells me that Meth once said that "she thought that I was approaching a point where she would consider me a sister, like she taught me everything and I didn't want anything, and that we were just on a similar level or whatever, I was like absolutely not: she will always be my mother". Makeup is perhaps thicker than blood, and drag familial bonds truly do last for Ruby and Meth. There is a certain familial resemblance, Meth being the *grande dame* of darkness, a gothic queen with wild coloured hair and porcelain skin. Though, where Meth has a certain refined glamour, Ruby is far more anarchic: no gowns for Ruby, but heels, fishnets, and underwear are all she needs.

In discovering her drag character, Ruby didn't want to be "another one of the notorious gay boys" that just wants to be a queen; no, she wanted "to make a conceptual creation", to have a message from the off, and to create "a human being". She describes how she "wanted to create the twin sister I never had", creating a persona that was as close as possible to her whilst still remaining distinct. Indeed, perhaps Ruby is a mixture of both Theodor (Ruby's name out of drag) and this imagined twin, blending, as Ruby does, a multiplicity of genders. Much like Rodent, drag isn't about a gender flip, but about negotiating a queerer conception of gender. "I want to challenge the ideas of masculinity and femininity", Ruby says, "and how people can find a creature that is a blend of several genders attractive". Ruby wants to mix several genders, not just two, to find new ways of being that are just as, if not more, pleasing than the heteronormative gender paradigms; to this end, Ruby is "not particularly fussed about pronouns [...] I guess 'they' is easiest, just mix it up", and therefore I will, for ease of comprehension and in line with her thoughts, use "they" when referring to them out of drag, and "she" for her drag persona.

iii. ShayShay



Fig. 3: ShayShay

After six years of performing in drag, ShayShay finally has “a definition of drag that works for me”. “Whenever someone asks, ‘oh, are you gonna be in drag?’ blah blah blah... I’m in drag right now, *right now*, we’re all in drag constantly. Drag is just what you’re wearing, and what you’ve put on your face, and if my drag is ‘lazy grandpa who doesn’t get off the couch’ versus ‘dominatrix sex goddess’,

those are all forms of drag. I feel that whatever personality, and all kinds of personalities, and personalities that don't even belong to me, like characters or past lives or whatever, can be in existence always, coexisting, and the clothes don't have to be a part of it, they just help me negotiate how to act. We're all acting, and we're always in drag, so why not throw together something visually that goes with some facet of a character or a segment of my many personalities and live it out, live it to the fullest". This definition evinces ShayShay's life-affirming attitude – they call for a drag that reflects what you feel, or want to feel, and a drag that explains how gender and dress work both on and off the stage. For ShayShay, all the world's a stage.

ShayShay moved to London from California, a move that heralded the beginnings of their drag career. "Now that I have a much more open idea of what drag is, I've realised I was doing drag-ish performance at university, by dressing up at parties and stuff, but not necessarily dressing up *as a woman*; but I don't really dress as a woman now, I dress as a weird alien creature. But I would say that if we're gonna think about drag in the context of doing performance that is on the road to a career or life in performance, the creative stage, life, then it would be when I started Sink the Pinks". Like Rodent, ShayShay was once part of drag mega-collective Sink the Pink, their first experience of which was at one of the Sink the Pink Summer Balls. "The Summer Ball was my very first Sink the Pink, and that was the very first thing I ever saw you all do, and it was *insane*. And I remember I told my friend, who I'm still best friends with, pointing at the stage, I was like 'oh my god, this is what I've always wanted to do!' but I didn't know that something like that existed in this realm. In my head I didn't want to be on Broadway, and I didn't want to be in Vegas performing, so to see performance of this variety where it's mostly about costumes, choreography, but it's silly and all that, I was like 'yes, must do this!'" . And do it they did. ShayShay subsequently entered Sink the Pink by winning the coveted title of Miss Sink the Pink, thereby cementing themselves as a key player in the drag scene.

Drag for ShayShay is a place of absolute fun. "I think the main thing was that it just looked like you were having so much fun. It wasn't as much about like 'oh, polished! Oh, we're all doing the same serious face', like when you go to a hip-hop competition and they do *amazing* numbers but

it's all about 'we all look exactly the same', robotic, sharp, sharp, sharp, clean, ugh, ugh, ugh... So to see and be more about like 'I'm living, I'm loving', because all the dance-y stuff I'd done in the past was more about that, more about everyone having a good time, and it was supposed to be kind of easy so everyone could do it, and it wasn't really dancing to be dancers, it was just dancing because it's amazingly fun to dance". Such joy has stayed with ShayShay throughout their career, and they seek to share that joy with more people. ShayShay has carved out an adored space in the East London scene with their night *The ShayShay Show* that seeks to give new performers the chance to perform in drag: "the thing that I wanted to do when I started the show was to set up a platform for new performers to have a space to perform that wasn't a competition, because basically if you're a newbie and you want to perform, one of the only ways to do that in gay bars is to join one of the competitions, either *LIPSYNC1000* or the *Not Another Drag Competition* that they do at Her Upstairs [a competition and venue respectively], or there's, you know, loads of other drag competitions. But I don't like competitions, they're really stressful, I don't feel like that's the best way to go into a performance, you want to do your best, you don't want to have to be doing the best of everyone, you just want to do *your* best". More than this, ShayShay is also a co-founder of the pan-Asian queer collective The Bitten Peach, a group that seeks to amplify the talents of voices in the queer Asian community, of which ShayShay is a part. If Meth is Ruby's mother, then ShayShay is mother to half of East London.

Much like both Rodent and Ruby, ShayShay's drag isn't about gender flipping, but is, as they say, "a weird alien creature", a conglomeration of genders. Speaking of their own gender, they say "my gender is non-binary gender-fluid, which is only an accurate description for me because of its nebulous nature", and their pronouns are they/them both in and out of drag. For ShayShay drag is fun, it's universal, and it's undefinable.

iv. *Bourgeoisie*



Fig. 4: Bourgeoisie

“I started doing drag when I was 19, because I was going out to gay bars – I turned 18 in a gay bar – so I’d spent like every Friday night in the same gay bar, in the only gay bar in my town that would let 18-year-olds in. And I spent every night there and was just like ‘well this is really fun, but it’s not going anywhere. I don’t hate myself enough to become one of the really muscly gym faggots, and I’m not really that interested in being the cunt one who just sits in the corner and is a bitch to everyone’, and then at some point I was having this conversation with somebody in the smoking area, or in the lounge or whatever, and a drag queen walked in and fell down the stairs and crawl-

like, barrel-crawled all the way down this long corridor, and I was like, ‘well, I could really easily do that! So, maybe I’ll just do that?’”. Bourgeoisie, whose pronouns are she/her in drag and they/them out of drag, fell into drag – or rather, drag fell into her. And though Bougie, as she is affectionately known, did have all the makings to be a stellar drag queen – designing costumes for high school productions, working in a theatre, and being a member of show choir – her first forays into drag weren’t impelled by a desire to perform: “I didn’t start doing it to be a performer, or to do anything other than have a lovely time. I just started getting in drag to get more attention so that then more people would want to talk to me”. A wonderfully honest entrance into drag, and one that has, by the by, evolved into a formidable career.

Though Bougie’s career has taken her from her home in the USA to London, her name has stuck. “My name is like, now, I think, now living the way I do, living in London, being called Bourgeoisie and being a sort of train-wreck drag queen is quite funny, and quite... pointed? It’s quite a pointed commentary. But in reality when I chose my name we were drunk, we were sitting in the nightclub, watching, my drag mother and I, were sitting in a nightclub, watching everyone around, and it was the first time that I had done like ‘lady’ drag, and I had made myself a dress and glued my eyebrows down, and drew on a new eyebrow, and blah blah blah, and she was like, ‘well, you’re a little bit extra, and like, and you speak French, and so, why don’t you call yourself Bourgeoisie?’ And I was like, ‘oh, okay, great, sounds great!’” Bougie’s drag career seems to flow in these serendipitous happenstances, but perhaps she sells herself short with her self-description of a “train-wreck drag queen”. While Bougie is the life of the party, and may look a little different at 6am, she is an exceptional queen, whose performances (to which Chapter 7 is devoted) are astonishing political and social commentaries.

When it comes to their drag, once again gender is something to be played with. She tells me that back in North Carolina, “the kind of drag that I did then is sort of linked to what I’m doing now. It was very gender-fuck, it was not ever trying to be a beautiful passing woman, that was never my goal, ‘cos I just figured if somebody, in my mind, if somebody wanted to hire a beautiful passing

woman they would hire a beautiful passing woman or they would hire one of the like *really* gorgeous trans women on the scene, 'cos there were loads of trans women that did drag in DC. So, why not capitalise on my visual expertise, and creating looks and creating a big spectacle". And Bougie is a big spectacle. Towering tall, with glittery costumes and famously wearing hair-that-isn't-hair – be it tulle, newspaper, or beads – Bougie pulls focus. And yet, this larger-than-life creation isn't some unique being alien to Joey (Bougie's day-to-day name). She tells me: "a lot of people talk about their drag persona being a character and I don't see my drag as any sort of character persona, I see my drag as just like a hyper-realisation, a *really* high level manifestation of the ultimate of my personality. So, it's not as if when I put on a sequin dress and a tutu and a pair of 8-inch heels, I don't feel like I'm becoming someone else, I more so feel like I'm just turning the volume really high up on who I am. So that's why I don't, I mean, the people that are around me definitely see some sort of difference in my persona, but I think in my conception of myself that's just the drag giving myself the freedom to do what I would be doing normally". Drag, rather than creating a new person, creates a new-found confidence to be the exact person Bougie is.

v. *Sue Gives A Fuck*



Fig. 5: Sue Gives A Fuck

“My name’s Sue Gives A Fuck, and I really do”, so declares Sue at the beginning of each set.<sup>50</sup> Sue is a searing comedy queen, with razor-sharp wit and an incredibly smart mind, both of which she puts to use in brilliantly satirising the political climate in her lip-sync routines and in her stand-up. Alongside her routines, which I address in Chapter 4, she also has a YouTube series called “The Gay

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<sup>50</sup> Sue Gives A Fuck, “A Response to J.K. Rowling” (June 2020)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfQQgqfvmv0> (accessed on: 20<sup>th</sup> of June 2020).

Today”, where she expertly explains the hegemonic machinations behind global political news. Sue is a queen set to opening people’s eyes and uncovering the heteronormative dicta that perniciously pervade most, if not all, aspects of our lives. There is, however, a certain productive relationship between drag culture and mainstream culture for Sue. “This is the thing with drag, isn't it, because drag is fundamentally about subversion a little bit, you know, [so] we kind of need the mainstream to be a bit shit for our art form to have any value. I was thinking about this with the acceptance of gender nonconformity. If it goes too far, we’re irrelevant: I need a bit of homophobia back!”. While this is all said with Sue’s tongue-in-cheek giggle, Sue makes an interesting point. Drag is reactionary, it is destabilising, and, thereby, needs something to push against.

When speaking about drag, Sue quipped that drag is “like if you painted the Mona Lisa but only in primary colours. You just did the Mona Lisa but just did it really fucking brash”. Drag is taking the key signifiers, of whatever that may be, most typically gender, but Sue also adds “wealth, or the signifiers of perhaps political power”, and applying them in broad strokes. Naturally, this results in drag being bigger than life: “everything [in drag] is obviously bigger than life, but I guess it's bigger than life for the same reason that I am male-bodied, and why that is a relevant thing is that it’s just drawing attention to the fact that I’m subverting it, like there is just a real twist on it. It’s like turning something into a sort of cartoon version of itself”. Drag layers the incongruous, intending to subvert. Sue understands this subversion as functioning due to, as Butler might say, working the weakness of the norm. Speaking of impersonating Theresa May and Joan Crawford in her routines, she tells me: “so you’re taking the iconic signifiers of the leopard print kitten heels [for Theresa May] or Joan Crawford’s crazy hair, and you put those on a weird, male-bodied 30-year-old administrator [Sue’s day-to-day job], and suddenly they look really bizarre”. This unexpected play of signifiers does not *make* them bizarre, but *reveals* them to be bizarre: “exaggerating it, and making it a bit grotesque says ‘that’s all there is, and what it is, is a bit weird’”. Drag, for Sue, reveals the inherent peculiarity of gendered and political signifiers. It questions not only their assumed sexed and social assignments, but also questions their ontology. Sue states that drag “treats the surface level as the fundamental

reality”, espousing a typically Butlerian play of signifiers on the surface of the body, a surface whose ontology is performative in the sense that it is produced by its very performance. The surface is all you get.

The subversion and play of drag have impacted Sue’s personal life considerably. “Drag was, as it is for so many people”, she explains, “a gateway drug for gender”. Since performing in drag, Sue has explored her personal gender much more, putting herself on the waiting list for the Tavistock Centre, one of the UK’s leading gender recognition facilities, a waiting list, she jokes, that she’ll be on “for another six hundred and four years”. Around this time, she began adopting she/her pronouns out of drag, and “was absolutely heading down the direction of medical transition”. Now, however, she wonders “maybe I’m a ‘they’ now, I’m not sure. Either way, drag certainly gave me permission to explore that side of things”. Drag, in its subversion, gave Sue the space to explore gender in a safe and comfortable way, ultimately discovering that she is trans. For the purposes of this study, I will adopt she/her pronouns for Sue, as I will be speaking about her in her capacity as a drag queen. When musing upon the evolution from binary transition to something more fluid, Sue told me: “everyone knows what drag is and you put on that role, and [before you had] played one role forever, which is some boring bloke. And then you're like, ‘okay, this other role exists. I'm going to paint extreme femme business lady’. And then, because you can do two roles, and you can do that because it’s famous [i.e. drag is popularised], then you are able to experiment, because you have those stages where you’re half in drag, whereas probably if you hadn't known about this well-known, accepted form of gender nonconformity that is drag, you might not have explored those middle grounds”. Drag, beyond a type of theatrical performance and, indeed, a career, offers new ways of seeing and being in the world.

From my brief theoretical outline and my interlocutors’ statements above, it is clear that drag has an abundant variety of manifestations, and indeed that drag is ubiquitous. For the purposes of this thesis, I understand drag to be a theatrical mode of performance that, to some degree, takes gender

as its subject matter, but does not qualify an inversion of binary genders. To this end, it is also worth noting the similarly engaging and fascinating world of drag king performers, who are not featured in my delimiting study of drag queens. I consider the omission of drag kings from this thesis, as well AFAB<sup>51</sup> drag performers, as an unfortunate outcome of narrowing my research parameters; however, I hope to build upon this preliminary research into drag queens with continued investigations into drag king performance, and those interested in drag kings may look to the rich literatures offered by other authors.<sup>52</sup>

### *O.v – Voices, Bodies, Technologies: Methodologies*

This thesis proposes three useful avenues through which to discuss lip-syncing: voices, bodies, and technologies. However, to imagine that these are in any way neatly or easily demarcated would be to do them a disservice. What is a voice? What does it sound like? To whom does it belong? Moreover, what voice does not also intimate a body, a vocalic body?<sup>53</sup> What body, in this modern age, is not intimately connected with myriad technologies, webbed in vast, networked assemblages? Where does the body end – at the skin, at its prosthetic technological extensions, or thrown in the voice? And, are technologies only those electronic devices essential to lip-syncing – recording devices, loudspeakers, editing software – or can we not extend technologies to technologies of performance (the stage, makeup, costuming, wigs) and, after Foucault, technologies of the self?<sup>54</sup> Voices, bodies, and technologies are useful to tether this research, but act as a web that binds, rather than separate strands that delimit.

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<sup>51</sup> Assigned female at birth.

<sup>52</sup> Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Judith/Judith “Jack” Halberstam & Del LaGrace Volcano, *The Drag King Book* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1999).

<sup>53</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck*, p. 35.

<sup>54</sup> Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self”, in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton (London: Tavistock Publications, 1988), p.p. 16-49.

To this end, my methodology is also interdisciplinary and intertwined. I adopt what Judith/Jack Halberstam describes as a “queer methodology”: “a queer methodology, in a way, is a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately excluded from traditional studies of human behaviour. The queer methodology attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other, and it refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence”.<sup>55</sup> As such, my methodology is purposefully disparate and at times contradictory, and I speak in different “voices”, as it were, sometimes within chapters and sometimes between them. The three main disciplinary thrusts of my thesis are psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and queer theory, which have produced frictions. For example, the work of Jacques Lacan has been instrumental to my research, and a fundamental part of my theorisation of lip-syncing is predicated upon the subject as lack, and the structure of desire as lack.<sup>56</sup> To this end, my invocation of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whose conception of desiring-machines, in which desire is figured as a connective process, clashes with Lacan.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Jacques Derrida’s phenomenology of voice and his seminal disavowal of the metaphysics of presence as it pertains to internal monologue similarly jars with the psychoanalytical investigations of Lacan’s *objet petit a*: “if for Derrida the essential of the voice lies in auto-affection and self-transparency, as opposed to the trace, the rest, the alterity, and so on, for Lacan that auto-affection is where the problem starts”.<sup>58</sup>

Beyond the discrepancies between disciplines, this thesis is also very much driven by ethnographic research, at times using my interviewees as examples that prove the rule, and at other times generating new theories directly from their words. And, within this ethnographic mode, my role is complex. While I attempt to adopt as etic an approach as possible, viewing my subjects from

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<sup>55</sup> Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 13.

<sup>56</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan / Book X*, trans. A. R. Price, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p. 23.

<sup>57</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, & Helen R. Lane (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1984), p. 16.

<sup>58</sup> Mladen Dolar, “The Object Voice”, in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 16.

the outside and gaining my knowledge of the drag scene from them, I cannot deny my emic status. I have been a drag queen working in London and abroad for the past 8 years, and I have worked with each of these queens extensively: Rodent, even, is my drag sister. Having collaborated with ShayShay, Rodent, and Bougie as part of Sink the Pink, having competed with Sue in the *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* "Ambassador" competition, and having performed with Ruby and her drag mother Meth, not to mention seeing them at countless events, bars, nightclubs and haunts over the better part of the last decade, my emic perspective not only on the drag scene within which they work but also on themselves as individuals has undoubtedly influenced my analysis. To my mind, this can only enrich the analysis. With this added dimension, I have been able to understand references more readily, benefit from their trust more totally, and engage more empathetically with what they say, and I hope I relay what they say in both an intellectually critical and emotionally sensitive way.

I understand clear points of connection between psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and queer theory, namely in how each of these theories revolves around a notion of the self. I am consistently concerned with the self throughout this thesis, questioning how selves are constructed, multiple selves for a single person, contradictory, creative selves. To my mind, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and queer theory, while having distinctly opposing stances on many issues, are similar in their admission of a non-unitary, unstable, and relational self. Whether in the mirror stage of Lacan (as I discuss in Chapter 3), the *différance* of Jacques Derrida or the chiastic structures of Merleau-Ponty (as I discuss in Chapters 1 and 5 respectively), or the radically changeable states of being espoused by Jodie Taylor (as I discuss in Chapter 3), the self is not a given, singular entity, but one that is contingent and constructed. This, for me, is the backbone of the thesis. Voice, bodies, technologies: each are relative, malleable categories, and ones that coalesce to form a sense of self that is only possible through relationality. This core similarity is what binds together my methodologies, a connection that can broadly be surmised as queerness. I take, after Freya Jarman, queer/queerness to act as an adjective, noun, and verb, the latter of which involves its essential

movement, its changeability, and its adaptation.<sup>59</sup> I therefore contend that queerness as an act is a helpful way to unify this thesis: queerness is constantly negotiating, questioning, and destabilising. The methodological constraints of this work can be opened up through a healthy dose of queerness.

A potential antagonism arises between drag and queerness, for the two terms, though perhaps appearing mutually supportive, can have a fraught relationship. For example, though Newton's explication of drag offers a destabilising inversion of gender and sex, inversion does not necessarily chime with a more radically queer approach to gender that seeks to unravel the binary altogether. Moreover, as I cite briefly above, there is a large faction of the queer community, for example, who worry about the deleterious effects of *RuPaul's Drag Race* in its hegemonising of drag, specifically across gendered lines. Similarly, in a more political sense, there is much drag that is not queer, and performances that aid only in bolstering misogynistic stereotypes. To this end, I return to the words of my interlocutors and lean upon their understandings (plural, to be sure) of drag, understandings that align themselves decidedly with queerness.

It is also worth addressing the title of this thesis: *Becoming Queen*. I choose "becoming" following Deleuze, who writes in *The Logic of Sense* that "it pertains to the essence of becoming to move and to pull in both directions at once: Alice does not grow without shrinking, and vice versa. Good sense affirms that in all things there is a determinable sense or direction (*sens*); but paradox is the affirmation of both senses or directions at the same time".<sup>60</sup> As is expressed in what each of my interlocutors describes above, drag has been a constant process of becoming for them: of movement and change, not necessarily in one, teleological drive, but of free play and imagination, moving in different and undiscovered directions. For the ephemerality of a stage performance, drag has resounding implications that cause evolutions for both queen and creator. I believe lip-syncing is instrumental in this process. Indeed, this is why I choose to adopt the gerund form "lip-syncing"

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<sup>59</sup> Freya Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw* (York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 16.

<sup>60</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin Boundas (London: The Athlone Press, 1990), p. 1.

throughout: lip-syncing is a process, and one whose effects are felt long after lip-syncing stops. Moreover, lip-syncing certainly evidences the paradoxes of becoming – silent yet loud, singular yet plural, self yet other. This thesis explores the constant becomings of lip-syncing and drag through a varied methodology centring on queerness and relationality.

### *0.vi – Charting the Thesis*

This thesis is split into four broad sections: The Silent Voice; The Imaginary Voice; The Material Voice; The Queer Voice. The first two chapters make up The Silent Voice. Here, I seek to answer my first question – *How does lip-syncing function?* – by interrogating lip-syncing in depth and providing a refined theorisation of lip-syncing as a mode of voicing. To this end, I approach lip-syncing primarily through film and ventriloquism literatures in order to shed light on how lip-syncing is performed, but then move onto phenomenological and psychoanalytical literatures to assess how the voice functions within this process. I contend that voice in lip-syncing is produced from no voice, and that silence is a key figure in the creation of what I term the silent voice in lip-sync performance.

Chapters 3 and 4 make up The Imaginary Voice. Here, I turn my attention to processes of identification in lip-syncing, using a Lacanian model in order to account for both visual and aural identifications. While Chapter 3's focus is primarily on the Imaginary identifications with the voice and the body, Chapter 4 is focussed on the creation of an Imaginary voice, through the stitching together of multiple voices as one in performance, what I term the composite voice. In these chapters, one gets answers to my second main question: *Why do drag queens lip-sync?* The identificatory processes evident in lip-syncing produce powerful self-actualising effects in my interviewees, and the unique affordances of the composite voice allow these queens to produce highly critical commentaries as well as more layered forms of identification.

The Material Voice deals with technology's role in lip-syncing more frontally. Chapter 5 theorises a concept of haptic aurality, a type of listening that attends to immersion, depth

perception, tactility, and directionality, and one that allows for a complex identification with the voice on the track. Synthesising Deleuze and Guattari, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I argue that when certain acoustic variables are just right, the drag queen is able to engage with the track in a haptic manner, one that offers a powerful connection between the queen and the track. Chapter 6 deals with technology's more deleterious potential. Focusing on a single performance by ShayShay, I chart the potential utopian and dystopian consequences of the posthuman body as it is figured in lip-syncing. ShayShay's subject-position as queer person of colour draws out nuanced approaches to these theories, and ultimately reveals that ShayShay finds themselves trapped between a desire to unplug and a necessity to engage with technology, a fact that is reflected in their highly original performance.

Finally, I turn to The Queer Voice. This final section similarly focuses on a single performance, this time by Bougie. Here, Bougie plays with the expected form of lip-syncing and implicates the audience within the piece's diegesis. The piece, a commentary on chemsex and HIV/AIDS in the queer community, utilises collective queer memories of shame in order to bind the audience with the performer, inviting them to empathise with the piece's message. I argue that Bougie here creates a queer voice: a voice that is distributed, that is both silenced and lauded, and one that works within a dialectic of shame.

Over the course of these four sections, I hope to provide a richly illustrative analysis of lip-syncing as it pertains to drag performance. From its theoretical importance as a mode of voicing to the personal ramifications such acts hold for the performing queen, lip-syncing is figured throughout the thesis as a patently political process, offering insight into new ways of being in the world. Lip-syncing, more than a performance medium, is a personal endeavour, one through which my interlocutors discover more about themselves. In analysing the words and performances of Sue, Bougie, ShayShay, Rodent, and Ruby, and theorising more broadly the critical acuity of lip-syncing as a unique mode of vocal performance, I will now set out the radical becomings on offer through the adoption of the voice of another.

I

## THE SILENT VOICE

## Chapter 1

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### The Silent Voice

*You don't actually, as far as the audience know, have the ability to speak. They can assume that you can talk, but like, maybe you're a mute, maybe you can't even speak! But you can still lip-sync and convey everything*  
~ ShayShay

#### *I.i – Introduction*

To speak of a silent voice may seem an antinomy: how can a voice, that which expresses itself as a sonorous event, be silent? While this appears to be a common-sense question, one often takes for granted the silent voices that permeate our daily lives. Take, for example, the silent voice of reason, which speaks directly to the listener without the need for externalisation; though, to be sure, “while silent, [the voice of reason] is nevertheless so loud that no matter how loudly we cry, we can never cover or silence it”.<sup>1</sup> Silent yet thunderous: so initiates the paradoxes of the silent voice. One can rethink the voice of reason, perhaps, simply as an inner voice, a consciousness that speaks to the subject in silent words, inaudible to others. Indeed, beyond metaphorical voices, psychoanalysis, specifically the work of Jacques Lacan, argues for a voice that must always remain silent, lost to the Symbolic world and sequestered in the Real, an *objet petit a*, an unattainable remnant removed from sonorous signification. While these understandings are interesting in terms of lip-syncing, and the concepts of a silent internal dialogue and the *objet petit a* will become important theoretical

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<sup>1</sup> Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, p. 89.

bedrocks in both this chapter and the next, it is incumbent upon me here to define what it is meant by a silent voice in drag lip-sync performance.

Lip-syncing is not a silent act. On the contrary, lip-syncing often requires exceptionally loud volumes, so loud that the sound realises a tactile affectivity on the body of the performer, a concept I term “haptic aurality” and which I theorise in Chapter 5. Yet, behind this loud exterior, ever-present in this mode of performance, lies an undercurrent of necessary silence. The drag queen remains silent in lip-syncing, no voice issuing from her mouth. Naturally, she may make some sound – her breathing may be audible as she dances across the stage, her lips may smack together or her tongue squelch round her palate, and certain sibilants or plosives may even sound as breathing air escapes, sounding out the hollow and partial contours of a word – but these sounds are happenstances, rather than typical vocalisations. And yet, she does generate a voice. She vocalises, she speaks, she sings, despite not using her own voice – she engages a silent voice. This is more than a voice *from* silence, for all voices begin from silence, the absence of sound a silent precursor to any vocal utterance, the empty air before that first inhalation of breath. Rather, lip-syncing generates a voice *in* silence. The drag queen is silent throughout her performance, but all the while she voices: she enlivens and embodies the voice of another and in turn is envoiced by the voice on the track. It is worth noting that this chapter will deal with voice rather than particular voices; here I am concerned with a broader theory surrounding the structural makeup of voice and its corollary the silent voice, and in future chapters I turn my attention to specific voices and instantiations of voice.

Such an understanding requires a broadening of what it means to be a voice. I write above of “voice, that which expresses itself as a sonorous event”, but surely voice and voicing is so much more than that. A voice is more than sonorous expressivity, though that is a large part of it. It is a corporeal process, one that is generated through hidden bodily machinations, internal tensions and external propulsions; yes, it is sound, but it is also gesture, tone, and mood. Imagine a voice stripped of everything except a sonic carrier of linguistic signification – a steely, computerised voice. A voice, certainly, but one that doesn’t explore so much more of what a voice can be. The silent voice in drag

lip-sync performance is a voice that does not privilege its sonic destination, but remembers (quite literally, re-members) the full corporeal process as essential. It is such a twin structure – indeed, a chiasmic structure, as I argue in Chapter 5 – that creates voice. Yet, while the silent voice of drag lip-sync performance stresses the importance of the body in voicing, it isn't entirely fettered by originary bodies. In lip-syncing, the voice one hears was corporeally generated in an anterior time and place by a body that may have functioned entirely differently from the queen onstage. Rather, the silent voice webs seemingly discrete bodies and voices into one unit, each influencing the other. To this end, some terminology will be helpful in fleshing out, as it were, a definition of the silent voice.

Throughout this chapter and this thesis I employ the verb “to envoice”. I am concerned with how lip-syncing envoices a body, how a body can be enlivened and animated with voice. When a drag queen twirls across the stage, the voice seems to be attached to her body so totally, and yet were the loudspeakers to falter, her body would seem empty, her silent mouth aping at words (something I interrogate more fully in the following chapter). To envoice means to fill a body with voice. The lip-syncing body is a vessel in which voice comes to reside, having been mutually generated between the sonic and corporeal dimensions of the voice. If a voice is embodied, then a body is envoiced.

Another term I use frequently is “ascription”, in that a voice is ascribed to a body. The *Oxford English Dictionary* – beyond the rare, obsolete, or special usages – defines “ascription” as: “the action of setting to the credit of; attribution of origin or authorship”; or “the action of ascribing, attributing, imputing, or declaring that something belongs to a person or thing”. It is to these common definitions of ascription that I turn my attention here: the drag queen declares that the voice of the track belongs to her; she takes authorship of the voice; and she fuses the voice of the track with her own body. This draws into focus another key term, one whose presence is felt in all acts of lip-syncing: mimesis. There is an obvious parallel between mimesis and lip-syncing, the drag queen miming or replicating the oral movements necessary to speak the words on the track. Yet, my

interest in mimesis lies in the fact that the mimetic is not auxiliary or secondary to the original, but rather that it holds “the magical power of replication, the image affecting what it is an image of, wherein the representation shares in or takes power from the represented”.<sup>2</sup> To ascribe the voice of the track to the drag queen does not suggest a powerless imitation, but rather the drag queen engages the “magical power” of mimesis, and shares or even co-opts the voice for her own.

Wrapping around these ideas, of ascription, envoicing, embodiment, mimesis, and lip-syncing, hangs the silent voice, not so much the summation of these parts, but the set that contains them all. The silent voice suggests a type of voicing that does not require the body that moves to expel any sound at all; rather, voice is generated corporeally and the sonic materiality of voice is ascribed to a new source given the magical play of mimesis. While “silent” may seem too far, given the thunderous noise of the club and the potential for the queen herself to make noise, I believe it is the right term for three reasons. First, I understand “silent” in terms of silent letters in words: the “b” in subtle is unsounded, but present, and crucially this presence is visual. The fact that the drag queen’s silence is a visual phenomenon will be fundamental in the subsequent chapter. Second, it is silent because it is not necessary to make any sound at all – the same qualitative type of voicing could exist were the drag queen’s mouth to be a vacuum. Third, because “silencing” also holds political connotations, connotations that I believe are incredibly poignant for the queer subjects represented in this thesis, an idea I similarly turn to in the following chapter.

Throughout this chapter, however, it is my intention to theorise the concept of the silent voice in a variety of ways, seeking to understand how a silent voice is performed, and how a silent voice might be theoretically understood. I will first question how lip-syncing disturbs current vocal theories, opening up the possibilities of voice to broader horizons. Subsequently, I will question how it is that the voice is able to be co-opted by another, drawing upon both vocal theory and film theory. I then begin a discussion of how the drag queen is able to make of her body a suitable site of ascription, for lip-syncing is far more than an oral phenomenon. Following this, I turn my attention

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 2.

to the idea of agency, speaking more broadly of voice as a concept that, in its involvement with the body, means the drag queen has an exciting amount of signficatory power in lip-syncing. And finally, I shall argue that lip-syncing can be understood as a foil to the internal dialogues of consciousness (indeed, dialogues over monologues), meaning that in lip-syncing the voice of another can, for all phenomenological intents and purposes, become the voice of the queen. Such an idea begins my interest in different forms of selfhood that emerge in lip-syncing, to which Chapters 3 and 6 are more directly focussed

### *I.ii Retelling Vocal Theory*

The voice's structural makeup lends itself to lip-syncing, with lip-syncing highlighting the bisection of speaker and listener in all speech. In typical acts of speaking or singing, the voice is produced by the speaker and sent out into the world: in order to exist, the voice must exist external to the speaker, insofar as the "voice comes from the inside of a body and radiates through a space which is exterior".<sup>3</sup> The voice, that which is considered to be most part of oneself, something so intrinsically tethered to one's own sense of self, must always exist beyond oneself, thereby initiating the central dialectic of voice.<sup>4</sup> The voice exists at the critical point between self and Other, subject and object, and where the voice leaves as subject, as the – idealistically – most focussed point of interior expression, it returns to the speaker as object, the speaker thereby becoming the listener. In most instances, the speaking subject is also the listening subject, and the voice that is issued from the speaker as subject must find its way back into their ears as object. Of this phenomenon, Steven Connor writes that "I cannot speak without putting myself in the position of the one who hears my voice. [...] In speaking, we listen intently to our own speaking voice, in a complicated feedback loop,

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<sup>3</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck*, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> This tenet will be explored more rigorously in Chapter 3 in terms of the generation of subjectivity during lip-sync performances.

a duet of utterance and response; we eavesdrop on our own speech, but do not, as it were, hear ourselves listening”.<sup>5</sup> Speaking is always, however unconsciously, listening.

In lip-syncing the inverse operation occurs. Rather than sounding speech and hearing her own vocalisations, the drag queen listens out, “hears herself listening”, to rephrase Connor, and moves her mouth and body in time with the voice. Even so, the feedback loop of voice is satisfied – a (silently) speaking subject hears the voice as object and identifies with that voice. I do not believe it is too far to consider the drag queen a speaking subject in this instance, for voice is not simply the sound that is emitted, but the corporeal processes through which that voice is produced. For how could the voice be untethered from the body? In one sense, voices themselves produce bodies, a “vocalic body”, in Connor’s coinage, one that intimates a certain form of corporeality – age, gender, class, race etc.<sup>6</sup> In another, while voices may produce bodies, they are also most often produced *by* bodies: inhalations of breath, tensing of diaphragms, movements of the tongue and the shape of the mouth. The drag queen mirrors these actions when she lip-syncs: she purses her lips for the plosive utterances, she catches her throat for the glottal stops, and she tenses her stomach to exhibit the force necessary to belt out the extended notes of the ballads she lip-syncs. The drag queen performs the corporeal actions of speech and enacts the dialectic of voice, except from discrete locations. While the voice starts elsewhere, it ends with her, and while she may not produce the voice in the typical sense, she goes through the motions of vocal production.

In its generation of voice from multiple and discrete locations, lip-syncing renegotiates a seeming given of voice: that it expresses, inextricably and unavoidably, the person who speaks. Adriana Cavarero, in her work *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, understands the voice, or rather all voices, as intrinsically unique, and calls for a philosophy that understands the “uniqueness of each human being, as it gets manifested in the uniqueness of the

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<sup>5</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 35. See also Nina Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Sound & Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015).

voice”.<sup>7</sup> This certainly has an overt truth to it, in that my voice is my own as it is no other’s: I need only say “it’s me” to answer the question “who is it?”, for my voice carries with it some inalienable part of myself. However, while voices may have a uniqueness to them, they do not exist only in relation to the person who spoke them, and they can be adopted by others. Connor writes that, in “marking out the relations of interior and exterior, the voice also announces and verifies the co-operation of bodies and the environments in which they have their being”.<sup>8</sup> I am particularly struck by Connor’s assertion that the voice, in its exteriority, “verifies the co-operation of bodies and [...] environments”, which suggests that the voice does not exist in a closed feedback loop, but rather always involves relationality with other actors, interaction with other bodies. Alireza Fakhrkonandeh takes Connor’s idea further, suggesting not only a co-operation of bodies initiated by the voice, but an intercorporeality, perhaps even violently so:

The voice directly pierces the interior and suffuses it to the extent that the very status of the exterior becomes dubious, and it invariably discloses the interior to the extent that the very supposition of an interior is contingent on the voice.<sup>9</sup>

The voice not only disturbs the idea of an interior and exterior in terms of the self, acting as both subject and object, but moreover it destabilises the boundaries between one’s own self and other subjects. The voice can pierce, can enter the body: it makes of the body something pervious, goes beyond the skin, and indeed initiates a porousness of bodies. In lip-syncing, the voice of another not only pierces the drag queen as she hears the voice in her ears, but suffuses her corporeally, with the voice felt to be generated throughout her body.

It is clear, therefore, that the voice’s structure lends itself to lip-syncing, and that lip-syncing reframes the typical routine of speech, not only by including a proleptic listening, but also by generating speech from discrete locations. The lip-syncing drag queen satisfies the dicta of the voice

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<sup>7</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *For More than More Voice*, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck*, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Alireza Fakhrkonandeh, “The Acousmatic Voice as the Chiasmatic Flesh: An Analysis of Howard Baker’s Gertrude-the-Cry”, in *symploke*, Volume 22, Numbers 1-2 (2014), p. 249.

– that it be generated corporeally and experienced as object – all whilst remaining silent. Such a renegotiation of the voice’s structural makeup moves beyond existing vocal theories, extending their horizons to accommodate a theorisation of the silent voice.

### *I.iii – Vents and Dummies: Ascribing a Voice*

At its core, lip-syncing plays off the bisection of body and voice. While lip-syncing is a rather exaggerated form of this split, it is something that both Cavarero and Connor mention in their own ways: Cavarero speaks at length about how Voice in philosophy has lost the uniqueness of the body behind that voice, and that Voice floats dismembered, separate from the body; and Connor highlights the essential split between voice and body that occurs in all acts of speech. Given that this bisection of body and voice is so deeply ingrained – unavoidable, even – within vocal production, it is unsurprising that drag is not the first nor only mode of performance to explore this division. Both ventriloquism and film offer important insights into the possibility and precedence of the creation of a silent voice. Where ventriloquism may be the oldest ancestor of lip-syncing, with its literal meaning of “belly speaking” harking both to the vaticinations of the Oracle of Delphi right through to hoax media séances in the nineteenth century, the practice’s reliance on ventriloquial structures, which depend “upon the insufficiency of sound and the adjustment of sound by sight”, are crucial aspects of both film and lip-syncing.<sup>10</sup> And film, which must constantly attempt to suture the division between screen image and soundtrack, evidences a more modern example of such ventriloquial structures that often attempt to obfuscate their existence. In this section, therefore, I turn to film and ventriloquial theories in order to highlight the ascriptive processes evident in lip-syncing that assist in the generation of a silent voice.

Sound film is always, at base, an example of ventriloquism. Just as in ventriloquism, where the audience is faced with a silent body that is animated by the voice of another (the dummy and

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<sup>10</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck*, pp. 56 & 22.

the ventriloquist), in film the creation of voice is split between the silent image on the screen and the loudspeakers that emit the sound from somewhere around the room. Film, more often than not, attempts to hide this division, wishing to create the Imaginary ideal that there is a unity between the sound heard and the image seen; and, indeed, in most cinematic experience the audience does suspend their disbelief, allowing the sound to marry itself to the moving lips on the screen.<sup>11</sup> Michel Chion describes this process as one of “synchresis”, that is, a portmanteau of “synchronism” and “synthesis”, which “consists in perceiving as one and the same phenomenon – which manifests itself both on the visual and sound levels – the ‘concomitance’ of a precise sound event with a precise visual event on the sole and only condition that they happen simultaneously”.<sup>12</sup> Synchresis aptly describes what happens during a drag lip-sync performance; as the drag queen stands onstage, the only real reason to believe that the voice is issuing from her mouth is the fact that her lips and bodily movements are in synchrony with the words being sung or spoken on the track.<sup>13</sup>

Chion’s terminology refers to the concomitance of *any* sound event with a visual image; for example, Chion is also interested in the syncretic relationship between the sound of someone cracking an ice cream cone and the image of a dinosaur emerging from its egg in *Jurassic Park*. The fact that the sound is not “correct” does not matter, for its simultaneity with the image is enough to afford it credence.<sup>14</sup> Beyond such Foley sounds, Rick Altman relates these theories directly to the phenomenon of linking up spoken word with image in film. He writes that the lips on screen “transfer the origin of the words, as perceived by the spectator/auditor, from sound ‘track’ and loudspeaker to a character within the film’s diegesis. To put it another way, pointing the camera at the speaker disguises the source of the words, dissembling the work of production and technology”.<sup>15</sup> The first

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<sup>11</sup> I will speak at length about the filmic Imaginary, after Jacques Lacan and Friedrich Kittler, in Chapter 3, and therefore I use the capitalised Imaginary in this instance simply to foreshadow these future chapters and to reference spectrally the influence of psychoanalysis on this work.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Chion, “Audio-Vision and Sound”, p. 205.

<sup>13</sup> Casey O’Callaghan writes of other, more empirically grounded, ventriloquial and cross-modal effects in his work *Sounds: A Philosophical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 172.

<sup>14</sup> Vanessa Theme Ament, *The Foley Grail: The Art of Performing Sound for Film, Games, and Animation* (Burlington: Focal, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Rick Altman, “Moving Lips: Cinema as Ventriloquism”, p. 69.

half of this quotation is undoubtedly true of lip-syncing, in which the focus on the moving lips of the queen moves the origin of the words from the loudspeaker to her mouth; however, I would caution against an idealistic fall into the latter half of the sentence, in which the work of production and technology is disguised. While it is often the intention of the performing queen to obfuscate the means of her vocal production, sometimes the technological work and mediation form integral parts of the performance, about which I will speak at some length in Chapter 5, with specific reference to ShayShay's performance "Mutual Core". Indeed, there are many examples in filmic traditions where the sutures between sound and image are torn apart: I am drawn most strongly to the moments of rupture in David Lynch's films, particularly the dying singer of *Mulholland Drive*, who falls to the floor as her voice keeps singing, aptly laying bare the artifice of cinema. Indeed, this is why I particularly enjoy the term *synchresis*, for it "is possibly ambiguous; it is not really a synthesis in the sense that no difference is 'transcended' or resolved".<sup>16</sup> *Synchresis* does not imply a necessary recourse to an idealised singularity between image and sound, some sort of Hegelian *Aufhebung*, but rather it tethers the two together, in a relationship that can be as pure or impure as it wishes. Such a wide-ranging definition leaves the drag queen's silent voice open to a plethora of alternative interpretations.

What is interesting in the case of lip-syncing is that the voice ascribed to the body is hardly ever the voice of the drag queen, but the voice of someone else. Naturally, in ventriloquism the intention is for the audience to believe that the voice belongs to the dummy, though it is the ventriloquist who both moves and speaks for the dummy, speaking to themselves in feedback loop whose circuit is closed; similarly, in film, while dubbing and playback are widely prevalent techniques, typically it is the sound of the actors' own voices that is then layered over their bodies in post-synchronisation.<sup>17</sup> While there are many examples of voices being synced up with discrepant

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<sup>16</sup> Michel Chion, "Audio-Vision and Sound", p. 205.

<sup>17</sup> The Bollywood filmic tradition has the most prevalent use of playback singers in films, singers who are unseen but whose voices are "lip-synced" to by the actors onscreen, the most famous of whom is Lata Mangeshkar, who gave her voice to over 25,000 songs, Sangita Gopal & Sujata Moorti, *Global Bollywood*, p. 23.

bodies, as evidenced in Chapter 0, lip-syncing is unique in its desire to link up voices almost exclusively with alternative bodies. Indeed, what is striking is that my interlocutors stated that they would *always* choose the voice of someone else, even if they had the option to use their own. For example, Sue Gives A Fuck, in her performance “Boudica” (which I discuss in Chapter 4), begins with a scripted monologue that she herself wrote; rather than record the speech herself, she asked her friend to do it instead. When I asked her why she didn’t use her own voice, she responded:

Well, I’m really curious actually, because the show I’m seeing tonight about Nicola Sturgeon, he [the drag queen] does record his own voice and lip-syncs to it sometimes. Whenever I’ve seen clips of it, I’ve actually felt that it doesn’t work. That it’s not that impactful.

Fascinatingly, Rodent holds a similar opinion to Sue, and when asked to expand on why they choose not to use their own voice, they stated:

There’s kind of [an] ambiguity about who they [the drag queen] are [in lip-syncing] because there’s never a solid voice coming out to signify that person’s self, because every single time it’s a different self being channeled.

While I will interrogate the interconnected ideas of selfhood and vocal multiplicities more fully in later chapters, as well as offering an answer to why Sue may find lip-syncing to her own voice less impactful, here it is important to note that lip-syncing remains unique not in its ability to tether the voice of someone to the body of another, but in the fact that this is a paramount feature of the art form. Where Cavarero writes of an inalienable uniqueness of voice, here Rodent and Sue argue for a conception of vocal identity that must always remain at a disjuncture: the silent voice resonates through the body with multiple and contradictory identities.

#### *I.iv – Drag’s Bodily Ascriptions*

Over the course of the preceding sections, I have shown that ascription plays a key role in the formation of a silent voice, in that ascription is able to yoke a voice to a silent body; moreover, I have suggested that the voice, especially the rhizophonically divorced voice of recorded music, not only

is able to be sewn back onto the body from which it originally came, but is also able to be co-opted by the body of another.<sup>18</sup> In this section, I would like to go beyond the syncretically ascriptive processes that are evident in drag lip-syncing. During a drag lip-sync performance, it is not enough simply to go onstage and move one's lips in time with a voice (or, at the very most, this would not generally be a satisfying performance).<sup>19</sup> Rather, the drag queen's body has a crucial role to play in the suturing of the voice on the track to her body. Beyond the lips, voicing is a fully corporeal process, one that requires a singerly approach to how one comports oneself; but also, in the case of drag, the physical regalia and makeup of the performing queen are invaluable elements in their drag arsenal. The amassed spectacle is one that provides not just a body for a voice, but a suitably ascribable body that can act convincingly in the audience's suspension of their disbelief.

Drag involves an exploration of gender that subverts binary expectations. One typically finds with drag queens that an assigned male at birth person dons the clothing, hair, and makeup stylings of excessive femininity, one that, in its negotiation of the gender binary, serves to subvert and undermine it in some way. As such, lip-syncs are most often comprised of songs performed by female pop vocalists, thereby corroborating the gender play, cementing Butler-via-Newton's argument of the play between interior and exterior gender that I cite in Chapter 0. The logic follows that the female voice of the track finds its home in the femininely gendered body onstage, and therefore the gendered play of drag is augmented. Indeed, drag queens undergo an astoundingly complex regimen in order to become the stylised female impersonators one sees onstage. Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor outline much of the process, including: heavy foundation designed for scars to cover beards; "exaggerated eyes and enlarged glittery lips"; tucking of the genitals between the legs (often assisted by duct tape); shaved legs, or several layers of tights to conceal leg hair; corsets; waist

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<sup>18</sup> I employ "rhizophonic" here after Stanyek and Piekut, who helpfully assign rhizophonic over the tautological schizophonic. A more complete discussion of rhizophonia is present in Chapter 4, Jason Stanyek & Benjamin Piekut, "Deadness: Technologies of the Intermundane", in *The Drama Review*, Volume 54, Number 1 (Spring 2010), p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> While it is generally the case that a static lip-sync, only moving the mouth, would be a less satisfying lip-sync performance, I am reminded of Sasha Velour's performance of Kate Bush's "This Woman's Work", which is an exceptionally arresting performance that uses little to no movement below the neck.

cinchers; bras (again, some use duct tape across their chests to create cleavage); homemade fake breasts, constructed out of everything from “lentil beans” to “water balloons”; dresses; shoes; and wigs.<sup>20</sup> The aesthetic goal to which these arduous and time-consuming rituals strive can be different for each queen. Yet, whatever the desired effect, they each have a common cause: in adapting the male body to appear female, the female voice of the track is more readily ascribable to the body of the queen.

However, such an analysis of the ascriptive intentions of makeup and costuming smacks of non-binary erasure when applied to my interlocutors. While it is undeniably true that Rodent, ShayShay, Sue, Bougie, and Ruby purposefully adopt signs of femininity with regards to their makeup, hair, and costumes, none of them intend this to denote a gender flip, as I mention in Chapter 0. Moreover, these queens often lip-sync to songs that are not sung by women: Rodent has performed to My Chemical Romance and Marilyn Manson, both fronted by men; and Ruby has performed to Muse. Therefore, it is a lazy analysis to suggest that their regalia’s ascriptive processes function solely along gendered lines.

Makeup does, however, have an important role in the ascriptive processes that assist in the generation of the silent voice. Rupp and Taylor note that drag queens often have “exaggerated eye [makeup] and glittery lips”, which is certainly true of the five drag queens I focus on here. Though glittery lips may not fit with all of their aesthetics, a commonality between them all is an overdrawn lip, almost exclusively in a bright or deep colour (hardly ever a flesh-toned lip), with eye makeup that is hugely exaggerated. These queens either shave their eyebrows or glue them down in order to be able to draw them on much higher and therefore give themselves more space for an exaggerated eye makeup look. This form of makeup reminds me of a quotation by Michel Serres, in which he considers the role of makeup in delineating the senses:

Cosmetics becomes an aesthetics of sensation, because of a particular harmony: the naked woman in the mirror tattoos her skin, in a certain order and according to precise laws, she

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<sup>20</sup> Leila Rupp & Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, pp. 13-23.

follows exact pathways; she emphasizes the eye and the gaze, accentuates with colour the place to be kissed, crowning the zone of words and taste; underlines hearing with an earring, traces the bridges or links of colour between the wells or the mountains of the senses, draws the map of her own receptivity. With cosmetics, our real skin, the skin we experience, becomes visible.<sup>21</sup>

Serres paints a picture of makeup as a topography of the senses, in which the lips are highlighted by the glossy overdrawn red lip liner of the drag queen, and their eyes attract one's gaze through the darkening of their exterior. In lip-syncing, therefore, the audience's gaze is drawn to the moving lips, and they are connected to the eyes of the drag queen, cementing these features as the creators of the voice, much in the same way as Rick Altman describes the direction of the camera to the actor's mouths obfuscating the true source of the sound. Indeed, this focus on the eyes and lips evokes a quotation of Jacques Derrida's, in which he muses: "To which surface of the eye do lips compare? If two gazes look into each other's eyes, can one then say that they are touching? Are they coming into contact – the one with the other?"<sup>22</sup> The focus on these features, and the attention that is drawn to them creates an affective encounter of contact with the audience, demanding them to notice the voice issuing from them. Makeup in this instance acts as both an attraction and a decoy: it asks the audience to look at the mouth, to notice that it is moving in time with the voice, and simultaneously, in its overt exaggeration, the drag queen's makeup draws the focus away from the fact that her movements are mute.

Lip-syncing is more than its namesake, however, and the lips are only the beginning of the ascriptive processes the drag queen goes through in order to lay claim to the voice of another, generating a silent voice of her own: she must utilise her whole body in order to provide a suitably ascribable source. Following Connor's "vocalic body" I cite above, I contend that when one hears a voice one can imagine the corporeal processes that went into making it. While Connor's notion of the vocalic body is far more expansive than the use I put it towards here – for the vocalic body can

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<sup>21</sup> Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. Margaret Sankey & Peter Cowley (Bloomsbury Academic: London, 2016), p. 34.

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Touching*, p. 2.

form entirely new ways of being or having a body “sustained out of the autonomous operations of the voice” – here I am concerned with a rather more prosaic fact of the vocalic body, that the voice in its sonic materiality suggests the bodily procedures that created it.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, when the drag queen endeavours to yoke a voice to her body in lip-syncing, she must envoice her body and show it to be going through the bodily functions not only of creating voice but of creating that specific voice at that particular moment. Rick Altman states this in terms of ventriloquism when he says that a ventriloquist “must also be able to move the dummy in time with his voice – not only lip movement but all other bodily motion as well must be rhythmically consistent with the sound”.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, “life-like manipulation of the dummy” is the third fundamental of ventriloquism, according to Darryl Hutton, after “speaking without moving the lips [and] producing a ventriloquist voice that is different from your own”.<sup>25</sup> Rodent spoke specifically about how they feel it necessary to engage their whole body in the act of lip-syncing as though they were actually singing:

When I lip-sync, I try and imagine as though it is coming out of me and try and use as much of my body as possible with doing it. It’s not just the lips and the mouth and the jaw, it’s tensing my stomach, tensing my arms, using all the things that you would do to make those sounds.

Rodent makes an important point. It is not enough to stand onstage silently moving their lips: in their silence, they must engage their diaphragm as though they were singing; they may strain their arms, as though trying to get to the end of a particularly long phrase, or to reflect the emotion in the song; and they may use their jaw to simulate a quivering vibrato. The focus on the stomach is intriguing, as the typically more hidden parts of singing are brought to the fore, laying a corporeal claim to the voice. It is important to remember though that this is simply an “engaging” of the diaphragm, “as though trying”: these are gestural, visible signs of singing, rather than the actual necessary movements.

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<sup>23</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck*, p. 35.

<sup>24</sup> Rick Altman, “Moving Lips”, p. 77.

<sup>25</sup> Darryl Hutton, *Ventriloquism*, p. 4.

A useful precedent here is the mime tradition and its use of counterweights. Thomas Leabhart details how Etienne Decroux's later work explored in depth the ways "of expressing the movement of thought, studying the way thought shaped the body, and examining in great detail the way physical exertion shaped the body".<sup>26</sup> This latter point was also interrogated by Jean-Louis Barrault, whose theatre of objective mime was based on the premise that the "imagined existence of an object will become real only when the muscular disturbance imposed by this object is suitably conveyed by the body of the mime".<sup>27</sup> In mime, if the audience is to believe, for example, that the performer is dragging an invisible boulder with an invisible rope, they must exert a noticeable and identifiable degree of muscular effort equal (or visibly equal) to the actual act of dragging such a boulder; similarly, in drag lip-syncing, if the audience is to believe the drag queen is actually singing a virtuosic phrase, she must visibly show the same degree of muscular effort. What I find interesting is the discrepancy this has with dubbing practices. For example, Marsha Siefert, when speaking of the turn to post-synchronisation and dubbing in Hollywood musicals, states that:

The technological separation of the song from its singer meant that the image of singing did not have to reflect the physicality of its bodily production. The physiology of singing (wide open mouth, unusual or extreme facial expressions, visible signs of breathing) and its physicality (strength, endurance) is no longer necessarily visible. The singer could dance, do acrobatics, or otherwise move around with only minimal lip movement to produce consistent, clear singing. In addition, the microphone, necessary to achieve the clarity and presence expected from the popular music sonic ideal, was also visually absent. Thus, larger than life singing with minimal bodily effort or accompanied by dancing with no technological requirements came to appear natural and more like speaking.<sup>28</sup>

Whereas in drag lip-syncing the queen, even though she doesn't need to, desires to be seen to be making the required physical effort, in film musicals the actors strove towards a more Imaginary

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas Leabhart, *Modern and Post-Modern Mime* (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1989), p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> Jean-Louis Barrault, quoted in Thomas Leabhart, *Modern and Post-Modern Mime*, p. 62.

<sup>28</sup> Marsha Siefert, "Image/Music/Voice", p. 47.

ideal. The drag queen, in a kind of irony, seeks a reality, a viability, one that relies on an elaborate system of counterweights to evidence a seemingly equal degree of physical effort when lip-syncing. There are, of course, productive slippages. I am thinking of times ShayShay might touch their ear when casually lip-syncing a stratospheric Mariah Carey whistle-tone, finding the note with incredible ease, in a campy display of feigned vocal virtuosity, more comic than believable.

#### *I.v – Agency and Languages in Lip-Syncing*

Ascriptive processes are important, but to have a voice is more than to have a voice ascribed – one must speak. Cavarero writes that “the voice is sound, not speech. But speech constitutes its essential destination”.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the voice as speech intimates a degree of communication, even a sophistication in the degree, and multifarious ways through which the speaking subject can come to mean and can express themselves through their voice. Therefore, while the voice must be seen to be convincingly ascribable to the body of the drag queen, having a voice seem to come from a body does not necessarily imply a great deal of agency. The envoicing processes outlined in the previous sections do endow the drag queen with a certain sense of agency, I would argue, in that they implicate the drag queen in a network of actors that work to create a whole voice, a voice that is embodied and a body that is envoiced. But voices are more than how they are produced, and while the voice cannot be reduced to linguistic meaning, as Cavarero rightly notes, one of the voice’s primary functions is to mean. And though it may be true that the voice ascribed to the drag queen does mean, I have not yet outlined how the drag queen is able to affect the meaning of that voice, thereby enjoying a far greater agency than simply through ascription alone.

ShayShay touched on a fascinating point in interview when they were musing on the differences between using their own voice or someone else’s. They explained:

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<sup>29</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*, p. 12.

I think there's a lot more ability to adapt with your own voice, obviously, because it's not pre-recorded and it's not a song. That sounds really stupid, of course you can't adapt the track; but you can lip-sync things differently, your expressions can be different.

What ShayShay describes here is their ability to have an active engagement with the semantic meaning of the words that are sung on the track, even though they were recorded in an anterior time and place. ShayShay's point can be helpfully understood through Freya Jarman's explanation of the voice, in which she states that the voice "functions in a 'third space' in between the voicer and the listener and that it operates as a mediator between body and language".<sup>30</sup> Through using their own expressions and bodily movements to affect the meaning of the words, ShayShay draws attention to the voice's critical role as mediator between both body and language, and indeed language's role between body and voice. The voice cannot be contained within either the body or language, just as language cannot be contained by either body or voice: voices always generate bodies, and voice always has the potential to sit outside of language, even meaning outside of language in a system Dolar refers to as "the linguistics of the non-voice", a "pre-cultural, non-cultural voice".<sup>31</sup> Language, the body, and voice all work in tandem, producing and affecting each other.

I see useful parallels that may be drawn between ShayShay's ability to use their body to affect the meaning of the words on the track and Don Ihde's taxonomy of different forms of languages. Ihde states:

The centre of language as language-as-word may be understood as similar to the appearance of a focus-fringe phenomenon in the sense that deployed around language-as-word is a vast field of meaningful activities which may in the broader sense of language be called "languages". These "languages" are gravitationally weighted toward the central significance in word, but they may be relatively distinguished from the "linguistic" form of language.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Freya Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices*, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, pp. 24 & 26.

<sup>32</sup> Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 148.

To this end, Ihde notes a “‘language’ of gesture which can itself be rich and highly significant in its expressibility”, an idea that supports ShayShay’s ability to change, augment, or adapt the meaning of certain words through their gestural language. Through not only the drag queen’s facial movements, in expressing emotions that match or misdirect the typical meaning of the words or tone of the voice on the track, but also through her physical comportment, gait, movements etc., the drag queen is able to work within a system of bodily language, a language of gesture, that endows her performance with a semantic meaning that affects the linguistic surety of the words on the track. In this way, the drag queen is afforded a considerable amount of agency, and, even through her silently lip-syncing body, is able to speak.

The drag queen’s agency in moments such as these also raises interesting considerations of liveness in lip-syncing. What constitutes “liveness”? The drag queen is present, but the singer is absent – and yet, in a way, the drag queen sings. Philip Auslander makes pains to stress that “liveness, then, is not an absolute condition”, and that liveness need not commit itself to a unitary position which involves spatial and temporal co-presence.<sup>33</sup> Auslander cites the work of Steve Wurtzler, whose article on a particular performance of Whitney Houston’s during which she sang live but her microphone was turned off is particularly relevant here. Whilst singing the National Anthem at the Superbowl, Whitney Houston sang into a microphone that was turned off, and the audience heard the sound of her pre-recorded track. Wurtzler details the public outrage at such moments of lip-syncing, and pinpoints the public’s accusations as centring on “notions of creativity and artistic integrity, but also at stake is the integrity, or rather the existence, of the live’s status as a fully present event”.<sup>34</sup> The case of Whitney Houston and drag lip-sync performance is almost identical, for both include a “spatial co-presence and temporal anteriority”, in which a performer is

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<sup>33</sup> Philip Auslander, “Live and Technologically Mediated Performance”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*, ed. Tracy C. Davis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 109.

<sup>34</sup> Steve Wurtzler, “‘She Sang Live, But the Microphone Was Turned Off’: The Live, the Recorded, and the *Subject* of Representation”, in *Sound Theory Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 93.

onstage, and performing live, but with pre-recorded materials in use.<sup>35</sup> Such performances break down the illusion of the live event and interrogate what it even means to be “live”. Is the drag queen not live? Is she not performing, and performing with agency in a meaningful way? The confluence of temporal anteriority and spatial co-presence marks out the interplay between different axes of actors in lip-syncing.

ShayShay’s language of gesture, their bodily voice, brings up another important point, one that affirms the voice of the track as the drag queen’s own even though she remains silent. ShayShay, whilst also talking about the difference between using their own voice and that of another, stated that they are “becoming more comfortable with, not the *sound* of my voice, I don’t want to hear my voice, but I’m feeling much more comfortable about other people having to listen to the *stuff* of my voice” [emphasis added]. ShayShay’s differentiation between the “sound” and the “stuff” of their voice, between the sonorous material and the semantic content, is fascinating. ShayShay chooses tracks that express the stuff of their voice, even though their voice remains silent. In this respect, though ShayShay’s body is silent, they are not *silenced*. This chimes strongly with the epigram to this chapter, in which ShayShay states that “you don’t actually, as far as the audience know, have the ability to speak. They can assume that you can talk, but like, maybe you’re a mute, maybe you can’t even speak! But you can still lip-sync and convey everything”; this is true, the audience does not know that ShayShay can speak, can sing, can vocalise, but during the lip-sync performance they still have a voice. Between the processes of ascription, the gestural language, and the predetermined choice of the “stuff” of the track, ShayShay’s voice is heard, even though they are silent.

#### *I.vi – Phenomenology of Voice and Consciousness*

Thus far I have endeavoured to show how the silent voice is both theoretically possible and how it is generated through a variety of means: I have argued for the possibility of a silent voice using extant

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 93.

vocal theories; I have set precedents for such vocal explorations in both ventriloquial and filmic traditions; and I have sought to argue that the drag queen's body has an important function in both voicing and attributing meaning to that voice. At this point, I believe that the silent voice has been justifiably considered and matched with the more quotidian understandings of voice, save for one crucial way – in how the voice functions in the creation of subjectivity and consciousness. While I later focus on psychoanalysis to answer this final question, I turn here to the phenomenology of Jacques Derrida, whose *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl's Phenomenology* offers an incisive rebuttal to Edmund Husserl's theorisation of the absolute presence of internal monologue, and in so doing deconstructs the notion of the metaphysics of presence, allowing for a fuller and more enriching theorisation of the silent voice.

Derrida's main conviction in his essay is to deconstruct the metaphysics of presence that pervades Husserl's work, and Western philosophy more generally. While the intricacies of Derrida's argument with relation to the interconnection of the indicative and expressive functions of the sign are beyond the scope of this work, the fact that both Husserl's and Derrida's arguments found themselves on the speech act, and more specifically with the inner monologue, the silent soliloquy that runs through a subject's mind, has important ramifications for lip-syncing. The basic premise is that, when thinking in one's head, Husserl believes that "phonic signs [...] are 'heard' by the subject who utters them in the absolute proximity of their present. The subject does not have to pass outside of himself in order to be immediately affected by its activity of expression".<sup>36</sup> In this way, Husserl outlines a transcendent voice, in which meaning is produced at the exact moment of its sounding (internal – silent – sounding, that is); when the subject thinks, it is such because they think at the very same moment they hear, creating a feedback loop of pure auto-affection that not only need

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<sup>36</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. Leonard Lawlor (Illinois: Northwestern University Press), p. 65.

not pass into exteriority, and one that happens in a complete temporal present, a transcendent synchrony.<sup>37</sup>

For Derrida, Husserl's theory of the phenomenological voice plays into a dangerous history of both logo- and phonocentrism, in which logocentrism "means the immediate presence of a perfectly self-identical meaning or object; especially the immediately present object of pure knowledge", and phonocentrism "refers to the immediate self-presence of the knower's voice in speaking the word that names the immediately present self-identical object of knowledge".<sup>38</sup> In Derrida's understanding, there can be no unmediated access to consciousness or objects, and as such Husserl's phenomenology falls flat, subscribing to the metaphysics of presence.<sup>39</sup> Were Husserl's argument to hold true, then the lip-syncing drag queen would have no claim over the possibility of a silent voice, for the phenomenological voice of thought must always exist in absolute self-presence; however, Derrida offers a new path out of Husserl's phenomenology that lends a convincing line of argument to lip-syncing in its dramatisation of the workings of the voice and consciousness.

Derrida follows much of Husserl's argument, and agrees with him that the voice – for all intents and purposes – is consciousness; he says in no uncertain terms that "this auto-affection is the possibility of what we call subjectivity", and moreover declares plainly that "the voice is consciousness".<sup>40</sup> This is summarised by the phrase "*s'entendre parler*", to hear oneself speak, an idea not dissimilar from Connor's self-eavesdropping I cite earlier. And yet, Derrida does not believe that this consciousness arises in a transcendent, unmediated form of absolute presence to oneself. Indeed, Derrida states that:

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<sup>37</sup> Richard Aczel, "Understanding as Over-Hearing: Towards a Dialogics of Voice", in *New Literary History*, Volume 32, Number 3, Voice and Human Experience (Summer 2001), p. 599.

<sup>38</sup> Jim Garrison, "John Dewey, Jacques Derrida, and the Metaphysics of Presence", in *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Volume 35, Number 2 (Spring 1999), p. 352.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p. 348.

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon*, p. 68.

The process by means of which the living now, producing itself by spontaneous generation, must, in order to be a now, be retained in another now, must affect itself, without empirical recourse, with a new originary actuality in which it will become a non-now as a past now, etc.; and such a process is indeed a pure auto-affection in which the same is the same only by affecting itself with an other, by becoming the other of the same.<sup>41</sup>

Derrida inserts temporality into Husserl's explanation in such a way that Husserl's theory becomes "radically contradicted by 'time' itself".<sup>42</sup> This contradiction functions due to the fact that time "cannot be an 'absolute subjectivity' precisely because it cannot be conceived on the basis of a present and the self-presence of a present being", and it is here that Derrida's concept of *différance* comes into effect.<sup>43</sup> *Différance*, which functions both as difference and deferral, non-identity and delay, makes the claim that the auto-affection of speech is always deferred, and therefore cannot be self-present, it must become "the other of the same".<sup>44</sup> Leonard Lawlor summarises this point well in his introduction to *Voice and Phenomenon*:

If we think of interior monologue, we see that a difference between hearer and speaker is necessary, we see that dialogue comes first. But through that dialogue (the iteration of the back and forth) the same, a self, is produced. And yet the process of dialogue, differentiation-repetition, never completes itself in identity; the movement continues to go beyond to infinity so that identity is always *deferred*, always a step beyond. "*Différance*" names this inseparable movement (what we called repeatability above) of differentiation and deferral.<sup>45</sup>

In this way, the auto-affection of speech, the feedback loop of voice that generates consciousness, must always, through a process of *différance*, deny self-presence.

How is this relevant to the drag queen? On the face of it, Derrida's disavowal of the singular moment of self-present thought places at the centre of voice an always and already essential

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* p. 72.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* p. 74.

<sup>43</sup> Jacques Derrida, quoted in Michelle Duncan, "The Operatic Scandal of the Singing Body", in *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Volume 16, Number 3, Performance and Opera (November 2004), p. 295.

<sup>44</sup> Jim Garrison, "John Dewey, Jacques Derrida, and the Metaphysics of Presence", p. 353.

<sup>45</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon*, p. xxiii.

deferral, which has important theoretical implications for lip-syncing. The deferral evident in Derrida's thought means that, though the speaker and the listener in his feedback loop are the same person, voice is produced by discrete parts (both temporally and identically); if in any act of voicing the speaker listens to themselves in a moment that isn't at absolute proximity to themselves, then why can't lip-syncing, in the movement of the mouth to the voice of another, close this feedback loop in a similar way? Moreover, if this deferral is not only a deferral but also a differing, then the non-identity of the two sides of vocalising, of speaker and listener, exhibit a non-identical relationship just as they do in lip-syncing. The implications this holds for the generation of a silent voice are invaluable. For, as Derrida states, it is voice that *is* consciousness, a consciousness created through this process of *différance*; and while I am not suggesting that lip-syncing generates consciousness in the exact same way as interior monologue, it does both dramatise the process in a performative context, and has the potential to layer onto the self, onto consciousness, a secondary (or, perhaps simply other) vocal identity. As such, through its dramatisation, the drag queen lays claim to the voice on the track, and in a phenomenological sense that voice can be understood as being actually hers, as actually producing this voice in silence: this silent voice. The drag queen's dramatised split of the speaker/listener duality reflects the essential process of *différance* that occurs in any act of voicing and even the creation of consciousness.

While this is pleasing, this analysis misses a final step. It falls short the moment one considers the act of deferral alongside the act of lip-syncing: deferral – synchronicity. Lip-syncing at its very core might seem to fall foul of Derrida's deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence, for lip-syncing seems to hold synchronicity, co-presence, co-temporality at the centre of its art. How to reconcile the essential *différance* of speech with an act that prides itself on the complete unison of two discrete parts? The first point, and one that I interrogate more fully in Chapter 2, is that lip-syncing always involves rupture, disjuncture, failure, a radical queerness that means that no matter how perfectly synchronous, however "tight" to use drag parlance, a lip-sync may be, it will always fall short of absolute speech – if that is even a viable category. The second point, and one that is

most important here, is that while lip-syncing may endeavour to achieve perfect unison in the moment of performance, there is an essential *preperformance*, a rehearsal, a knowing what words will come, an anterior deferral: a *préférence*. The drag queen, rather than hearing the words a moment later, differing and deferring from the words they have just spoken, in fact *prefigures* the words she *will* speak. In an anterior time and place, the drag queen rehearses the lip-sync, memorises the words, and in performance she is required to be attentive to the track, pre-empting the words that will come, foretelling what she will tell. Therefore, one can reframe Derrida's concept of *différance* for the drag queen as *préférence*, an anterior deferral, a prefiguring of the consciousness of speech.

#### *I.vii – Conclusion*

As oxymoronic as the silent voice may seem, the drag queen evidences a silent mode of voicing in lip-sync performance. Voice, that which mediates between sound and body, body and language, language and sound, and by virtue of that mediation exists between and beyond static points of emission and reception, is a relational phenomenon; for the lip-syncing drag queen, the voice is produced through the relation between the voice on the track and the silent machinations of her body: she speaks with a silent voice. Indeed, understanding a concept of the silent voice helps to expose some of the fallacies of voice in everyday thought: upon its deconstruction, one notices that the voice, that which is often considered to be most oneself, an effusion of one's inner being, a direct sonority of self, in fact functions in a way that relies upon exteriority, difference, deferral. The silent voice, as contradictory as it may sound, dismantles common-sense understandings of voice, while relying on the voice's essential structure.

Throughout this chapter I have sought to theorise the silent voice. I began by elucidating the basic structure of voice, and how the ways in which the voice functions lend themselves to the theorisation of the silent voice in lip-syncing. The voice sits between subject and object, splitting the

speaker into speaker and listener and wavering from bodies and toward bodies. Following this, I sought to find precedents of other forms of silent voices, through filmic traditions and ventriloquism, to show the pervasiveness of the bisection between body and voice across history – the ubiquity of the free-floating voice is perennial, for in the beginning was the word, after all. After assessing the bodily ascriptive processes of drag, I then turned my attention to the ways in which the body offers the drag queen a semantic agency in lip-syncing, how she can begin to speak with a silent voice, to mean beyond the prescriptive linguistic shackles of the pre-recorded voice. I argue, following Ihde and ShayShay, for a language of gesture, with which the drag queen can affect the meaning of the words on the track. And finally, I sought to justify the silent voice through its relation to the very core of the human experience in the voice's role as the creator of consciousness. While, as I argue, I do not wish to suggest that the drag queen is somehow circumventing her own internal dialogue in lip-syncing, lip-syncing exhibits a similar process of *différance* – indeed, reframing it as *prefférance* – in which she follows the same differing, preferring sidesteps of the inner working of the mind, as elucidated through the phenomenology of Jacques Derrida.

The silent voice is undoubtedly an uncanny phenomenon. However, its uncanniness increases manifold when one begins to consider the whole effect of the action in performance. What is the critical difference between watching someone sing and watching someone lip-sync? What does the silent void of the mouth hold within in it? These are the questions I pose in Chapter 2. Here, however, I am struck by the words of Charles Davis, who writes that “if there is an authentic voice it is one which comes from a recognition of its position in a system of voices”.<sup>46</sup> An authentic voice is not necessarily an idealised, sonorous profusion of an essential self, but one that works within broader systems of voices, in a webbed matrix of voices and bodies, and potentially, as evidenced here, one that speaks in its silence.

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<sup>46</sup> Charles Davis, “Reading the Ventriloquist’s Lips”, p. 151.

## Chapter 2

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### The Silent Scream

*I realised that someone screaming in silence, for example, is incredibly powerful: it just rings in your brain, and that's probably the loudest scream I've ever recorded – in that piece Silent Mountain*  
~ Bill Viola<sup>1</sup>

*And your voice, your voice more than any other voice linked to your breath, and breathlessness of feeling, so that you take one's breath away with you and carry one into realm [sic] of breathlessness and silence*  
~ Anaïs Nin<sup>2</sup>

*The mum performer, like a dreamer stuck in a nightmare in which she opens her mouth but cannot scream, reaches for the stereo with polished talons, wraps her mouth around the memory of a song and for a few precious musical moments rescues herself from the abyss of silence*  
~ Julian Fleisher<sup>3</sup>

#### *II.i – Introduction*

This chapter seeks to generate a deeper theory of the silent voice in lip-syncing, by way of analysing what I deem to be exemplary moments of silent voicing: the silent scream. Where the previous chapter built upon existing theories of body/voice bisections and the possibility of a more distributed, gestural form of voicing, here I interrogate the silent scream in an attempt to elevate it as a model for the workings of the silent voice in drag lip-sync performance. As such, this chapter's

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Viola, quoted in Doug Harvey, "Extremities", on *LA Weekly* (January 2003) <https://www.laweekly.com/extremities/> (accessed on: 21<sup>st</sup> of August 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Anaïs Nin, *A Spy in the House of Love* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 89.

<sup>3</sup> Julian Fleisher, *The Drag Queens of New York*, p. 75.

focus is less on specific performances and performers, but rather engages myriad literatures with the hope of highlighting the corporeal, vocal, and political exigencies of the silent voice. To that end, I begin in this introduction by supplying a firm foundation of ethnographic content, from which I hope to build such a theory.

My interest in the silent scream began by observing performances of both Rodent and Ruby. In figures 6 & 7, Rodent and Ruby are quite obviously in the throes of a scream: Rodent is doubled over, their chin close to their chest and their fists tensed, with their face visibly contorted into a screaming visage; Ruby on the other hand has her head stretched back, her neck extended, blood issuing from her mouth, her fists similarly strained. In both, their bodies are crumpled to a degree and extremely stiff, as though in an attempt to vent as much of themselves as possible. What I found intriguing is that these screaming points don't necessarily converge with actual screams on their tracks. For example, the photograph of Rodent comes from their performance "The End of the World", a performance that stitches together multiple songs to create a warning against the dangers of climate change: the performance begins with Rodent lip-syncing to Skeeter Davis's 1962 single "The End of the World"; after the first chorus, the music slows down, Davis's voice dropping through several octaves, until Maxine Peake's rendition of Caryl Churchill's poem "The Skriker" takes over; then breaks in the central focus of the performance, a large portion of Anohni's "4 Degrees", a song addressing the perils of climate change; finally, the song closes with the final moments of Britney Spears's "Till the World Ends", the track slowed down so that her voice sounds rather more like a baritone backing vocal than the American superstar to whom we are accustomed. Nowhere in the track, however, is there a scream, and yet Rodent's comportment might suggest otherwise. Why, then, do they adopt the physical trappings of a scream? Obviously screaming carries a certain emotional weight to it, but there is also a theoretical importance that such screaming holds.

Beyond Rodent and Ruby's more obvious, pained screams – apocalyptic prophesy and blood-soaked as they are – I began to notice similar, though less intense, examples in the performances of my other interlocutors. ShayShay, in figure 8, seems to exhibit similar styles of

clenched fists, curled body, and open mouth, if not as explicitly screaming as Ruby and Rodent, though still maintaining a visible emotional pain in their face. In figure 9, on the other hand, Bougie most definitely presents a type of screaming, but far from the screams of horror I mention above, Bougie's scream is jubilatory, ecstatic even. Her different emotional force still presents an open-mouthed cry with her chin flung backward, as with Ruby, but here her body is open, arms spread wide, less forcing every inch of air out of her but opening her body up as a channel for voices to travel.

I am intrigued by the silence of these screams, a silence that has become more apparent in my subsequent analysis of photographs of their performances. Photographs, of course, render any event silent, however, photographs of lip-sync performances reveal the necessary silence of lip-syncing. While to watch a lip-sync performance can be an extremely loud event, as I discuss in Chapter 5, the drag queen, by virtue of lip-syncing, remains silent. To be sure, this is not an absolute silence (a fact I consider more fully in the final section of this chapter), but it is a lack of sound. What is more, the drag queen's silence during lip-syncing is experienced as such: for example, Rodent says that lip-syncing falters when they can "hear my feet and my heels moving on the floor, and [...] the rustle of my dress, or worse me whispering under my breath and the movement of my lips". I interrogate this quotation more forcefully in Chapter 5, but here it is important to realise that, whatever noises drag queens may make while lip-syncing, the ideal to which their disbelief attends is a necessary silence of the performing body: in this instance, a silent scream. Moreover, ShayShay, as I mention in the previous chapter, tells me that they are becoming more comfortable with the "stuff" of their voice but "not with the sound of my voice". Lip-syncing, for all its sonorous clamour, is a perceptibly silent process for the performing queen (though, the unavoidable sounds of lip-syncing will be important theoretically at the close of this chapter). When watching a lip-sync, I rarely think of the mouth as silent, but there are flashes in performances, compounded by photographs, where I remember that the queen isn't actually singing, a beguiling and intriguing realisation.

Throughout this chapter, I will interrogate the silent scream as a paradigmatic moment of silent voicing, from which a broader model of silent voicing may be drawn. It is important to note that when I write “silent scream”, this does not mean that the queens are lip-syncing to a scream on the track, as I explain with Rodent; the silent scream is the most intense, and thereby the most readily analysable, moment of physical exertion in lip-syncing, and one that, in its overt aping at what is normally a very sonorous event, reveals the silence of lip-syncing more profoundly. I begin by taking Antonin Artaud’s adoration of the scream and his concomitant fear of the spoken word as my premise. In exploring Artaud’s theories, read through Jacques Derrida’s analysis of *la parole soufflée*, I shall explain how, in order to create a unique iteration of voice, one must counter the articulations of both the body and of language.<sup>4</sup> In setting up these parameters, I then turn to two distinctly opposed theorisations of the scream. The first is that of Peter Schwenger, who argues for a scream that rallies against corporeal situatedness, endeavouring to throw itself beyond the body through the scream; in this scream, the drag queen exhibits a new route for the voice that denies the typical articulations of the body and moves towards the creation of a body without organs, one that is ultimately queer.<sup>5</sup> The second scream is that of Mladen Dolar, whose scream is a call to be heard, a zero-point of signification; within such a scream, the drag queen’s silence points to the scream’s originary utterance, which was subsequently stolen away by signification and now lost forever as Lacan’s *objet petit a*.<sup>6</sup> In Chapter 1 I mentioned that Freya Jarman believes that the voice sits in a third space between the body and language, and it is between the articulations of these two poles that the drag queen finds herself with the silent scream: where Schwenger’s scream looks to bodily situatedness and disarticulates the body as one without organs, Dolar’s scream echoes through the

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<sup>4</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, trans. Victor Corti (London: Calder & Boyars, 1970); Jacques Derrida, “La parole soufflée”, in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 169-195.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Schwenger, “Phenomenology of the Scream”, in *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 40 (Winter 2014), pp. 383-394; Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin Boundas (London: The Athlone Press, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*.

Symbolic realm, looking beyond language to a pre-linguistic, pre-Symbolic ideality.<sup>7</sup> With these two theories in tandem, the drag queen cultivates a silent voice that negotiates many knotty issues of voice, linguistics, and the body. Finally, I turn my attention to the drag queen's breathing, engaging more ethnographic content, and argue that the necessary breathy undercurrent of lip-syncing, the drag queen's imperceptible whisperings, offers a poignant political angle to the silent voice. Lip-syncing's reconsideration of vocal monopoly and of bodily inscriptions leads to what I consider the creation of new ways of being in the world, or ultimately new worlds, that resound poignantly for the drag queen as a queer subject. By worlds, I take Jean-Luc Nancy and Aurélien Barrau's conception, in that a world is a space of sense-making, multiple, undefined, and nonunified: being in a world is not to be contained within something, but to produce and be produced together.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, I hope in this chapter to offer a robust theorisation of the silent scream in lip-syncing, one that can be taken as emblematic of the more subtle processes of the silent voice in lip-syncing, and one that holds powerful political potential.



Figs. 6 & 7: Rodent and Ruby

<sup>7</sup> Freya Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices*, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy & Aurélien Barrau, *What's These Worlds Coming To?* trans. Travis Holloway & Flor Méchain (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 1.



Figs. 8 & 9: ShayShay and Bougie

### *II.ii – Screaming with Artaud*

I don't suppose one often considers drag queens in conjunction with Antonin Artaud, positioning the bejewelled glamour of the drag superstar beside the twentieth-century French director famed with the creation of his Theatre of Cruelty and his aggressive retaliations against the spoken word. In considering the importance of the silent scream, however, drag queens and Artaud make pleasing, if unlikely, bedfellows. In Mikhail Yampolsky's article "Voice Devoured: Artaud and Borges on Dubbing", I was struck by Artaud's vehement hatred of dubbing. Gleaning information from Artaud's short 1933 piece entitled "*Les souffrances de dubbing*", Yampolsky writes that "the horror experienced by Artaud from the very sight of a dubbed film arises as a reaction against the fundamental contradiction between the external, articulatory nature of the technique of synchronisation, the fanatic attention to the micromovements of the mouth divined in the actor's speech, and a property of the actor's body such as the ability to assimilate and to swallow up the voice of another".<sup>9</sup> The tension between the highly nuanced movements of the actor with the swallowing of another's voice results, for Artaud, in nothing less than the "replace[ment of the] souls

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<sup>9</sup> Mikhail Yampolsky, "Voice Devoured: Artaud and Borges on Dubbing", trans Larry P. Joseph, in *October*, Volume 64 (Spring 1993), p. 60.

of genuine actors with artificial personalities”.<sup>10</sup> Artaud’s hatred of dubbing stems from his primary fear of the spoken word, for, by Artaud’s reasoning, the spoken word must always and already be robbed from the speaker, both prompted and stolen away. For Artaud, given that language is so beholden to representation and all speech is simply a repetition of a sound with an arbitrarily fixed meaning, there is no possibility in language for original, personal, or honest communication. In dubbing, therefore, the last vestige of agency is taken from the speaker, with their own voice supplanted by that of another. It seems unsurprising, therefore, that Artaud would detest above all else the implanting of a voice around the gesticulating mouth of another.

This fear of the word finds itself on two key points, as outlined by Jacques Derrida. For Derrida, this mistrust of the word can be encapsulated by the double meaning of *la parole soufflée*. At one time, *soufflée* can mean “stolen[, as] by a possible commentator who would acknowledge speech in order to place it in an order, an order of essential truth or of a real structure, psychological or other” [emphasis in original]; in this sense, words are stolen from the speaker because they are instantly placed within a pre-existing system of signification that results in their meanings no longer being governed by the speaking person.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, speech is “stolen” in that the speaking subject, as I have outlined in Chapter 1, becomes the one who hears: “as soon as I am heard, as soon as I hear myself, the I who hears *itself* who hears *me*, becomes the I who speaks and takes speech from the I who thinks that he speaks and is heard in his own name, and becomes the I who takes speech *without ever cutting off* the I who thinks that he speaks” [emphasis in original].<sup>12</sup> In this way, the dialectic of speech explicated previously becomes an “irreducible secondarity” of the subject, “his origin that is always already eluded”.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, there is a second meaning of *soufflée*, one that denies the primary agency of the speaker at all, in that it can mean “*inspired*[, as] by an *other* voice that itself reads a text older

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<sup>10</sup> Laurence A. Rickels, *Aberrations of Mourning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 160

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, “La parole soufflée”, p. 220.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 223.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 223-4.

than the text of my body or than the theatre of my gestures” [emphasis in original].<sup>14</sup> Speech in this instance is *prompted* by another, thereby meaning that the spoken word is always inspired by the words of another spoken before and robbed by another after having been spoken. Between these two understandings of the word *soufflée*, speech “is at once stolen and prompted, offered by the theatrical prompter as the word of the missing author on the stage of metaphysical representation”.<sup>15</sup> There is no possibility of original speech, nor of a speech that is ever truly one’s own, whatever this may mean. By this logic, it seems highly likely that Artaud would loathe lip-syncing, it being the active endeavour of attempting to house someone else’s voice within one’s own body. And though Artaud may have called for a theatre of “music, dance, plastic art, mimicry, mime, gesture, voice inflexion, architecture, lighting and décor”, this was on the understood proviso that these elements would not stand in for words, but create a whole new system of language, one that, “by using breathing’s hieroglyphics, I can rediscover a concept of divine theatre”.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, following this line of argument, it may seem as though lip-syncing is the catastrophic end point of Artaud’s fears – a form of theatre that does nothing to reinstate the body, to bring the self back from being prompted and stolen, but rather offers up the body to be overrun by others.

Is this what is happening in lip-syncing, however? What *does* lip-syncing do to the drag queen’s body? Does inhabiting the voice of another and allowing that voice to inhabit oneself detract from oneself, or does it point towards something else entirely? Indeed, within this chapter I contend that the silent screams of the drag queen argue otherwise, and in fact lead to a theorisation that could assuage Artaud’s fears to a surprising degree, one that understands the voice in drag lip-sync performance as the closest possibility of touching a “real/Real” voice. For Artaud, the scream was “an intricate amalgam of linguistic and physical elements that counter [the] absence of the body, while enforcing its materialization”.<sup>17</sup> In screaming, vocalisation comes directly from the body,

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 220.

<sup>15</sup> Allen Thiher, “Jacques Derrida’s Reading of Artaud: ‘La Parole soufflée’ and ‘La Clôture de la représentation’”, in *The French Review*, Volume 57, Number 4 (March 1984), p. 505.

<sup>16</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, pp. 28 & 95.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Barber, *Artaud: The Screaming Body* (London: Creation Books, 1999), p. 93.

Artaud believed, exhibiting “the removal of the differences” between word and gesture, speech and language, and originating “directly from within the body”.<sup>18</sup> The scream makes of the body flesh, and in its denial of linguistic articulation it disavows the prompter and the thief in that it allows the screamer to act outside of representation, or so Artaud thought.

Artaud’s scream is, undoubtedly, a very idealised and specific form of screaming. For example, there are innumerable instances where screaming, far from endeavouring to move beyond language, is an attempt to come closer to linguistic surety: an infuriated parent screaming at a recalcitrant child is not a purgation of *souffrance*, but “an attempt to be heard and understood” within a system of signification; moreover, screaming is often used to compound meaning, with “semantic and intonational meanings [most often expected] to be concordant”.<sup>19</sup> The specific iteration of the scream I am referring to throughout my analysis, therefore, is Artaud’s scream, the wordless scream.

While drag queens may not be emitting any noticeable sound when they are onstage, I believe their silent screams act in such a way that navigates many of Artaud’s fears. In these moments, the drag queen is able to communicate through the voice of another without having her own voice *soufflée*, as it were, and is also able to rearticulate her body to deny the strictures of functionality, as well as, in her silence, pointing to the impossibility of a speech that is truly one’s own, outside of the web of signification Artaud feared so much.

### *II.iii – First Scream*

This first scream is aptly theorised by Peter Schwenger, who states that the scream is primarily concerned with the screaming subject’s corporeal situatedness. As living subjects, while our bodies are networked in manifold ways with other bodies, both human and non-human, and while we may

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<sup>18</sup> Mikhail Yampolsky, “Voice Devoured”, p. 58.

<sup>19</sup> Jody Kreiman & Diana Sidtis, *Foundations of Voice Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Voice Production and Perception* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 274 & 304.

live on from our bodies in myriad ways, our biological, mortal mass is bound to our bodies, and to escape the body is impossible: we cannot choose to leave our bodies and remain in the same phenomenological position. However, one of the ways subjects often attempt to escape their bodily hindrances, Schwenger argues, is through the scream. Whereas many theorists, including Mladen Dolar, believe that the scream is a call to attention, a demand to be heard by someone, an affirmation of one's existence, Schwenger believes that "what is at stake here is not the constitution of identity but an attempt to escape it", an attempt that is ultimately doomed to fail.<sup>20</sup> Schwenger quite rightly details many instances when one might scream, for example if one were to be apprehended in the street by an attacker, or if one were to find themselves careering towards a tragedy in a car accident. In these instances, the scream functions less to insist on one's existence in that moment, but rather as an attempt to escape from that moment. In screaming, one rends their flesh into the scream, projects it through an opening of their body, and attempts to flee their corporeal shackles in an auditory *échappé*. Indeed, one can place this idea in tandem with Steven Connor's theory of the vocalic body – in screaming, one abandons their physical body in lieu of their vocalic body, preserving themselves in the vocal spectre of the scream.<sup>21</sup> Of this, Schwenger writes:

We wish to escape from the body, from its localization in space and time. And so we scream. [...]

It is our only recourse, this projecting of oneself out of that hole in the body through the power of the voice. To expel from the body breath alone is not enough. [...] Because the scream is vocalized, it gives body to breath, makes of the breath a body. To expel the breath alone is merely to collapse. A scream is the opposite of this; it is a force. [...] It is an embodiment of force, moreover, that projects itself *outside* the body [emphasis in original].<sup>22</sup>

The scream is a way of *not* being in the world. It is a violent force through which one may escape their own body, the scream itself being an act of disembodiment; or rather, the scream is an act of extracorporeal vocal embodiment, in which the body manifests itself *in* the scream. While many

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Schwenger, "Phenomenology of the Scream", p. 383.

<sup>21</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck*, p. 35.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 394.

aspects of this analysis require, and indeed will be given, further consideration in terms of lip-syncing – for example, what about the breath of the drag queen? How does the inherent silence of lip-syncing factor into this discussion? Is the drag queen “not being” in the world, and if so, what might such an “unbeing” mean? – what should be gleaned here is that in the drag queen’s seeming screams she vacates her body, makes of her body a voiceless vessel, with the voice, and indeed perhaps part of herself, thrown from her.

Schwenger writes above that “to expel the breath alone” is not enough, yet this is the case in lip-syncing. The drag queens are not screaming in a typical sense, and the ways their breath leaves their bodies is important, as I discuss in the final section. Rather, as I argue before, the scream is corporeal as well as vocal, and Schwenger’s description may be helpfully augmented. For example, the scream’s propulsive power of disembodiment, of jettisoning parts of the body in its sonority *and* its physicality, is theorised by George Bataille. In his short extemporisation on the mouth, Bataille writes that during the scream

it is easy to observe that the overwhelmed individual throws back his head while frenetically stretching his neck in such a way that the mouth becomes, as much as possible, an extension of the spinal column, *in other words, in the position it normally occupies in the constitution of animals*. As if explosive impulses were to spurt directly out of the body through the mouth, in the form of screams [emphasis in original].<sup>23</sup>

Bataille’s description of the screaming body as contorting itself in such a way that “explosive impulses” may find better passage out of the body adds an important physicality to the idea of throwing oneself out in the scream. Screaming, in all of its extracorporeal potential and its sonority, is a deeply corporeal act, one in which the body must align itself, strain itself, in the appropriate way.

Such a corporeal scream is evident in the work of my ethnographic subjects. Take, for example, Ruby Wednesday. In figures 10 and 11, Ruby is clearly screaming: figure 11 shows Ruby in

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<sup>23</sup> George Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt & Donald M. Leslie Jr, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 59.

an almost identical position as detailed by Bataille, with her head forced back, elongating the neck, her eyes rolled back into her skull, her body clenched as though forcing everything she has up and out of her throat; and in figure 10 the tendons in Ruby's neck are painfully distended, making of her neck a canal through which the scream erupts. Moreover, there is a sense in which something is being sent out from Ruby during these screams. Indeed, the physical exertion evident on Ruby's face mirrors Artaud's own instructions for screaming, wherein he states that:

To vent this cry I must exhaust myself

Expelling not air but the very capacity to make sound.<sup>24</sup>

Here Artaud's description of exhausting oneself marries well with Schwenger, suggesting that one can collapse oneself entirely in the scream, exhausting oneself in sonorous screaming: or, perhaps, not so sonorous. Artaud speaks of a scream so powerful that it exhausts the very capacity to make sound at all, a scream such that it divests itself of the ability to make sound. Ruby throws herself out in Artaud's own silent scream.



Figs. 10 & 11: Ruby

Speaking of throwing the voice in such violent ways leads me to consider such an action through the lens of abjection. Ab-jection, *ab iacere*, literally “to throw away from”, suggests something that is excluded, pushed away forcibly. Indeed, Julia Kristeva, in her theorisation of the

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<sup>24</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, p. 96.

abject, defines it as “the jettisoned object”, it is “radically excluded and draws me to the place where meaning collapses”.<sup>25</sup> Crucially, that which is ab-ject is not ob-ject. It does not stand in front of the subject, in relation to the subject, but must, as Kristeva states, be radically excluded. Whereas in Chapter 1 I described the feedback loop of voice as drifting between subject and object, in which the speaker takes on the position of both speaker and listener, lip-syncing must include an intermediary stage: in order for the voice of the track to enter the queen as object, her own voice must be radically excluded *as abject*. Rodent, in their discussion of Rodent’s lack of voice, came close to explaining why such an abjection is key to lip-syncing. They stated:

I don’t like [Rodent] having a voice because I like the fact that every time [they are] onstage there’s a different voice coming out. Like, there’s a kind of ambiguity about who and what they are because there’s never a solid voice coming out to signify that person’s self because every single time it’s a different self being channelled.

In order for Rodent to be able to adopt different voices in performance, to channel different voices in lip-syncing, they must divest themselves of their own voice: they must abject their own voice. Indeed, abjection’s rejection of identity is something Kristeva mentions at length, stating that the abject is “not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A ‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing”.<sup>26</sup> In abjecting the voice, ridding the corporeal body of its vocality, one of the greatest bearers of identity, the drag queen is able, to a certain – though not total – extent, to leave her body as a neutral locus for a new voice. Throwing her voice out, screaming her body out, she abjects herself in readiness for a new voice.

Judith Butler adds a helpful dimension to this in her own discussion of abjection, when she writes that “the boundary between the inner and outer is confounded by those excremental passages [that perform abjection] in which the inner effectively becomes the outer, and this excreting function becomes, as it were, the model by which other forms of identity-differentiation

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<sup>25</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2.

are accomplished”.<sup>27</sup> If the boundaries between inner and outer are confounded in abjection, with the inner becoming the outer through the excremental passages (i.e., the mouth), then why shouldn’t, in this destabilised capacity, the outer become the inner? Abjection allows for a voice to leave, and also leaves space for a voice to enter. Moreover, Kristeva’s discussion of the abject as a place “where meaning collapses”, and later as “a weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant”, calls to mind Schwenger’s denial of the scream’s signifiatory potential as a demand to be heard, and reinstates it as a “meaningless” expunging of the body through the voice.<sup>28</sup>



Fig. 12: Bougie

This analysis positions itself rather firmly in the horrible, in its truest sense (indeed, Kristeva’s *Essay on Abjection* has the *prénom*, *Powers of Horror*). Ruby’s screams are rather obvious moments of horrified screaming, in that it reflects a certain anguish; yet, this anguish isn’t not entertaining, as the faces of the audience in figures 10 and 11 attest. Ruby’s performances, as will be explored further in Chapter 4, are darker, more horrid, but they are still enjoyable. It happens that Ruby’s screams marry with a more typical idea of screaming, but this need not necessarily be the case and

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<sup>27</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 182.

<sup>28</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 2.

whereas Ruby's screams certainly engage darker connotations of the scream, several of the lighter numbers my queens perform exhibit a similar physicality. Take for example figure 12, where Bougie, while certainly seeming joyful, also has the comportment of a screaming body, with her mouth wide open and her shoulders spread back. The scream, therefore, whilst often synonymous with horror, needn't be completely defined by it, especially not in its theoretical importance here. What of, for example, screams of joy, of passion, or of ecstasy? Indeed, drag parlance revolves around such screams, and one often hears phrases such as "scream!" or "I'm screaming!" to denote uncontrollable laughter. Laughter, in fact, fits Bataille's figure aptly, with the head thrown back in the throes of laughter, or, as he says, "in the constitution of animals", cackling like a hyena. Perhaps this explains part of the audience response in figures 10 and 11: while Ruby's performances are entertaining *and* dark, perhaps there is also an empathic response between performer and audience, a mirror of screams of horror with screams of laughter. Whatever the case, here the scream functions as a theoretical model from which a broader theory of the silent voice may be drawn. And to this end, while the scream may be the most visible moment of vocal abjection, I would argue that such an abjection is essential to any moment of lip-synced performance, though exemplified in the scream.

But, critically, the voice *isn't* leaving the body in lip-syncing. These screams are, for all intents and purposes here, silent. What, therefore, is happening in this silent scream? Here, I find Yampolsky's ideas on dubbing to be particularly helpful. Considering the duality of the mouth's function in dubbing, he writes that since the mouth

is an organ of speech, it exhales sound, directs speech outward. Being an organ of ingestion, a body cavity absorbing the body, the word, or another's voice, it is as if it draws sound in, devouring the voice. Hence we see its duality: the organ of speech reveals itself to be an organ of ingestion.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Mikhail Yampolsky, "Voice Devoured", p. 61.

Here a crucial distinction on the functionality of the mouth is made. In speech, the mouth is an organ of expulsion, emitting a voice; however, in eating, it is an organ of ingestion. In dubbing, as in lip-syncing, these functions cross. In lip-syncing, alongside the screaming body opening up a way for the voice to get out, the screaming body effects a reverse route of the voice. The unidirectional flow of the voice out of the mouth has been reversed and now the voices of others can enter the emptiness of the drag queen's throat: the drag queen opens up herself to be filled with voice. The scream still holds some of the functions Schwenger states, for it does vacate the body, it does remove the queen's voice from the equation, abjects it, and yet at the same time, in its silence, it leaves a space for the voice to enter. The drag queen ingests the voice of the other in the space left vacant through the abjection of her own voice. As Ruby or Bougie or Rodent scream, no sound comes out, but rather a voice comes in; they hear the voice of the singer on the track, and that voice finds passage into their body through the screaming hole of the mouth.<sup>30</sup>

What I have outlined thus far may seem a grotesque idea for Artaud, hating dubbing as he did, and yet I believe there are two ways in which lip-syncing may assuage certain fears of *la parole soufflée*. The first, which I don't mean to belabour, is that in not using one's own voice in lip-syncing one doesn't offer up its *souffrance*. If a primary fear, as Derrida sees it, is of one's own speech being robbed by the very I that hears it, then the drag queen removes her own voice from the equation. Indeed, speaking of the difference between lip-syncing and speaking, ShayShay explained to me that "you're definitely a lot more vulnerable with your actual voice, like, a lip sync kind of is able to put a bit of a wall, a protective wall between you and your audience". Though ShayShay understands the protection of not using their voice within an audience-performer relationship, removing their voice from the performance also removes it from the auto-affective feedback loop Derrida explains above.

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<sup>30</sup> Considering lip-syncing as ingestion contra the abjection of her own voice poses new questions regarding the generative processes of lip-syncing. Ingestion always *produces* something – in eating, subjects not only sustain and nourish themselves, but also produce waste, what can here be helpfully determined as a remainder. What is the remainder in lip-syncing? This is a question I will answer in the coming sections, specifically in relation to the voice as *objet petit a*.

Though Artaud may have wanted to communicate using their voice, at least in lip-syncing the voice is safeguarded rather than stolen.

A second reason also presents itself to me, in that the discussion of the mouth as a hole and the inversion of the functionality of the voice and mouth have potentially positive connotations for Artaud. Intriguingly, Gilles Deleuze, speaking of the screaming paintings of Francis Bacon, states that in Bacon's paintings the mouth "becomes nothing more than the section of a severed artery [...] It is no longer a particular organ, but the hole through which the entire body escapes".<sup>31</sup> This point is crucial. In the scream, the mouth loses its functionality, it becomes a severed artery, a hole in a piece of flesh, rather than a functioning organ. Jay Murphy furthers this line of thought in quoting Catherine Clément's ideas on the scream, stating that it "does violence to the throat, which is suddenly turned into a hole".<sup>32</sup> In these descriptions of gaping mouths that no longer serve their primary function the body becomes a body without organs, a body that is no longer governed by the strict articulations of bodily functionality; for "as soon as the body is articulated, it is fatally expropriated by functionality. The body, then, must be liberated from organs, from functions, and from all submission".<sup>33</sup> Gilles Deleuze instates the idea of a body without organs in his discussion of Artaud and Lewis Carroll in *The Logic of Sense*, though it is an idea that is furthered throughout his writings, notably his later writings with Félix Guattari. Originally, however, Deleuze describes such a body, this "glorious body", as "an organism without parts which operates entirely by insufflation, respiration, evaporation, and fluid transmission".<sup>34</sup> The body as a whole, rather than being segmented off into its separate functionalities, acts as a breathing machine, filling and emptying air (and fluids). In lip-syncing, therefore, the mouth-in-voicing is critically reconceived as both an organ of ingestion and of expulsion, aided by the physicality of the scream. Lip-syncing's renegotiation of

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<sup>31</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 19.

<sup>32</sup> Catherine Clément, quoted in Jay Murphy, "Artaud's Scream", in *Deleuze Studies*, Volume 10, Number 2 (2016), p. 145.

<sup>33</sup> Andrea Potestà, "Toward a 'Rigorous Writing of the Cry': The Two Artauds of the First Derrida", trans. D. J. S. Cross, in *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Volume 17, Number 1 (2017), p. 131.

<sup>34</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 88.

the typical functionality of the mouth-in-voicing initiates a body with organs, the repercussions of which are important.

Indeed, it is productive to think of the mouth in different terms. In Latin, there are two words for the mouth, *os* and *bucca*, “the latter being more ‘primitive’ than the former. The mouth *speaks* but it does so *among other things*. It can also breathe, eat, spit” [emphasis in original].<sup>35</sup> Whereas *os* has connotations of speech and expression, the *bucca* is “the mouth that can scream”.<sup>36</sup> *Bucca* can also hold connotations of a cavity, and I believe the idea of a cavity works well in this instance: beyond the signifiatory power of the *os*, this buccal orifice of the mouth suggests a vacancy, devoid of the articulated speech, and lacking the articulated function of the mouth as speech-giver. In such a buccal cavity, perhaps Artaud might find some comfort, for he was “as fearful of the articulated body as he [was] of articulated language, as fearful of the member as of the word. For articulation is the structure of my body, and structure is always a structure of expropriation”.<sup>37</sup> In this sense, the screaming body satisfies Artaud in two ways: firstly, it appeases Artaud’s disgust for the articulated body by escaping it; secondly, this new configuration of the mouth as nothing more than an opening, simply a feature of the body without organs, denies the typical articulations of the body. The mouth in singing is an organ of expulsion, and in lip-syncing it is reframed as one of ingestion, one that makes the pantomime of screaming but without sound.

The reframing of the mouth from voice-giver to voice-eater, from *os* to *bucca*, disarticulating the functionality of the mouth into a Deleuzian body without organs is also a decidedly queer act. To queer: to question, to nonsense, to spoil, to destabilise. In and of itself, reframing the mouth is a queer action. Considering this beyond etymology, such a rearticulation of the mouth invokes certain queer theories. Judith Butler, for example, writes that

the construction of stable bodily contours relies upon fixed sites of corporeal permeability and impermeability. Those sexual practices in both homosexual and heterosexual contexts that open

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<sup>35</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Touching*, p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 20.

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Derrida, “La parole soufflée”, p. 234.

surfaces and orifices to erotic signification or close down others effectively reinscribe the boundaries of the body along new cultural lines. Anal sex among men is an example.<sup>38</sup>

The body's stability, Butler states, is fostered through the regulation of sites of permeability and impermeability, open orifices of the body. For Butler, what I shall call queer sexual acts, those that rearticulate the heteronormative erogeneity of the body, "reinscribe the boundaries of the body along new cultural lines"; in her example, anal sex among men renarrativises the anus from an orifice of expulsion (of abjection, even) to an orifice of penetration. In much the same way, I believe one can understand the mouth as adopting a queer functionality. While the mouth *is* an orifice of ingestion – with feeding most typically performed through the mouth, indeed the second action most humans perform, after the scream, that is – the mouth in voicing is *not* an organ of ingestion, and therefore lip-syncing as a mode of voicing queers the surface of the body, rearticulating the buccal orifice, and thus renders lip-syncing a queer act.

Rather than simply a rearticulation of the mouth, however, I believe one can helpfully consider lip-syncing's inverse functionality of the mouth in term of failure, specifically, to use Judith/Jack Halberstam's coinage, the queer art of failure. Halberstam, in their book of the same name, writes that "the queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being".<sup>39</sup> Focussing on such moments of losing and failing, Halberstam argues, can lead to "more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in world".<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the silent scream is a failure in many ways: it *fails* to make a sound; it *fails* to voice itself; in this, it *fails* to throw the body out in its scream; and because of this, the mouth *fails* at its role as voice-giver and becomes a voice-eater. There is not a negativity in this failure, however, or rather, if there is a negativity, it is not one that can be easily or qualitatively opposed to positivity. Such a negativity, as Halberstam states, is creative – it offers more creative ways of being in the world, of voicing. The drag queen's failure

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<sup>38</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 180.

<sup>39</sup> Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 88.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 2-3.

allows for a more cooperative creation of voice across multiple bodies, and one that foregoes the rigid articulations of the body. Indeed, such failure makes something new of the body. To speak again of abjection, Butler writes that “the construction of the ‘not-me’ as the abject establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject”.<sup>41</sup> In the drag queen’s abjection of the voice, in her making of it Other and decidedly “not-her”, she concomitantly establishes her own body: but what is this body? It is a body that fails at its primary functions in generative ways, that reinscribes its surface, and also, given the voice’s role as bearer of the subject’s most intimate interior, even reinscribes the body beyond the surface. In the interplay of abjection and establishment, the drag queen manifests a body that is in fact a body without organs.

Such an establishment is a queer act in more wide-reaching senses than the reinscriptions I have just discussed. For the renegotiation of the body writ large has resounding consequences. For example, Butler writes that “if the body is synecdochal for the social system *per se* or a site in which open systems converge, then any kind of unregulated permeability constitutes a site of pollution and endangerment”.<sup>42</sup> The queer inscriptions of the body do not end at the skin, it would seem, and ripple out to affect the social body; indeed, Butler claims that such an understanding marks any kind of “anal and oral sex among men [as] a site of danger and pollution, prior to and regardless of the cultural presence of AIDS”.<sup>43</sup> Lip-syncing, while less explicitly sexual (though, perhaps the inscription of the throat in such a way could be argued for in a sexual capacity), depicts a similar queering of the body, and could be considered a performative retaliation against dominant ideologies. Indeed, Halberstam notes a similar idea in their discussion of failure. They write:

We can also recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are

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<sup>41</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 181.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* p. 180.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p. 180.

embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities.<sup>44</sup>

The queerness of lip-syncing, the queerness of failure, relates directly to a queer ideology – a way of being in the world that opposes sanctioned heteronormativity and other prescriptive modes of being. I am struck particularly when Halberstam writes that “if taken seriously, unbecoming may have its political equivalent in an anarchic refusal of coherence and proscriptive forms of agency”.<sup>45</sup> I asked before what the drag queen’s “unbeing” – close, though not the same, as Halberstam’s “unbecoming”, to be sure – in the world might look like. If for Schwenger the scream is an attempt, albeit a failed one, *not* to be in this world, perhaps lip-syncing can be understood as a political attempt of unbeing, an unravelling of one of the most basic ways of being in the world – voicing – a loosening of the shackles. Through such an understanding, the silent scream becomes something more than a paradigmatic example of the necessities of lip-syncing. The silent scream pushes beyond the boundaries of the body, rearticulates the body’s surface orifices, and as such fails at their typical functionality. It makes of voicing a queer act that rebels not only against one’s own bodily processes, but the social body as well.

Such political potential, such new possibilities opened up through drag lip-syncing, isn’t only theoretical, but is mentioned by each of my interlocutors: ShayShay tells me “being in drag gives you a power and a freedom to do things that maybe you wouldn’t feel as comfortable on an everyday”; Rodent says “I get to play around with it [gender] a bit more, and kind of ease up a bit as Rodent”; Sue explains how drag is “a gateway drug for gender”; Bougie conceives of drag as “a hyper-realisation and really high-level manifestation of the ultimate of my personality”; and Ruby describes drag as a kind of “protection” against the hegemonic world. Drag is, for each of my interlocutors, a safe way of exploring new ways of being within a hegemonic society. In the next chapter, I argue that it is through aural and visual identifications with the voice that such a protection is manifested,

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<sup>44</sup> Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 88.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* p. 134.

and to be sure, my queens consider the visual appearance of drag more in their discussions. Yet, I contend that lip-syncing's structure as queering the functionality of the body is a crucial step in allowing such explorative, radically political ways of being.

In this section, it has become apparent that understanding the silent scream through Schwenger's theorisation leads to a plethora of responses. Through this avenue of analysis, the silent scream rearticulates the body in such way that the functionality of both the mouth and the voice are brought into question, resulting in a new way of considering the body, one that, especially given the context, is decidedly queer. Moreover, such queer acts have important social repercussions, for what it means to revel in such passivity, to renegotiate the functions of organs, goes beyond the moment of performance. In many ways, such a theorisation of the scream sits well with Artaud's thought, in that it makes of the body something that isn't already written. It does not, however, do much to account for Artaud's fear of signification. While the silent scream in this instance may rearticulate the body, the body is still filled with the resounding words of another, and therefore Artaud's distaste for dubbing persists. In the following section, however, by adopting Mladen Dolar's explication of the scream, I hope to offer an explanation of the silent scream that focuses more on its implications for linguistics, arguing that the silent scream points to a voice – perhaps the same voice to which Artaud strives – that must, by its very nature, be lost.

#### *II.iv – The Mythical First Scream*

Thus far, I have used Peter Schwenger's explication of the scream to argue for the drag queen's corporeal re/disarticulation through her silent screams. Schwenger's conviction that the scream, rather than a call to be heard, is in fact an attempt to release oneself from the world leads to a theorisation of the silent scream in lip-syncing that refashions the queen's body as a site of queer inscription, and one that has the potential to affect not only the personal body but the social body as well. While this theorisation is convincing, to begin from an alternative premise yields another

compelling analysis of the processes underway during the drag queen's silent scream that may more fully interrogate its importance. In this section, therefore, I will adopt an opposing view of the scream, namely that the scream is at base an act of speech, one that demands to be heard and seeks an answer. Through this, I hope to show that the silent scream in lip-syncing provides an emblematic example of a more clandestine, continuous process in all acts of lip-syncing. Such a process points towards an unreachable vocal object in the Lacanian sense, and in doing so brings to the fore the ever-present absence of the vocal object in any act of speech, that untouchable Real that defines the subject, and to which Artaud consistently strove.

Contrary to Schwenger, Mladen Dolar states in no uncertain terms that the scream does indeed work within the realms of signification and is a call to be heard. He states that "the scream, unaffected as it is by phonological constraints, is nevertheless speech in its minimal function: an address and an enunciation".<sup>46</sup> While structural linguistics would surely posit that meaning is produced through a phonematic system, within which signification is a product of difference, the scream, lacking phonemes, works outside of language, pushing structural linguistics to its furthest possible point. This is, as I mention in my introduction, obviously only true for a very specific scream, for people scream full sentences all the time. The scream I am concerned with here is a wordless scream, Artaud's scream, and one that, as wordless, still means, indeed is the incidence of meaning and the basest form of signification. The scream does not mean *de facto*, however; indeed, Michel Poizat suggests, through a Lacanian understanding, that the scream as first vocal utterance has the potential to work outside of signification, and only once it has been *ascribed* meaning does it hence become the *first* incidence of meaning, as it were. This first scream – a mythical first, perhaps – not yet rendered a demand within the Symbolic, was pure vocal cry, and as such firmly located in the Real. Poizat describes it in the following way:

At the beginning of existence, as a result of an inner tension, the baby, the *in-fans*, marked by the characteristic human prematurity that makes it utterly dependent on the other for the

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<sup>46</sup> Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, p. 28.

satisfaction of its needs, emits a cry. It doesn't matter whether this "first" cry is "the" first or some other cry – as we shall see, this "first" cry is mythical or at all events hypothetical. What is important is that this cry is a pure manifestation of vocal resonance linked to a state of internal displeasure, and that this cry is answered by the Other (who may be and in fact usually is the mother, though it may be any other person), who *attributes* meaning to the cry, *interprets* it as a sign of hunger or thirst or whatever, and, in bringing the baby something to relieve the tension that provoked the cry, provides the child a first satisfaction [emphasis in original].<sup>47</sup>

Poizat's analysis rests on an understanding of the scream's dual identity in the realms of both the Real and the Symbolic. These terms – to which I shall add "the Imaginary" in the following chapter – refer to the three psychic levels as set out by Jacques Lacan, in which the Real denotes an untouchable *a priori* realm outside of signification, and the Symbolic refers to the realm into which all subjects must enter, a realm of meaning and language.<sup>48</sup> Once the cry has been attributed meaning, it no longer functions within the Real and rather is drawn into the Symbolic, this pure vocal manifestation suddenly endowed with meaning. Herein something is lost to the cry, an irretrievable object sequestered in the Real, to which Lacan ascribes the algebra the *objet petit a*. It is within this *objet petit a* that I believe a crucial importance of the silent scream in lip-syncing lies, and indeed lip-syncing more generally.

The *objet petit a* is an elusive object designated by Lacan as a "remainder, this ultimate Other, this irrational entity, this proof and sole guarantee, when all is said and done, of the Other's otherness".<sup>49</sup> For Lacan, the *a* is to be found where the Subject (that pre-subject, before it has entered into the Symbolic, before it has truly become a subject) is divided by the Other, resulting in the subject and the *a*. The *a* is a leftover, a remainder, something that cannot be incorporated and cannot be reached. Indeed, elsewhere Lacan states that "the *objet a* [*sic*] is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ. This serves as a symbol of

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<sup>47</sup> Michel Poizat, *The Angel's Cry*, p. 100.

<sup>48</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Reading: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 279.

<sup>49</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety*, p. 27.

the lack, that is to say, of the phallus, not as such, but in so far as it is lacking. It must, therefore, be an object that is, firstly, separable and, secondly, that has some relation to the lack”.<sup>50</sup> The dual nature, therefore, of the *objet petit a* is that it is both remainder and lack, leftover and absent. Where, then, is the *objet petit a* to be found in the scream? Jacques-Alain Miller helpfully designates the vocal object as “everything in the signifier that does not partake in the effect of signification”.<sup>51</sup> The vocal object is that which does *not* signify; where the scream may be the basest form of signification, the vocal *objet petit a* does not aid in this process. Rather, the *objet petit a* is the lost object, the voice in the Real, the cry that has not yet been drawn into the Symbolic. In the scream, therefore, the *objet petit a* is everything in the scream that does not signify, it is the unaccountable remainder that is left behind once signification has been subtracted. It is the remnant of the Real that remains as a hole in the Symbolic.

Following this understanding, it becomes clear why Artaud praised the scream as he did. Artaud’s scream represents the furthest point from structural linguistics, free from the shackles of phonemisation which would have the word constantly *soufflée*, positioned as each word is within a discursive system of differences. And, while undoubtedly the vocal *objet petit a* is extant in every utterance (indeed, Lacan states in no uncertain terms that “when something from this system [linguistics] passes into an utterance, a new dimension is involved, an isolated dimension, a dimension unto itself, the specifically vocal dimension”), the *objet petit a* is perhaps most noticeable – in its absence – in the scream, in its attempt to step outside the Symbolic and make contact with the Real.<sup>52</sup> What happens, though, when this scream is silent? Artaud spoke of a scream that vented itself to such a degree that it emptied itself of all sound, and in lip-syncing, as I have described in the previous section, the hollow emptiness of the drag queen’s mouth in her silent screams certainly

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<sup>50</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 103.

<sup>51</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, “Jacques Lacan and the Voice”, in *The Later Lacan: An Introduction*, eds. Véronique Voruz & Bogdan Wolf (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 141.

<sup>52</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety*, p. 249.

holds some importance. Now, therefore, I will show how lip-syncing draws close attention to the present absence of the *objet petit a*, and in so doing gets as close as possible to this Real.

Thus far there is the scream of signification and the mythical scream of the Real. I believe the silent scream of the lip-syncing drag queen helpfully mediates these two screams. In lip-syncing, as I have outlined in Chapter 1, the drag queen lays bare and dramatises the split inherent to voicing: there is the body of the drag queen and the sound of the singer. Where the sound of the singer on the track may signify, the gaping mouth of the drag queen lacks the sonic materiality of signification, and it is in this silence that the *objet petit a* of speech is most noticeable.<sup>53</sup> The slipperiest element of the vocal *objet petit a* is the fact that, contrary to our common-sense notions of voice, it has nothing at all to do with sonic materiality: indeed, Miller states that “if the voice as *objet a* [*sic*] does not in the least belong to the sonorous register, it remains that potential considerations on voice [...] can only be inscribed in a Lacanian perspective if they are indexed on the function of the voice as *a-phonie*” [emphasis in original].<sup>54</sup> Moreover, while the vocal *objet petit a* is present in every utterance, it is “silence that, all the more, makes the object voice appear, maybe in its pure form, for in its specificity it is, after all, devoid of phonic substance”.<sup>55</sup> In this way, we can describe the vocal *objet petit a* as extimate in all acts of speech: it is external to but also existing at its core.<sup>56</sup> The drag queen, therefore, dramatises the spectre of the *objet petit a* in every vocal utterance by performatively parsing apart the Symbolic element of linguistic utterance from the unreachable Real of the *objet petit a*. Her silent mouth gapes at words, expressing the silent vacancy of the *objet petit a*, while another’s voice fills the void with signification. In this way, the drag queen is able not only to point towards the Real of the *objet petit a*, but she also saves her own voice from the *souffrance* of her words being drawn into signification; her silent scream comes as close as possible to the Real without actually giving over her breath to the Symbolic. It would be untrue to suggest that the drag queen is

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<sup>53</sup> There is, however, the important element of lip-reading.

<sup>54</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, “Jacques Lacan and the Voice”, p. 139.

<sup>55</sup> Mladen Dolar, “The Object Voice”, p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Jason David Myres, “The Bit Player: Stephen Hawking and the Object Voice”, in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, Volume 46, Number 2 (2016), p. 162.

asignifying in this process, to be sure, for even disregarding her expressions and movements one can still make out the contours of the phonemes her mouth traces; however, the emptiness of the mouth seems to hollow out these words, and points towards something that is at the same time external to and central to her words, that of the *objet petit a*.

I am struck particularly by the *visuality* of this process. As I have said, it is a curious fact that the vocal *objet petit a* has nothing to do with sonority, but secondly, within this, it has a close relationship with visuality, specifically with the gaze. Throughout Lacan's writings, he consistently describes voice through an understanding of gaze, adding as he does voice and gaze to Sigmund Freud's list of partial objects. In so doing, Lacan also consistently reminds his listener (and now, reader) not to confuse the function with the organ, thereby offering intermodal ways of considering both gaze and voice.<sup>57</sup> I believe, therefore, one can helpfully consider the visuality of voice in lip-syncing, specifically the visual lack that is evident in lip-syncing. If the *objet petit a*, as Lacan states, is exemplified by the phallus, not in that it *is* the phallus, but that it is a *lack*, then the emptiness of the drag queen's mouth in lip-syncing, the *visible* emptiness expressing the *sonic* lack, certainly draws attention to the *objet petit a*. I am struck particularly by Lacan's statement that "the cry does not stand out against a background of silence, but on the contrary makes the silence emerge as silence".<sup>58</sup> It is not the fact that silence is the base state out of which sound emerges, but rather the fact that this resonant backdrop allows silence to emerge as silence. Slavoj Žižek helpfully adds another dimension to Lacan's tenet when he writes that "silence is not (as one would be prone to think) the ground against which the figure of a voice emerges; quite the contrary, the reverberating sound itself provides the ground that renders visible the figure of silence".<sup>59</sup> It is not only that this ground of sonority allows silence to emerge, but moreover that it "renders visible the figure of silence"; there is a critical point in that this silence emerges within the visible realm, and this is perfectly exemplified by the drag queen. It is a peculiar fact that her mouth is really no more or no

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<sup>57</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 101.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* p. 26.

<sup>59</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "I Hear You with My Eyes"; or, The Invisible Master", in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, p. 94.

less full in any readily quantifiable way when lip-syncing or singing, but there is a very obviously perceptible difference between the two states. In watching a lip-sync, one cannot help but see the silence of her mouth once attention has been brought to it. Indeed, Lacan states that the *objet petit a* “at the oral level, it is the nothing”, it is the lack of anything at all.<sup>60</sup> It is such nothingness, I contend, that is also present in the disarticulated silent scream I spoke of in the previous section; such a nothingness reframes the mouth from *os* to buccal cavity.

Tethering this to a performance is difficult in writing and photographs, but I hope here to offer some concrete examples of this extimate silence. Figures 13, 14, and 15 are all moments taken from ShayShay’s performance “Mutual Core”, to which Chapter 6 is devoted, and are timestamped 00:19, 00:32, and 01:15 respectively.<sup>61</sup> Each shows a different way through which the silence of the lip-syncing voice is visually present in performance. Figure 14 is the most scream-like of the three, ShayShay’s mouth stretched wide. Their lip-syncing is exceptionally tight at this moment in the performance, and they trace the words of Björk’s original song perfectly. Yet, their expression is extremely exaggerated, and it is hard to imagine that the shape of ShayShay’s mouth would produce the same sound and timbre of Björk’s voice, even though it certainly could produce the same words. Therefore, one is reminded (if one chooses to pay such close attention) that ShayShay is not making the sound one hears, and that therefore they must be silent, highlighting the silence that underscores ShayShay’s performance, the essential silence behind the sonorous material of Björk’s song. Figure 13 is a similar example: here ShayShay flicks their tongue to create the “l” sound in “nail”, and yet once again it seems a grossly exaggerated movement that would produce the word but not the exact word of Björk’s. There is, in short, a juxtaposition, a subtle one, to be sure, but one that foregrounds visually the silence of ShayShay’s performance. Finally, figure 15 exhibits a moment of lag in ShayShay’s performances. Here in the number they have to produce a wire from their chest, the concentration of which has distracted them from their lip-syncing, and though their mouth is

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<sup>60</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 103.

<sup>61</sup> Shane Konno, “ShayShay at Lipsync1000 Final 2017” (April 2017) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Ga3Yga8Ka0> (accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> of November 2017).

still open, it is no longer as engaged as it was mere moments ago and they slip from the original track. Once again, such slippages reveal visually the silence that is essential in ShayShay's performance, with the slight asynchronicity revealing that ShayShay cannot be making the sound the audience hears. Intriguingly, such slippages, rather than being failures (or, failures in the negative sense), are generative, and reveal flashes of the uniqueness of lip-syncing as a mode of performance. Indeed, Sue Gives A Fuck, when considering lip-syncing to one's own voice, told me:

I'm seeing [a show] tonight about Nicola Sturgeon, [and] he does record his own voice and lip-syncs to it sometimes. Whenever I've seen clips of it, I've actually felt that it doesn't work. That it's not that impactful. Because I always feel lip-syncing so relies on a juxtaposition between what you're doing onstage and what the audience is hearing.

The joy of lip-syncing is in such juxtapositions, such slippages, between sound and image. Lip-syncing to one's own voice would iron out the moments of disjuncture between voice and body, and perhaps would be too believable. While Sue is referencing more the costuming and general performance, these minute moments of failure are key in their foregrounding of a unique mode of silent voicing in lip-sync performance. It is in such moments that the audience catches glimpses of the silent voice, a theory that is most easily identifiable in the silent scream.



Fig. 13: ShayShay, 00:19



Fig. 14: ShayShay, 00:32



Fig. 15: ShayShay, 01:15

Within this analysis of the silent scream, the drag queen navigates a unique path through the webs of signification and the realms of the Real and the Symbolic. If the scream signifies in the Symbolic register because of an attributed primary meaning following the first mythical scream in the Real, resulting in the separating off of the vocal *objet petit a*, then the silent scream in lip-syncing – and, indeed, all lip-syncing – is a way to performatively address the ever-present silence of the *objet petit a* that haunts all speech, the unknowable Real removed from the Symbolic. In this way, the drag queen exhibits an attempt to achieve what Artaud desired, a pure vocalisation beyond the shackles *la parole soufflée*, whilst ultimately always showing its impossibility. For where Artaud saw the horror as being the fact that language was forever placed at a remove within this realm of the

Symbolic, Žižek rightly states that “the ultimate horror would be that of an object voice coming *too close* to us, so that the reverberation of the voice is at the same time a conjuration destined to keep the object voice at sufficient distance” [emphasis in original].<sup>62</sup> Indeed, to come too close to the *objet petit a* would be to fall into *jouissance*, an impossible fantasy that would nullify the subject.<sup>63</sup>

#### *II.v – Breath*

There has been a crucial omission throughout this chapter thus far, a lack that in itself precedes the silence of the drag queen: that of breath. For it is in re-navigating the force of breath that the drag queen remains silent. Where typically breathing functions in tandem with singing, directing the breath out in smooth, pulsive actions, in lip-syncing breathing must take on a decidedly different role. In this way, breath and breathing add important dimensions to the two analyses laid out above: how does the drag queen’s breath enrich an understanding of bodily rearticulations? Do the drag queen’s breathing patterns match the singer’s in a synchronicity not dissimilar to their mouths? What of the life force of breath and Artaud’s concept of breathing life into theatre? And, crucially, what of the noise of breathing, the breathiness of lip-syncing, the underscore of perhaps pants and sighs that reinstate sound to the silent image of the drag queen, removing an idealised concept of totalised silence in performance? It is to these questions that I turn my attention here, stitching together the above theorisations in a tapestry of breath, interrogating breathing’s role in the generation of this silent voice.

How does the drag queen breathe whilst lip-syncing, whether a scream or silent? Instinctively, one might imagine that she endeavours to match the phrasing of the singer, articulating an exact mimesis and thereby giving the performance a greater sense of realism. Indeed, this is what Ruby explains to me. She tells me: “I think I breathe mostly with the content, as if I were singing. I

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<sup>62</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “‘I Hear You with My Eyes’”, p. 94.

<sup>63</sup> Lewis A. Kirshner, “Rethinking Desire: The *Objet Petit A* in Lacanian Theory”, in *JAPA*, Volume 53, Number 1, p. 101.

definitely don't sing". Ruby explains how her breathing matches that of the singer's, but, while breath may escape, it is unsounded, a hollowed-out breathiness. While I don't doubt that this is what Ruby experiences, can this always be the case? Can a non-professional singer even follow exactly the phrases of, say, Whitney Houston? Thinking of Whitney Houston's belting performance of "I Have Nothing" in the soundtrack to *The Bodyguard*, I can't imagine it being particularly easy to match her breathing across the exceptional key change towards the end of the song. Much like circular breathing for woodwind performers, the pop divas to whom drag queens so often perform exhibit their virtuosity in part through their phenomenal breath control and power, therefore it seems untenable that a drag queen be able to mirror these phrases perfectly. The difficulty, however, in matching these virtuosic phrases is not so much in their length, but in their length and concomitant consistency and control of the breath leaving the body. Ruby is, in fact, also a professional singer, which may explain how she is able to match the singer's phrases so expertly. In any case, Ruby's breathing patterns in lip-syncing add weight to my analysis of Dolar's scream. Ruby's mouth in lip-syncing hollows out the voice, leaving an imperceptible breathiness beneath the voice on the track, a performative *objet petit a*.

Drag queens without Ruby's singerly training have found ingenious ways to circumnavigate such breathing difficulties, however. For example, Rodent, when asked if they breathe out whilst lip-syncing, responded "no, I don't think so. I kinda just get really taut in my core and facial muscles". Rather than letting the air escape, Rodent catches their breath, keeping it held within their body, thus exhibiting a type of breath control, just not the same as the singer's. Where the singer will use their diaphragm to maintain a consistent breath flow, Rodent, rather, holds their breath, a far easier example of breath control whilst still fulfilling the same visible phrase contours. Moreover, they tense not only their core, but also their face, therefore making more readily visible the hidden, internal processes of creating voice. In this way, breathing moves from a *functional* process to a *gestural* one, thereby corroborating my previous argument that lip-syncing reconfigures the mouth's functionality and in so doing disarticulates the body. Rodent's choked breath also lends itself

pleasingly to Artaud's concern of *la parole soufflée*. For how can a word be spirited away if there is no breath to carry it? Rather than lending their breath to the words, Rodent holds it back, releasing it in between phrases. In these moments of choked lip-syncing, Rodent is able to communicate and speak with a voice, all the while not allowing their own breath to be carried away. Not only, therefore, does Rodent avoid bodily articulations by making of the body a body without organs, but they also keep back their breath, the essential breath of life, as Artaud saw it, for themselves.

These choked moments that Rodent describes seem to be most readily identifiable at particularly intense moments – loud, belting notes, virtuosic phrases, screaming points, even. But, moving from the more identifiable screaming examples to such as examples as models for all lip-syncing, what of more subdued, quiet phrases? Is the tautness Rodent describes always present in lip-syncing? Ruby's method is helpful, but are there other ways of breathing during lip-syncing? While I take ethnographic material as my sources for this thesis, I cannot completely distance myself from the fact that I too am a professional drag performer who lip-syncs; and while I enjoy adopting a more etic approach as it were, I cannot help but be reminded of my emic perspective and the affordances this provides me. The itching of my emic perspective has been most noticeable with this issue of breathing, for while I agree with Rodent and observe similar processes of choking the breath in lip-syncing, I also notice another way in which I breathe whilst lip-syncing. This is a breathing that, for lip-syncing's essential synchronicity, demands an out-of-syncness that I find is particularly important in terms of the functionality of the body and the systems of both respiration and phonation. For, when lip-syncing I find that I most typically engage in a breathing that does not take the singer's phrase structures into account, and indeed does not even take into account the possibility that my breathing patterns could produce a voice in the typical sense. For example, during a single phrase, I may breathe out with the singer, and then breathe in while the singer is still on the same breath; during these moments of breathing, I still lip-sync, feeling the breath coming in rather than going out. Breathing still always happens with speech, but whereas typically this breathing would have to be going outwards, breathing in after speaking, in lip-syncing I can breathe in *and*

speak at the same time. This is a decidedly queer reinterpretation of vocality, disavowing the standard ways in which breath must function in speech. In its out-of-syncness, one can understand these inverse breath patterns as queer in their failures to reproduce the breathing patterns of the singers as well as in their failure to complete breathing routines of singing. Moreover, I find this reading queer in that, between Rodent, Ruby and myself, three more breathing structures have been added to the monopoly of typical vocal utterance, structures that can be used interchangeably, and to which any number of breathing actions could be added. For there is no one way to lip-sync; lip-syncing is play, it is inquisitive, “querying” even, to play on queer’s own etymology.<sup>64</sup> If queerness prides itself on multiplicity, changeability, and malleability, indeed, if queerness denies solid identification lest it be divested of all its radical power, then such a multiplicity of breathing’s potentiality cements lip-syncing’s queerness. In this ludic perspective, breathing and breath act as reminders of the dis- and rearticulatory potential of lip-syncing.

Far from an idealised backdrop of silence in lip-syncing, therefore, what is emerging is a breathy underscoring, that, while not silent, is still, to be sure, unvoiced. From Ruby’s unvoiced matched breathing, to the sharp inhalations of breath that are then choked by Rodent, and to the out-of-sync steady flows of breath exhibited by some other queens, there is a rich tapestry of sound rolling beneath the more readily audible track. How might this affect a reading of the essential silence of the vocal object’s lack? Indeed, far from discrediting the previous theorisation, the realisation of lip-syncing’s breathiness strengthens any such analysis by confirming that the drag queen points towards, rather than arrives at, the vocal object. Žižek rightly notes that to come too close to the vocal object would be the ultimate horror, even if being apart from it initiates the subject’s central melancholia, and therefore the whispering murmurs of the drag queen obviate any such calamity through the appropriate breathy reverberations in her mouth.<sup>65</sup> I use “whisper” here

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<sup>64</sup> Freya Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices*, p. 15.

<sup>65</sup> For further discussion of whispering and the *objet petit a* in a slightly different sense, see Xinghua Li, “Whispering: The Murmur of Power in a Lo-Fi World”, in *Media, Culture & Society*, Volume 33, Number 1 (2011), pp. 19-34.

to denote the breathy sounds made during lip-syncing. Kreiman and Sidtis, in their comprehensive study of the voice, state that “in whisper, the vocal folds vibrate only slightly or not at all, and acoustic energy is generated entirely by the turbulence that arises as air rushes through the partially-closed glottis”.<sup>66</sup> This, I believe, is what happens in the breathiness of lip-syncing. The acoustic energy is not directed via the vocal fold, but sound is generated simply through air as turbulence passing from the lungs and out of the mouth. There is the incidence of sound by virtue of breathing, but a sound nonetheless.

Whispers and chokes. These are not typical modes of speaking or singing, and their clandestine and pained connotations are important here.<sup>67</sup> The fact that the drag queen as a queer subject, as she who in her lip-syncing points towards a new way of being, or unbeing, in the world, speaks in whispers and chokes should not go unnoticed. Brandon LaBelle’s beautiful explication of the whisper in his *Lexicon of the Mouth* unveils an incredibly poignant semantics to the drag queen’s breathiness in performance. LaBelle suggests that whispering is a way of approaching “what cannot be spoken of otherwise. It’s as if the whisper is a voice barely able to touch its topic; a voice that hesitates to even dare to utter”.<sup>68</sup> In this way, the whisper doesn’t only brush against what cannot be spoken of in the sense of its proximity to the Real, but, in a much more pragmatic sense, whispers touch upon topics unsanctioned by hegemonic society. While whispering and lip-syncing are certainly different, I believe a theory of whispering can helpfully elucidate the poignancy of lip-syncing as an art form, having as it does a type of whispering embedded within it. I have not yet come to the content of my interlocutors’ performances, but in the following chapters it will become readily apparent that these queens use lip-syncing – and, therefore, whispering – to speak of issues that they would not have the confidence to voice in their day-to-day lives. Whispering, as

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<sup>66</sup> Jody Kreiman & Diana Sidtis, *Foundations of Voice Studies*, p. 64.

<sup>67</sup> While not typical, such styles are certainly not aberrant, and styles such as crooning and pansori certainly employ both whispers and chokes.

<sup>68</sup> Brandon LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2014), p. 153.

phonetically unvoiced, gives space to these perceived taboo topics. In this way, LaBelle makes a compelling case for the whisper:

A speech that fuels the imagination with superstition, magic, divine contact, and telepathy, and with intimacy, the whisper may in fact speak for those *without voice*. In this way, the whisper may carve out an empty space, a quiet zone within the order of language and power, to charge the social and political structures with uncertainty, and promise: with all that seems to be relegated to the periphery. *To speak is unspeakable* [emphasis in original].<sup>69</sup>

Whispering creates a space in which the unspeakable can be spoken, in which, perhaps, the queer existence that my interlocutors experience can be rendered. For just as Halberstam wrote of failure as a way of unbecoming, Kristeva of abjection as a way of dissolving meaning, and Schwenger of the scream as a primary way of not being in the world, so too can whispering be understood as a way of creating new worlds, positioning oneself outside of the world. As I state in my introduction, I take “world”, after Nancy and Barrau, to be a space where sense is made, leading to the possibility of multiple and contradictory worlds. LaBelle writes that “the whisper, in other words, incites the making of alternative worlds, whether in gossip and the reverberations within the whispering galleries, or poignantly in moments of silent prayer”.<sup>70</sup> To whisper is to form an intimate pocket set aside, a new space of sense and meaning that need not be comparable to the outside’s structure and strictures. In lip-syncing, therefore, the whispering drag queen exhibits the creation of a new world, one that revels in the failure of her lip-sync, her out-of-sync breath, her disarticulated mouth, her silent voice. If the whisper invites a proximity, an almost amorous intimacy, drawing the listener in so that the speaker’s voice can be heard swelling in the ear, then in lip-syncing perhaps it is the visuality of the whisper, the promise of sound in an empty mouth, that draws the audience’s gaze into the void.

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* p. 157.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* p. 158.

## II.vi – Conclusion

Through an explication of the silent scream in lip-syncing as paradigmatic, I hope to have shown the subtle workings of the silent voice. In communicating through the unvoiced movements of her mouth and body, the drag queen radically refashions the body as a site of contestable and uncertain functionality, a queering of the body that suggests multifarious and imaginative new ways of being in the world. In her silence, moreover, her speech runs as an asymptote against the Real of the *objet petit a*, never touching it, but revealing its extimate present absence within every act of speech. These two features added together spell a powerful mode of performance for the queer performer. In one sense, lip-syncing's renegotiation of the mouth becomes a powerful politic. LaBelle states that "the mouth is so radically connected to both language and the body, desire and the other, as to provide an extremely pertinent education on what it means to be – *and to create oneself as* – a subject" [emphasis in original]; while the creation of the subject will be interrogated in the subsequent chapters, here, such a repurposing of the mouth, adapting its function, queering it, navigates new and circuitous routes down the well-trodden paths of, as LaBelle states and Artaud feared, language and the body.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, if the mouth, in its gatekeeping of the internal and external, therefore is always a site of *relation*, then lip-syncing and the queering of the internal and external, ingestive and propulsive, actions of the mouth questions the ways in which the speaking subject interacts with the world, indeed creates the world. But there is also the acute, even melancholic, poignancy of this radicality being silent, its pointing to a Real forever sequestered away. It suggests a *not now*, a *not here* (close, perhaps, to Kristeva's abject *not me*), an element of futurity that I will touch on in Chapter 3, with José Esteban Muñoz. I believe such a silent voice exhibits a beautifully apt metaphor for the queer condition, one that is ever-present, even in routines that may – both ostensibly and actually – be much more uncomplicatedly joyful.

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2.

Whether Artaud would have found lip-syncing akin to dubbing is, in large part, neither here nor there. But where in dubbing actors unknowingly have the voices of others fed into their throats, lip-syncing is an active endeavour not only to take on the voice of another, but to safeguard one's own. In holding their own voice back, not only do lip-syncing drag queens refashion the body and point outside of language, as I have explained, but they save their own voice from the *souffrance* of utterance. If phonetically the breathy whisper remains unvoiced then the drag queen manages still to infuse her breath of life, as Artaud saw it, to the words emanating from the loudspeakers. Moreover, as Deleuze states, for Artaud to reach his body without organs, "triumph may now be reached only through the creation of breath-words (*mots-souffles*) and howl-words (*mots-cris*)".<sup>72</sup> Between screams and breaths, we find the lip-syncing drag queen. She breathes, she saves her voice, she refashions the body, she exposes the extimate silence of language, but above all she speaks in a voice that remains silent.

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<sup>72</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 88.

II

## THE IMAGINARY VOICE

## Chapter 3

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### Mirror, Mirror

*From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to  
create ourselves as a work of art*  
~ Michel Foucault<sup>1</sup>

*What remains of people is what media can store and communicate*  
~ Friedrich Kittler<sup>2</sup>

*We're all born naked and the rest is drag*  
~ RuPaul<sup>3</sup>

#### *III.i – Introduction*

I closed the previous section with the drag queens' whispers, the breathy underscore of lip-syncing, arguing that, since whispers open a space where the unspeakable can be spoken, lip-syncing offers a mode of voicing for drag queens in which they have the confidence and power to say what is normally prohibited publicly. Over the next two chapters, I will further this line of thought, arguing for new modes of protective identification in lip-syncing as well as drawing in the content of my five interlocutors' performances. I hope to show that lip-syncing is used by Rodent, Ruby, ShayShay, Bougie, and Sue to voice deeply personal issues, issues they may not necessarily feel comfortable

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress", in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 351.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young & Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. xi.

<sup>3</sup> RuPaul, *Workin' It! RuPaul's Guide to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Style* (New York: Harper & Collins, 2010), p. ix.

raising out of drag. More than this, I contend that the very act of lip-syncing, aside from the content, can offer protective and self-affirming effects, leading me to qualify lip-syncing as a decidedly self-actualising process. It is this latter point that I address here. Throughout this chapter, I wish to draw out the complex relationships my interlocutors have with their drag alter egos, and argue that, through processes of psychoanalytical identification, these queens become more themselves through their drag personae.

My ideas are drawn from interviews with Sue, Bougie, ShayShay, Rodent, and Ruby, in which each queen has spent time dwelling on the relationship between themselves and their drag alter ego, relationships that in no instance fit a simple character that is adopted for the stage. For example, Bougie stated: “I don’t feel like when I put on a sequined dress and a tutu and a pair of eight-inch heels, I don’t feel like I’m becoming someone else. I more so feel like I’m just turning the volume *really* high up on who I am. [...] I mean, I think that people that are around me definitely see some sort of difference in my persona, but I think in my conception of myself that’s just the drag giving myself the freedom to do what I would be doing normally”. Bougie, therefore – or rather, Joey, though see footnote for clarification – sees herself in relation to her drag character as a mirror, a reflection of who she already is.<sup>4</sup> Yet, it is a mirror in the truest sense, wherein the reflection offers an amped up version of herself, one where the volume is turned right up. Such a function of mirrors will become crucial to the theoretical underpinning of this chapter.

Sue similarly chimed with much of what Bougie said: “I think so much of drag is the balance between character and self-expression, normally a lot more on the self-expression side”. Here Sue corroborates Bougie’s words, stating that drag isn’t so much about creating something new, but exhibiting a part of oneself, mediating between performative construction and performative

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<sup>4</sup> I will continue to use my interlocutors’ drag names in this thesis throughout – with occasional signposted exception – for two reasons: the first, for the sake of clarity for the reader; and the second, more important reason, for the fact that I have never, in five years of knowing Bougie, known anyone to call her Joey (or, indeed, to use any other pronouns for her). This is undoubtedly part of the drag world (I, for example, am only known to these queens as “Dinah”, my drag name), but also reflects Bougie’s sentiment above, that their drag character is not necessarily easily divorced from their day-to-day persona.

representation. Crucially, Sue also touched upon similar ideas of freedom of expression. She told me that

people were way less receptive to that [her routines about feminism] when they were reading me as a man. [...] I guess I am a femme guy. Anyone who looks weird who does mainstream comedy has to spend the first five minutes of their set explaining “I know how you think I look! You’re absolutely right! Isn’t it funny? What am I? A boy or a girl?” and I just don’t want to do that sort of stuff. And when I’m in drag people are just like “oh, it’s a drag queen”, and it just gets that out of the way. So yeah, it’s allows me to talk about stuff.

While Sue is referencing her live stand-up rather than her lip-syncing, the element of drag still persists. Just as Bougie said, drag affords Sue the freedom, in side-stepping her socially deemed failures at masculinity and adopting heightened femininity, to speak about what is most important to her.

Rodent, ShayShay, and Ruby all touched upon similar themes. While I will go into more detail, by way of introduction: Rodent praised drag’s “ability to transform yourself” whilst also maintaining that “it’s still me”; ShayShay, in speaking of their drag persona, said “I’m always that person, or I always have the ability to be that person”, reflecting an intermingling of lived and performative selves; and Ruby beautifully described drag as a way to “try and find separate areas of my being”, a process of artistic self-discovery. What these five queens espouse is a theorisation of drag that argues for an embodied act of self-creation, a performative medium that seems both to generate and reflect their sense of self, and one that cannot easily be contained to the stage. I hope to corroborate their lived findings through an analysis of their words and performances throughout the following two chapters.

While the preceding two chapters have touched on ideas of selfhood, the “self” becomes my main concern here, and therefore requires a more rigorous explanation. In one sense, as my interviewees’ responses describe, I take Foucault’s concept of an artistically created self seriously within this chapter. As stated in my epigrams, Foucault argues that the self, rather than something that is born inherently within us, is something born out of us, a self a that is constantly constructed,

reconstructed, and reimagined through our discourses and creative endeavours. It is important to temper this analysis somewhat, as clearly dominant power structures have undeniable effects and preclusions on the construction of the self; however, one is able, to a certain extent, “to create ourselves as a work of art”, and one ought to consider “the kind of relation one has to oneself [as] a creative activity”.<sup>5</sup> In this way, subjects are agents in the construction of their selves – indeed, potentially multiple selves – and it is to such a notion of the artistic creation of self that I turn my attention in this and the subsequent chapter, focussing on both the corporeal and the vocal identities that are constructed in drag lip-sync performance.

I also find strong parallels with Lacanian conceptions of selfhood in what these queens say, drawing a line from my theorisation of the silent scream in the previous chapter to the self-actualising effects in this chapter. While I will go into more detail in the main body of this chapter, what these queens outlined above, in their relation to themselves *as* themselves, their creation of literal *alter* egos with which they identify, has clear connections with Lacanian notions of subject formation, most notably with the mirror stage. I therefore take the mirror stage as structurally similar to the self-actualising benefits of lip-syncing. However, given the essential sonic and technological mediations present in lip-syncing, there are two theorists who have furthered Lacan’s theories that ought to be brought squarely into the discussion: Guy Rosolato and Friedrich Kittler. Rosolato’s enlightening work on the acoustic mirror provides a satisfying framework for the aural identifications in lip-syncing, and Kittler’s mapping of Lacan’s three psychic orders – the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic – onto technologies – the gramophone, film, and the typewriter, respectively – is informative for both the visual and aural mediations present in lip-syncing.

As such, three terms will come up with increasing regularity, and used in several ways: r/Real, i/Imaginary, and s/Symbolic. While these terms appear in the preceding chapter, their meaning here becomes more complex. In psychoanalytical terms, the Real is that originary state that, once one becomes a subject, one has to leave behind in order to enter into the Symbolic realm.

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<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics”, p. 351.

The Real, in Jacques-Alain Miller's words, is "that which is lacking in the symbolic order, the ineliminable residue of all articulation, the foreclosed element, which may be approached, but never grasped".<sup>6</sup> In Chapter 2, I explained that the Real was the asignifying *objet petit a*, the extimate void in the Symbolic of a pre-Symbolic Real. The Symbolic is the determining order of the subject, indeed, "the subject, in Lacan's sense, is himself an effect of the symbolic".<sup>7</sup> The Symbolic is a realm of signifiers, a linguistic realm of speech and language. The Imaginary, on other hand, is more specular, and is "the dimension of images, conscious or unconscious, perceived or imagined".<sup>8</sup> The Imaginary is a world of ideals, as shall become apparent throughout this chapter, ideals with which the subject identifies in order to safeguard themselves. While these definitions are true, each of these terms is slippery, and their relation to one another changes, within Lacan's own work and in future applications. For example, the vocal identifications I outline below, speech acts as they are, belong to the realm of the Imaginary, not of the Symbolic. Moreover, Kittler adopts a more liberal approach when using these terms, blending the psychoanalytical Real with the more common-sense definition of "real", creating a complex association. In an attempt to add clarity to this chapter, I will use the capitalised versions of each word in order to denote their psychoanalytical usage, and the lower-case spellings when they have a more general meaning.

Through both my interlocutors and the above theorists I hope to show that lip-syncing effects a powerful identification with the voice in performance, one that has protective and emboldening consequences for the performing queen. The queen, through her dazzling raiment and technological amplification, provides a body of Imaginary proportions so that she might identify with the voice of the Other, thus performatively suturing the split ever-present at the core of subjectivity, an act that has the potential to empower the queen both in and out of performance.

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<sup>6</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 280.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 279.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 279.

Each of my interlocutors brought up notions of a “self” in interviews, both directly and indirectly: whereas Ruby, Rodent, and ShayShay mentioned “self” explicitly, speaking of a fascination with “twenty-first-century ideas of the representation of the self”, the idea of a “monstrous Other [as] a signifier for the self”, and an understanding of both a partial and a “full self” respectively, Bougie and Sue spoke more openly of “different personae” and freedom of “self-expression”. What these queens’ statements suggest is a concept of selfhood that extends beyond the common-sense notion of a single, given, inalienable self, but the potential for multiple selves, selves that can be donned at particularly times, with at least a degree of agency in the matter. It is to such a conception of self that I turn here. For to speak of the self is to speak of something polyvalent and changeable: firstly, the self across the globe and throughout history has been theorised in abundant and distinctly contradictory ways, from Cartesian notions of a mind/body split to Buddhist conceptions of no-self; secondly, even if one agrees certainly with a particular theorisation of the self, often the linguistic surety of the nominative subject “the self” belies a misleadingly essentialised singularity.<sup>9</sup> It is my belief that the self is always relational and creative. Indeed, I take it as axiomatic that the self is always radically implicated with the Other. I follow Judith Butler, who states:

The self only becomes a self on the condition that it has suffered a separation [...], a loss which is suspended and provisionally resolved through a melancholic incorporation of some “Other”. That “Other” installed in the self thus establishes the permanent incapacity of that “self” to achieve self-identity; it is as it were always already disrupted by that Other; the disruption of the Other at the heart of the self is the very condition of that self’s possibility.<sup>10</sup>

The self is always and already disrupted by the presence of an Other; it is always at a lack, and, even as it professes subjecthood, its subjectivity is always undermined by an inherent alterity.

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<sup>9</sup> Shaun Gallagher, “Introduction: A Diversity of Selves”, in *The Oxford Handbook of the Self*, ed. Shaun Gallagher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”, p. 27.

Such an alterity figures into many of my interlocutor's understandings. It is striking that, while these queens understand their drag characters as reflecting or revealing parts of themselves, they are able to stand at a distance and speak about their drag personae as alienated identities. Ruby, for example, speaks of "trying to find the twin sister I never had", qualifying this description with "a curiosity to find another human being within myself". Understanding Ruby as her own twin positions her drag character as the closest possible human to them biologically, whilst also retaining a critical difference.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, these queens all speak of their drag characters in the third person, whilst also answering to their drag names. For example, I have never called ShayShay "Shane" in interview or in any encounter over the past five years, and in interviews they will say sentences such as "ShayShay was open to do all those things", speaking of themselves in the third person, and then answer to ShayShay as first person a moment later. As such, these queens – and, indeed, one can notice this with almost all queens I have met – effect a self-alienation similar to Jorge Luis Borges's "Borges and I", in which he writes that "the other one, the one called Borges, is the one things happen to".<sup>12</sup> These queens have the ability to slip in and out of self and Other, able to hold themselves in both positions, in a remarkable act of self-alienation, and one that can often blur, for as Borges writes, "I do not know which of us has written this page".<sup>13</sup> Rodent is by far the most extreme example of such alterity. In interviews, Rodent spoke of a continued interest in "the creation of Otherness that's evolved with [...] drag", and how they are "really fascinated by the outsider and the Other, [specifically] the idea of the monstrous Other [...] as a signifier for yourself". Here Rodent's discussion of a monstrous Other as a signifier for the self bears striking relation not only to Butler's essential implication of the Other with the self, but also with the work of Jacques

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<sup>11</sup> If one takes the twinning idea further, the fact that the twins share an original home in the womb creates a direct example of a single self holding within it both self and Other. For a similar discussion of pregnancy and subjectivity, see Imogen Tyler, "Skin-Tight: Celebrity, Pregnancy, and Subjectivity", in *Thinking Through the Skin*, ed. Sara Ahmed & Jackie Stacey (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 69-83.

<sup>12</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "Borges and I", in *Labyrinths* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1962), p. 282.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 283.

Lacan. Rodent's discussion of a "monstrous Other" – an Other that is somehow greater-than-human, greater-than-ourselves – brings Lacan's theory of the mirror stage directly into frame.

Butler's explication of the self holds at its base a foundational Lacanian tenet: that the self is always concerned with an identification with the Other. Lacan traces this relationship between self and Other back to the subject's early infancy with his theorisation of the mirror stage, a moment in psychic development that has irrevocable consequences for the creation of subjectivity. In Lacan's words:

The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation — and which manufactures for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic — and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development.<sup>14</sup>

Upon seeing itself in the mirror, the child is confronted with itself as Other for the first time. At this early stage in development — Lacan hypothesised that the mirror stage occurs around the age of six months — the child still has limited control over its body; and yet, in the mirror image reflected to the child it sees an image of "totality", one seemingly more in control than itself, which thus produces the feeling of a "fragmented body-image" in the subject. Within the mirror image, the child anticipates its own maturity.<sup>15</sup> A temporal dialectic is thus erected, in which the "fragmented body-image" is realised retroactively only after having been made aware of one's mirror reflection, which functions anticipatorily, pointing towards a future maturation.<sup>16</sup> Beyond these chronological complexities of selfhood, what I am primarily interested in here is the turn Lacan makes from Freud in locating identification in a pre-Oedipal scenario, in which the individual's only object of desire is

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<sup>14</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publications Limited, 1977), p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 78.

<sup>16</sup> Though Lacan notes this dialectic himself (*Écrits*, p. 4), Jane Gallop provides a more extensive exploration of the chronological and temporal implications of the mirror stage in *Reading Lacan*, pp. 74-92.

themselves.<sup>17</sup> Lacan states in clear terms that “we have only to understand the mirror stage *as an identification*” [emphasis in original], one with an Imaginary whole, a *Gestalt* image, greater than the sum of its parts.<sup>18</sup> The image of the Other is incorporated into the self, predicating the subject’s inherent duality of self and Other. Here, Lacan’s terminology of *stade du miroir* is a *double entendre*; more than a stage in development, *stade*’s second translation of “stadium” accurately depicts the arena of life in which subjectivity will constantly battle between self and Other.

While the mirror stage may be one of Lacan’s most famous – and potentially most overused theories – its pertinence to drag is self-evident. I will explicate below a much more rigorous analysis of the mirror stage’s relevance to lip-syncing in particular, but one should not forget just how important literal mirrors are for drag queens. As she sits before the mirror in her dressing room, or, as is the wont of many queens, as she holds up her makeup palette with built-in mirror, the drag queen watches her visage change before her eyes and by her own hand. Glues and glitters, lashes and liners, the queen stares into the mirror to see herself, a self necessarily greater than the sum of its own parts. The time spent in front of the mirror is an important part of drag, and indeed it’s potentially a very long time, with Sue joking “I take 100 years”, though more truthfully detailing that she “will routinely take three hours, which is just not sustainable”. Sue describes the process, though seemingly incessant, as “very therapeutic and very nice because it is just painting, which is a thing that people enjoy to do. [...] And it’s also nice to transform yourself a little bit”. Sue details here, quite literally, how the construction of a mirror image has a therapeutic, beneficial effect for her. More than this, Sue explains to me how “drag treats the surface level as the fundamental real”, a statement that sheds fascinating light on Lacan’s theory. If the mirror stage involves an identification with a specular image, one that the Subject (pre-identification) understands as inconsistent with their internal feelings, and therefore one that is taken as “the fundamental real” even in its Imaginary

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<sup>17</sup> Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan*, ed. Frank Kermodé (London: Fontana Press, 1991), p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 2.

status, then drag performs similar contradictory work in taking the surface to be such a fundamental real.

Moreover, just as in Lacan, there is an essential misrecognition, an acknowledgement that this isn't how Sue imagines herself to look on any given day, but rather a different self, a self perhaps in "the armour of an alienating identity".<sup>19</sup> Sue told me that applying makeup is always enjoyable, "as long as I have time to sort of, you know, experiment and transform into what I ought to have been all along". Sue's mirror image is her and not her, what she should always have been – Sue's drag tied up considerably in her own gender expression – and thereby what she doesn't perceive herself to be. The relationship between gender and the "surface level as the fundamental real" ought not to go unnoticed: where Butler understands gender to be the play of signifiers on the surface of the body, so too does Sue understand the surface to create an albeit Imaginary real.<sup>20</sup> The invocation of theories of the Other, of split subjectivities, and of identifications with alterity are apposite here, and show the mirror stage to be a valuable and appropriately applicable theoretical underpinning.

The mirror is not only a visual enterprise, however, and psychoanalysts and voice theorists have located a complementary stage (*stade* in both senses of the word) that precedes the mirror stage's visuality with aurality. Guy Rosolato, for example, has extended Lacan's theory backwards in time and located a pre-mirror stage in the "acoustic mirror".<sup>21</sup> Rather than placing the realisation of self and Other at the visual mirror, Rosolato contends that the same processes occur when the infant ceases to identify the voice of the mother as their own.<sup>22</sup> The realisation that the mother's voice is not part of oneself enacts a powerful and traumatic split; with this vocal umbilical cord connecting

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<sup>19</sup> For a fascinating – and comical – *in situ* example of the misrecognition of drag in the mirror, see Davey Wavey, popular gay YouTuber, being put in drag by Courtney Act, of *RuPaul's Drag Race* fame, and seeing himself for the first time. He undergoes the typical Lacanian misrecognition before identifying with his mirror image, saying "that was the weirdest feeling to open my eyes in front of a mirror, because you don't recognise yourself when you see yourself", "Putting Davey Wavey in Drag!" (February 2016) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aM4Y7A2h-Dk> (accessed on: 1<sup>st</sup> of June 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 185.

<sup>21</sup> Guy Rosolato, *La relation d'inconnu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), p. 32.

<sup>22</sup> Jennifer Fleegeer, *Mismatched Women: The Siren's Song Through the Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 17.

mother and child severed, the child loses part of itself and is left at a lack. As Butler contends, the self undergoes a traumatic and irreparable separation. Concomitant with the loss of the mother's voice, however, is the perception of one's own; in the same way that the child will later come to experience its mirror image as Other, here the child experiences its own voice as Other, returning to its ears as object, and, where the child will identify with its own image, here it also identifies with its own voice. This vocal identification is the earliest example of an incorporation of the Other into the self in an attempt to repair the separation at the core of selfhood. However, it is upon this rupture that selfhood is predicated.<sup>23</sup> The relation to lip-syncing is clear. In hearing the voice of an Other in the drag queen's ears and experiencing it as her own, she creates a feedback loop in which voicing – the process of both feeling and hearing oneself speak – is unified in a single body from (at least) two discrete sources: the drag queen's own body and the loudspeakers that send out the voice of the singer. Indeed, the generation of such a singularity is essential to lip-sync performance and must be safeguarded, ShayShay argues. They say that “that's why people never really mix a lip-sync with spoken, like, on a microphone, because [...] it's just distracting”. Once the identificatory work of hearing the voice has been done, one must endeavour to retain that sense of singularity.

One must question whether this mirroring is as simple as an identification with the Other, however. Psychoanalytically speaking, what is one seeing, or hearing, when one sees themselves and hears themselves reflected back to them? Why is identifying with one's self a lack? What is this lack? When Lacan originally set his theory of the mirror stage to paper, he hadn't yet formulated his conception of the gaze and the voice as *objets petit a*, as I explain in the previous chapter. However, the *objet petit a* is of vital importance to both visual and acoustic mirrors. Mladen Dolar states, following Lacan's later *Seminar XI*, that “the gaze as the object, cleft from the eye, is precisely what

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<sup>23</sup> In Chapter 1, I invoked Derrida, utilising his *s'entendre parler* to argue that the drag queen, in hearing herself as herself, in believing that the voice that she heard was her own, reflected the phenomenological processes of consciousness as outlined by Derrida. Though Derrida goes on to argue for the impossibility of absolute presence in the voice, Derrida's formulation never includes *a*, for Lacan and Rosolato, necessary misrecognition. A structuring process of the mirror stage is seeing one's reflection (visual or acoustic) as Other, and thus predicates the structuring of the self around a lack.

is dissimulated by the image in which one recognizes oneself; it is not something that could be present in the field of vision, yet it haunts it from the inside”.<sup>24</sup> It follows, therefore, that there is a similar detachment between the ear and the voice, and that what is dissimulated by the voice when one recognises their voice for the first time is the voice as *objet petit a*. In this way, the *objet petit a* is at the core of self-apprehension. Above, I argue that hearing oneself speaking at the same time initiates subjectivity and places a schism at the centre of it. While this is true, this schism is not only caused by the necessary relation of the Other to the self in order to generate subjectivity; rather, one can go further, and state that there is a lack, the *objet petit a*, held at the centre of such a relation. For now, it will suffice to say that the drag queen, in identifying with the voice of the Other, dramatises the processes of identification everyone must go through in order to begin the journey of becoming a subject; however, in the next section, the estimate present/absence of the *objet petit a* will prove to be a crucial element in understanding the visual processes of drag, as well as tempering an idealistic unification of self and Other.

Gleaned from the above, it is clear that there are structural similarities between the voice and the self: both feign at singularity, when in fact their structure is poised between the poles of self and Other. As I explain in Chapter 1, at the moment of voicing, the subject is both speaker, with the voice issuing from their mouth, and listener, with the voice returning to their ears: the voice is both subject and object, internal and external, self and Other.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, in order for a voice to be a voice it must pierce a body, whether the speaker’s or another listener’s, and thus its existence is predicated on its happening as an extracorporeal event: that which is most internal, expressing the identity of the speaker as it does, must be made external, even if returning to the same body from which it came.<sup>26</sup> This fact leads Kaja Silverman to write that the voice “can spill over from subject to object and object to subject, violating the bodily limits upon which classical subjectivity depends”.<sup>27</sup> In

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<sup>24</sup> Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, p.41.

<sup>25</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck*, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Freya Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices*, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. 77.

speech, therefore, the voice's ability to move from the very interior of the speaker to that of the listener facilitates a porousness of bodies, an intercorporeality in which the voice acts as link. It is this striking intercorporeality that leads me to suggest that the drag queen is able to appropriate these voices and lay the voice of the Other into the performing the body, identifying strongly with these voices and thus effecting psychoanalytical processes of self-actualisation.

Though drag queens are an especial case of vocal identification, they are by no means the first or only to do so; indeed, identification is a crucial component in what makes listening to vocal music enjoyable. Identification erects an acoustic mirror between singer and listener, in which the listener adopts the voice of the singer as protection from the insufficiency of their own. In a basic sense, vocal identification takes place through the listener's adoption of both the "you" and "I" subject-positions within the song, being the addresser and the addressee at the same time: "I love you" becomes a narcissistic affirmation.<sup>28</sup> Beyond the semantic implications of the lyrics, however, Freya Jarman argues that vocal identification seeks "(in Lacanian terms) to relive the moment of loss, and to ritualize it".<sup>29</sup> By identifying with other voices, the lack ever-present in subjectivity that can be traced back to the vocal scission between mother and child is performatively remedied; an acoustic mirror is effected between singer and listening subject. Similarly, as Jarman again notes, in vocal identification "I want that sound to be mine [...] because of the protection it affords me against the inadequacy of my own state".<sup>30</sup> Just as in the visual mirror stage, it is in "the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity" that the listener finds a reprieve from the insufficiency of their own voice. The value of this identification is less on the semantic meaning of the voice, but more on the incorporation of and identification with the voice of the Other in an attempt to fill (however performatively or ultimately impossibly) the rupture at the core of subjectivity.

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<sup>28</sup> Gerry Moorey, "Music, Identity, and Oblivion", in *Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network*, Volume 1, Number 2 (2007), p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Freya Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices*, p. 29.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p. 43.

The protective qualities of vocal identification were raised on multiple occasions by many of my interviewees. ShayShay spoke at length about the protective armour of an external vocal identity:

I think you're definitely a lot more vulnerable with your actual voice, like, a lip-sync kind of is able to put a bit of a wall, a protective wall between you and your audience, but when it's your actual voice, like, I guess.... Okay, here you go, if you're lip-syncing [...] and you don't say a word, you lip-sync, and you go off, your actual voice was never even heard.

Here ShayShay mirrors Jarman, following Lacan: identifying with and using someone else's voice protects them from exposing the vulnerability of their own. But why should ShayShay's voice be vulnerable? As I have said, giving voice sends out that which is most interior of the speaker to the exterior, and therefore has the ability to reveal certain things one might prefer to remain hidden. Steven Connor suggests this is one reason why we often dislike hearing our own voices: the displeasure "derives from the fact that among the things the subjects heard in their voices they heard something they had not wanted to hear, something expressed which they had wanted not to express".<sup>31</sup> ShayShay's use of vocal identification erects a "protective wall" — a vocal mirror — to mask their own voice, to safeguard from their own voice betraying their secrets.

It is interesting to consider the agential role technology has to play in the dramatisation of selfhood that occurs through vocal identification. While it is true to say that human beings (and potentially other creatures) gain consciousness through interactions with the Other, this is not true for technology. Friedrich Kittler states in no uncertain terms that "whereas (according to Derrida) it is characteristic of so-called Man and his consciousness to hear himself speak, media dissolve such feedback loops".<sup>32</sup> Here, Kittler is specifically referencing the phonograph; in recording, it picks up all sound indiscriminately — all of the real — rather than filtering out meaningful content or noting the differences between itself and what it records. The machine does not gain consciousness through the realisation of itself as something different to that which it records, nor does it hear itself listening:

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<sup>31</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck*, p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p. 22.

there are no feedback loops. In lip-syncing, the machine does, however, enact a feedback loop, one between the queen and the singer, and becomes an essential component in the identification process. In this sense, I understand the technologies at play here (of recording, editing, amplification etc.) as having important agency in the self-actualisation processes I will explore throughout this and the subsequent chapter, for, whether conscious or not, “it is an action or an event — not an intent — that manifests agency, if something makes a difference, then it is an actor”.<sup>33</sup> As such, the selfhood that is manifested through identification with the voice of the Other (and through the processes I am yet to outline) is spread across voices, bodies, and technologies, each as integral as each other. There are pleasing parallels here with Lacan’s own discussion of the evolution of subjectivity in the modern world: he reminds his listener that as humans “[we] are infinitely more than [we] can imagine, subjects of gadgets and instruments of all kinds — ranging from the microscope to radio and television — that will become elements of [our] being”.<sup>34</sup> The essential psychic processes of selfhood have expanded, and now technologies have become bionic prostheses, extending our minds, bodies, voices, and selves.

In this section, I have shown theoretically how vocal identification can act as a Lacanian mirror, laying the Other into the self and acting as a form of protection. My interviewees spoke of a “protective wall” erected through lip-syncing, and similarly spoke of drag and lip-syncing’s ability to offer them the “freedom” to be who they are. However, I have also shown that vocal identification is not unproblematic in its unification of self and Other and exposes a lack that predicates the split at the core of subjectivity. A similar lack, or absence, is a prerequisite of any recorded music. In recorded vocal music, the singer is, by recorded material’s very nature, represented. As representation, the singer is present in their absence, for representation can only ever present something that is not itself present, that is lacking.<sup>35</sup> Sean Cubitt contends that the subject’s “activity

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<sup>33</sup> Benjamin Piekut, “Actor-Networks in Music History: Clarifications and Critiques”, in *Twentieth-Century Music*, Volume 11, Issue 02 (September 2014), p. 195.

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Lacan, quoted in Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p. 170.

<sup>35</sup> Sean Cubitt, “‘Maybellene’: Meaning and the Listening Subject”, in *Popular Music*, Volume 4, Performers and Audiences (1984), p. 222.

in listening is pursuing this felt lack with all the energy of its desires along the stream of signifiers in search of an impossible completion".<sup>36</sup> As such, rather than achieving resolution of any sort, the listener is in fact engaged in an interminable process of identification in which the object of identification is always at a lack, thus figuring itself as the object of desire. Should the performer be present, would this process come to an end? More than that, if the listening subject were able to embody the voice fully, to become the singer, to construct themselves as the *Gestalt* Other, would, then, the space between subject and object, self and Other, be sutured? And what, in this instance, happens to the structuring lack of the *objet petit a*? It is here that I find the theories of Friedrich Kittler to be particularly enlightening. As I mention in my introduction to this chapter, Kittler relates the three technologies of the gramophone, the film, and the typewriter, to Lacan's psychic orders of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic respectively. In the following section, I will argue that the same Symbolism of the typewriter is evident in the yawning gap between the presence and absence of the singer in recorded music. I believe that the drag queen then constructs a total Imaginary Ideal-I — through the play of physical gender signifiers as well as technological amplification — that is able to fill, or at least obscure, the Symbolic space left vacant both by the singer's representation as well as the essential lack of the *objet petit a*. With this space filled and the identity of the singer merging into that of the drag queen, the absence of the singer falls away, and the vocal identity of the track is laid as closely into the drag queen as possible, effecting a performative unification of self and Other that has resounding implications for the life of the performer.

### *III.iii – Constructing the Imaginary*

Where is the body in recorded vocal music? Though it would be reductive to slip too far into acousmatic aesthetics, recorded vocal music does effect a certain amputation: the source of the

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 221.

voice, the issuing body of the singer, is dislocated. The voice is always dislocated, however, leaving the body so that it may return, though to where remains uncertain. And while the recorded voice is physically severed from its corporeal source, the body is surely latent within the voice: voices by their very nature enact bodies, even when the issuing body is not present, and when one hears a voice, one sees (or imagines) a body.<sup>37</sup> In listening to recorded vocal music, therefore, the listener confronts a space: a space between the divorced voice and its source. In lip-syncing, on the one hand there is the space of the singer and their voice, a space that is both geographical and temporal; on the other, there is the space between the sound emitted from the speakers and the moving lips of the lip-syncing drag queen. I will begin by analysing these twin spaces in lip-syncing, before turning my attention to that elusive space of the *objet petit a*.

Friedrich Kittler spends much time extemporising on the loss of the body through technological mediation in the final section of *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. When writing with a pen, calligraphic arcs join letter to letter, and the hand moves over the formation of the words, body mirroring text: the writing is still imbued with a sense of the body. This trace of the body might helpfully be dubbed the “grain”, following Barthes, the grain being “the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs”.<sup>38</sup> Kittler suggests that in the move from pen to typewriter, this element of the body is lost; in tapping keys on a keyboard, the hand is divorced from the text that streams onto the paper (or the screen) and in lieu of the idiosyncratic elisions of letters afforded by handwriting there are empty spaces.<sup>39</sup> These spaces are pregnant with Symbolic meaning: the space between the letters is the space of the body.

Just as in Kittler’s typewriter, I contend that the spaces created through dislocation of voice and body are lacuna of Symbolic meaning: they are spaces of the body to be filled by bodies. I propose that the physical embodiment of these spaces — closing the space between drag queen and voice of

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<sup>37</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck*, p. 35.

<sup>38</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice”, in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 188.

<sup>39</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p. 203.

Other — lays the voice of the Other closer into the self than previous theorists have suggested with regards to vocal identification. Out of the void between voice and body and out of the inherent absence within representation, the drag queen supplies a fully constructed Imaginary image; she works with the voice, appropriating it as her own, and thus adopts, as Lacan states, the *Gestalt* Ideal-I of the Other.

In order to fill the space of the body, the drag queen must first have a body; it is here that I find strong parallels between the drag queen's assumption of feminine gender signifiers and Kittler's explication of film and cinema as Lacanian Imaginaries. In his discussion of film, Kittler states that "chopping or cutting in the real, fusion or flow in the imaginary — the entire research history of cinema revolves around this paradox".<sup>40</sup> In editing a piece of film, single shots are cut and spliced and stitched back together; the camera captures the real of life and then the editor dissects and reassembles it to forge a construction of the Imaginary, the assemblage of clips constituting something greater than the sum of its parts. The final product results in a heightened reality, wherein "films are more real than reality and [...] their so-called reproductions are, in fact, productions".<sup>41</sup> In short, films feign at the real but remain cemented in the world of the Imaginary.

This understanding of film can be mapped onto Judith Butler's theories of gender production, as espoused in *Gender Trouble*. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler contends that gender, rather than being an essential, internalised fact is nothing more than socially defined codes of conduct — "bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds" — that are cemented through their constant repetitive performances in quotidian life.<sup>42</sup> It therefore follows that

if the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* p. 122.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* p. 145.

<sup>42</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 179.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p. 174.

This leads Butler to dub gender as “performative” in that, in the very act of its performance, it generates the subject it claims to perform, rather than that subject existing *a priori* to the event.<sup>44</sup> In other words, gender takes aspects of the real — real movements, real pieces of clothing, real mannerisms — and weaves out of them a construction of the Imaginary, a total form that has no original; like film, gender cuts up moments of reality and creates something new, something that feigns at reality, but that is forever apart from it.

Further to the drag queen’s play of gender signifiers, her body is constructed of Imaginary proportions in the overly ostentatious manner in which it is bedecked. In terms of their makeup, every portion of their faces is exaggerated, from overdrawn lips to extended cat eyes, chiselled cheekbones with the aid of contour powders, and ethereal highlights with shimmers and glitter. And their outfits, of voluminous tulle, of glistening rhinestones that dazzle the eye, all covering layers of corsets, tights, gaffs, and tape to keep everything in place, certainly evince a body of Imaginary dimensions. Add to this their wigs, often wearing multiple wigs “stacked” on top of one another at a time, in order to diminish the perceived size of their head, rewriting Dolly Parton’s famous maxim “the higher the hair, the closer to God” as “the bigger the hair, the smaller the face”, and you certainly have an unreal body (not to mention the heels). The physicality of drag is truly an act of smoke and mirrors.

In this sense, I propose that the drag queen is an example of Kittler’s filmic imaginary, stitching together parts of the real to form an Imaginary as she does. I do not believe extending Kittler’s theories to include the drag queen requires any leap of logic due to Kittler’s invocation of the doppelgänger as the paradigmatic example of Lacan’s Imaginary.<sup>45</sup> Kittler describes the doppelgänger as an uncanny double, a mirror image that instils fear and aggression; and yet, man “lives through his identification with virtual doppelgängers. Narcissism is duplicated”.<sup>46</sup> For Kittler, the doppelgänger in film acts as a Lacanian mirror, an image of the self as Other, one that is terrifying

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<sup>44</sup> Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”, p. 24.

<sup>45</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p. 214.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* p. 169.

in its totality, and one with whom one identifies in order to confirm the ego. What is the drag queen if not a Kittlerian doppelgänger? Staring into the mirror, the drag queen sees themselves, greater than the sum of their parts, a tapestry of gender signifiers, a construction of pieces of the real into the totality of the Imaginary. The drag queen becomes an image of the Other, a *Gestalt*, and identification with it dramatises the inherent split between self and Other at the core of subjectivity; indeed, it also dramatises in a more obviously theatrical manner the inherent falsehood that underlies the mirror image in Lacan's mirror stage, our reflections always presenting themselves as more complete than they are.<sup>47</sup> This full construction of the Imaginary supplies the foundations needed to fill the space of the body that is separated from its voice in recorded music.

Unsurprisingly, this aspect of constructing the Imaginary resurfaced in many of my interviews. Rodent mentioned the enjoyment in "the ability to transform yourself", specifically the role that makeup has in this, saying that it offers an especial mode of performative transformation "because you get to play with all the makeup, [which is] a really fun way to experiment with the face and with transforming the way you look". Similarly, Sue made reference to just how much cosmetic help might be needed to initiate such a transformation, quipping: "can you not just see that a little bit of blush is not gonna change this? This is a big face!". The focus here on transformation and change may seem antithetical to a discussion of doppelgängers, however I see no contradiction. The doppelgänger is a likeness of oneself, a mirror image reflected back, and as a mirror image it is greater than oneself, a combination of parts that manifests into a whole more perfect than one perceives one's own body to be. In this sense, seeing oneself reflected back in the mirror as a drag queen, noting the uncanny similarities and the perplexing unity of lines and shapes to make something recognisably "you" but sufficiently "Other", is a similar phenomenon to the experience of the doppelgänger.

The construction of this Imaginary body does more than simply provide a body for a voice, though, for *any* body could suffice to house a voice: voices waiver to bodies, to the extent that even

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<sup>47</sup> Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan*, p. 23.

the necessarily lifeless ventriloquist's dummy can lay claim to a voice. The drag queen's body here acts in a structurally similar way to the reflection one sees in the mirror stage. Where the specular mirror image is of Imaginary proportions, greater than the sum of its parts, so too is the drag queen's body: a body somehow more than itself. Herein lies a critical relationship between the visible, the audible, and the *objet petit a* in lip-syncing. I wrote in the previous section that what is dissimulated in the mirror image is the gaze, and by association what is dissimulated in the voice is the vocal object. In both, the *objet petit a* is present in its absence, haunting both the image and the voice from within. It is the *objet petit a* of both the image and the voice that generates the schism at the core of self-apprehension, for, as in Lacan's algebra, where the Subject (pre-Symbolic Subject) is divided by the Other, one is left with the subject and the *a*. What I find to be of especial importance here is how the visuality of the drag queen and her Imaginary body support the dissimulation of the vocal *objet petit a*, which I shall set out below.

In Chapter 2 I argued that the drag queen's mouth in lip-syncing – its emptiness, its void – renders visible the figure of silence, the extimate silence in all speech, for, as Lacan and Žižek have stated, it is not the voice that emerges from the ground of silence, but rather from the ground of sonority that the figure of silence emerges. This, I maintain, is the case, and I also maintain that when one's attention is drawn to it, this silence produces an uncanny effect in the viewer that witnesses the emptiness of the drag queen's mouth. However, I also maintain that this is not one's first thought when watching a lip-sync: what is most astonishing, I believe, is that one can so readily forget that the queen onstage is lip-syncing. The joy of the performance is in the illusion, in being beguiled, in "believing" the voice to be coming from the queen. How, then, does the queen both present the *objet petit a* and distance herself from it? In much the same way as the mirror image dissimulates the gaze, "hiding" the present-absence of the *objet petit a*, here I believe the extreme physical manifestations of the drag queen visibly support a dissimulation of the vocal *objet petit a*. This body of Imaginary proportions, this *Gestalt* being that is greater than the sum of its parts, manages to deflect attention from the vocal object, made visible in lip-syncing, by virtue of the body's

ostentatious and Imaginary visuality. Were the drag queen to attempt to hide this solely through sound, would this not make the *objet petit a* horrifically present? No makeup, no costume, no wig, but the voice of another blared loudly – the juxtaposition would only serve to heighten the silence’s propulsion as figure from the ground of noise. And while this Imaginary body certainly provides a more sensible body for the voice in many ways – i.e. the drag queen’s femininity may more readily match a female voice – I believe a key factor in this is that the over-compensatory proportions of the drag queen’s body spackle over the extimate *objet petit a* of the voice.

Indeed, perhaps, in this respect, the lip-syncing drag queen becomes the Kittlerian *doppelgänger par excellence*. Dolar, speaking of the gaze in the mirror stage, writes that “if it [the gaze] appears as part of the image – as it does, for example, in the experience of the double [read: *doppelgänger*] which spawned a whole library of Romantic literature – it immediately disrupts the established reality, and leads to catastrophe”.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Slavoj Žižek, in his discussion of the relationship of the visible and the audible, states that “in the uncanny encounter of a double (*Doppelgänger*), what eludes our gaze are always his eyes: the double strangely always seems to look askew, never to return our gaze by looking straight into our eyes – the moment he were to do it, our lives would be over...”.<sup>49</sup> While the stakes might not be quite so high in drag, to notice the voice would certainly “disrupt the established reality”. The vocal object that haunts the mouth, that part of the Real in the Symbolic, must be hidden within the specular Imaginary, to hold the magic of the performance in balance.

The drag queen’s Imaginary body therefore supplies a body for the voice, as well as supplying the appropriate raiment to dress the vocal object. Now that the theoretical underpinning of vocal identification in drag lip-sync performance has been set out, the following sections will consider the self-actualising processes of such an identification. I will first offer a case study of these processes in

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<sup>48</sup> Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, p. 41.

<sup>49</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “I Hear You with My Eyes”, p. 94.

action, with a particular performance by Rodent. Following this, I will explore the self-actualising benefits through my other interlocutors.

### *III.iv – “Say My Name!”*

I am with Rodent backstage at the Troxy Theatre in East London. It is the Sink the Pink Summer Ball, a 3,000-person strong club night, with drag shows punctuating the evening. Rodent stares down at the floor as the booming bass of the party reverberates around the room. Fabric scales of iridescent blue adorn their body, and a headpiece in the shape of a cobra crowns their head. They move to the side of the stage. As the music quietyens the crowd erupts in screams. The emcee announces Rodent and calls them to the stage. Rodent arrives, stoic in the centre of the stage, and lip-syncs Florence & The Machine’s “Spectrum” to an audience screaming their name.



Fig. 16: Rodent performing “Spectrum” at the Sink the Pink Summer Ball, 2015

When I asked Rodent about what draws them to a specific song, they replied that their interest was founded on “the timbre of the music, like the actual tone of it, how it all sounds, and what that gives me, or it’s about the vocal performance”. Less the semantic meaning of the song, the vocal

performance takes precedence: the timbral, emotive, expressive qualities of the voice. When I probed further for specific examples of such vocalities, Rodent responded:

I think one that I really, really enjoyed [was] when I did “Spectrum” at the Sink the Pink Summer Ball. The power in Florence Welch’s voice is so ecstatic and it’s something that you never get to do in your real life, and performing that was such — I don’t want to sound new-agey — but it was like a trance state. I came off the stage like “oh shit, what just happened?” because it’s such a... To do those things, and those vocalities, even just miming it, it’s like... What did you say?

The track (in fact, Calvin Harris’s remix of Florence Welch’s original) is certainly full of vocal interest: the verses are delivered in a *parlando* style and the melodic line circles around a B minor chord, the peak gradually creeping from a B to a D; throughout the verses, Welch’s voice slips into guttural crackles, examples of the “vocal fry”, clearly audible moments of the grain in the voice; the choruses utilise a wholly different style of singing, one of force and power; the vocal line completes its ascent to F-sharp, and the line twirls in melismatic arcs over the words “name” and “shining”, outlining the B minor triad. One can readily understand why such a song would be of interest to a performing drag queen: the multivalence of Welch’s vocal identity affords the drag queen room to explore, to interpret, and to embody.

While Welch’s voice is rich with extra-linguistic meaning, the semantic content of her words is also important here. The chorus of Welch’s track goes as follows:

Say my name  
And every colour illuminates  
We are shining  
And we will never be afraid again

These lyrics, I believe, prove to be an exemplary case for analysing how the above vocal identifications are cemented in performance. While Lacan’s mirror stage and its attendant theories are primarily concerned with a narcissism, a relating to one’s own mirror image, having this identification reinforced from the outside is no bad thing. Here, I find Louis Althusser’s theory of interpellation to be particularly useful. Althusser’s theory seeks to explain how one is constituted as

a subject by being recognised as a unique subject. Intriguingly, his first “concrete” example involves the voice: “we all have friends who, when they knock on our door and we ask, through the door, the question ‘Who’s there?’, answer (since ‘it’s obvious’) ‘It’s me’”.<sup>50</sup> This first half of Althusser’s example attests to the inalienable uniqueness of each human voice, however he then goes on to explain how the subject is confirmed from the outside: having heard the friend’s response through the door, “we recognize that ‘it is him’, or ‘her’. We open the door, and ‘it’s true, it really is she who was there’.”<sup>51</sup> What Althusser surmises from this rather mundane series of events is that “you and I are *always already* subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects” [emphasis in original].<sup>52</sup> The individual is interpellated as a subject through recognition of themselves from the outside and the recognition that they have been recognised. For Althusser, one the simplest ways this can occur is through “the fact of calling you by your name”.<sup>53</sup> Welch’s song, therefore, in calling for the audience to “say my name” provides a wonderful – if not a rather prosaic – example of interpellation. Rodent, creating a body of both visual and sonic Imaginary proportions in order to house the voice of another, dramatising the inherent split not only of the voice but also of subjectivity and the extimate void held at its core, identifies with the voice and their own mirror image, but also has the audience hailing them into subjectivity. The addition of Althusser here is similarly not at odds with Lacan or psychoanalysis, as Althusser plainly understands interpellation as “specular, i.e. a mirror-structure”, in relation to, in his terms, ideology, the “Absolute Subject”, or perhaps we can simply say the Other.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Althusser’s work has been critical in queer contexts, most notably in Judith Butler’s “Critically Queer”, where Butler traces back the trajectory of the heteronormative subject to that first hailing of “it’s a boy!”

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<sup>50</sup> Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 172.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* p. 172.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* p. 172-173.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* p. 173.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* p. 180.

or “it’s a girl!”.<sup>55</sup> In this way, while Rodent’s performance of Florence Welch’s “Spectrum” provides a particularly fitting example, one can extend the act of interpellation beyond the literal naming of Rodent in this song and the audience’s approbation, and understand this process as being in effect through any lip-sync performance in front of an audience that recognises the queen as subject, confirming the queen’s identity from the outside.



Fig. 17: Rodent interacting with audience members during their performance of “Spectrum”

Further to this, Rodent describes how technology has an important role to play in closing the Symbolic space of the body, about which Kittler speaks. In interview, I asked Rodent whether they ever felt any disconnect between themselves as performing body and the sound of the voice coming through the speakers, to which they replied:

I think sometimes there’s a disconnect, and I’ve realised it’s to do with the sound quality of the room and the acoustics of the room. So I’ve been in places where I’ve done a lip-sync and it sounds like it’s not coming from me and there is such a disconnect but it’s because the music isn’t resonating around me.

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<sup>55</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 176.

Here Rodent locates the spatial dimensions of the voice in lip-syncing, specifically the space between loudspeakers and mouth. When I asked whether they felt this dislocation during “Spectrum” they replied that this was definitely not the case; rather

there was a definite singularity between it [the sound of the track and themselves]. The music and the power of the voice, using that to forget everything else, using and embracing and embodying the music to transport myself in the moment.

The sheer volume of the music, resounding as it was through industrial speakers, closed the space between loudspeakers and mouth. It allowed for a complete corporeal manifestation within Rodent, one that was, in their own words, able to “transport” them to some other place. While I will interrogate Rodent’s statement more forcefully in Chapter 5 with my discussion of haptic aurality, here the intense volume has a decided psychoanalytical benefit. Sean Cubitt theorises this feature of the amplified voice in popular music by relating it to the concept of the Socratic daemon; as such, “the amplified voice is an ideal form, an image like a mirror image, it is like us yet bigger, more perfect, almost godlike”.<sup>56</sup> The amplified voice becomes another form of mirror image, an Other greater than ourselves, and one with which the drag queen can identify. The invocation of the Socratic daemon is particularly pertinent to a discussion of Rodent; self-professedly intrigued by “witches, demons [and] the monstrous Other”, Rodent describes their lip-syncs as “possessions [like] the artist Dickie Beau, [who] frames lip-syncs as a séance, as a willing channelling of a spirit”. In so few words, Rodent summarises the essential processes of lip-syncing: of embodiment and a willing commingling of bodies and voices. And imperative to the process is the sheer volume of the sound equipment, creating of the track a vocal Other with whom Rodent might identify.

It is no surprise, therefore, that Rodent described the event with such loaded terms, of “new-age [...] trance”, focussing on the “ecstatic” qualities of Welch’s voice. Within this performance, Rodent adopts and fully embodies a vocal Other of daemonic proportions; they call for an audience to subjectify them through a process of interpellation; and they solidify a selfhood

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<sup>56</sup> Sean Cubitt, “Maybellene”, p. 220.

across temporally and geographically disparate voices, bodies, and technologies by closing the Symbolic space of the body left vacant through the dismemberment of the body in recording. This lip-sync is paradigmatic of the important self-actualising processes that can occur through vocal identification with and embodiment of the Other. What is created is a total image of *Gestalt* proportions. Rodent, in Imaginary body and voice, becomes a mirror unto themselves, constructing a powerful armour that acts as a form of confidence and protection.

### *III.v – Multiplicities: Voice and Queerness*

Thus far, I have sought to show how vocal identification in lip-syncing performatively closes the gap between self and Other inherent to subjectivity and to suggest that lip-sync performance fills the Symbolic space of the body left vacant through sound recording's inherent separation of body and voice. I have argued that in these moments of performance the drag queen lays the voice of the Other into the performing body, effecting a union of self and Other, however temporary this may be. In this final section, I hope to show why such performances have extended benefits beyond the stage – what are the repercussions of lip-syncing's self-actualising benefits outside of performance? By way of this, I must first address some problems that have formed at the foundation of my argument, namely: is the marriage of self and Other not antithetical to the very basis of subjectivity I take as axiomatic, and the foundations of psychoanalysis? And further, is the adoption of a single voice not at odds with a politics of queerness that defines itself through its changeability, malleability, and refusal of categorisation?

If the pleasure in vocal identification can be traced back to the desire to identify with the voice of the mother in the womb, as Rosolato suggests in his explication of the acoustic mirror, then this desire must, obviously, always remain at a distance. As I lay out in my introduction, the whole notion of subjectivity on which I place my argument is predicated on a split between subject and object; to remove that split and yoke the two would be to nullify subjectivity. Moreover, the

unification of self and Other suggests a perplexing singularity, one that is at odds with the queer identities my interviewees espoused. By its very nature, queerness eschews categorisation, being as it is, in Jodie Taylor's definition (as paradoxical as such a thing is), "destabilising, liminal, unfixed and contingent, and quite possibly above all [...] highly contested".<sup>57</sup> To hold down queerness is to divest it of all its radical power. All of my interviewees expressed a sense of self that matches closely with Taylor's words. For example, when I asked about their gender identity: ShayShay expressed a lack of fixity in their definition, stating "my gender is non-binary gender-fluid, which is only an accurate description for me because of its nebulous nature"; and Rodent, similarly, begrudged categorisation, saying "I would say it's a kind of fluidity but I don't want to engage in any rigid definition or category". For my interviewees, personal identity is not fixed, it is something that evolves, denies demarcation, and slips out of boxes. At any rate, it cannot be reduced to a singularity, to a single character with a single message. So how can lip-sync performance, in its active construction of singularity out of plurality, add to a sense of self?

Crucially, there is no single voice for these performers. Though they may adopt a voice for a performance, this voice disappears at the end of the track: there is no consistent voice, no locatable "I" in the timbres of the voice each time the drag queen performs. I spoke before of not using one's own voice as a form of protection, but it also has a very important role in terms of denying a singular identity. For example, Rodent spoke at length regarding the denial of voice in their performances:

I think it's because I relate voice so much with being a very solid identifier for identity, and I think because I want the performances to be as ranging and varied and ephemeral and kind of as changeable as possible, by giving them [a] voice it becomes a character and then they have their own, then they kind of have their own personage, almost.

Here Rodent refers to the common association of voice as signifier for the self; therefore, to give a consistent voice to Rodent the performing queen, to use their own voice, would be to supply Rodent with a consistent identity. It would be to deny the Imaginary capacities of drag. Further, it would

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<sup>57</sup> Jodie Taylor, *Playing it Queer: Identity and Queer World-making* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012), p. 14.

lose the charm of lip-syncing, the ability to create whole new Imaginaries, to slip on new voices as one does costumes, and would subscribe drag performance to a recurring sameness. By not using their own voice, Rodent is able to give themselves many in performance, a new one in each lip-sync, perhaps multiple voices each night.<sup>58</sup> Rather than the creation of totalising vocal identities being antithetical to queerness, their holistic construction assists queerness in their ability to be put on, taken off, and interchanged.

The exploration of different voices and different “selves” in each performance allows these performers to engage with alternate parts of their own personalities in safer ways than typically afforded them. In a marvellous quip, ShayShay said: “why not piece together personality traits that are the most me, the most extreme version of me, and throw them all together for a night out?” While such a bricolage of the self will be discussed at length in the next chapter, what is fascinating here is that this openness of exploration through drag then effects a connection with their day-to-day lives, wherein they feel more comfortable in themselves through their drag performance. For example, ShayShay spoke of the liberation drag gave them in terms of their gender identity:

Being in a drag feminine look, allows... Not allows... Encourages, more, you to be able to live out the more feminine sides of your personality. I mean, you can do those in any look, at any time [...] but to have the freedom to do that in drag, I feel has also really allowed me to do that out of drag more, and feel very comfortable and confident being what some people might call girly or feminine.

ShayShay clearly expresses a connection between the exploration of gender in drag performance and their own gender exploration outside of drag. The performance of gender signifiers in drag led to the realisation of gender’s inherently performative nature; gender signifiers performed on the surface of the body in their drag act are just the same as gender signifiers performed on the surface of their body on the streets.

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<sup>58</sup> For a discussion of multiple vocal identities as a form of protection, see Gillian Rodger, “Drag, Camp and Gender Subversion in the Music and Videos of Annie Lennox”, in *Popular Music*, Volume 23, Number 1 (January 2004), p. 18.

Similarly, Bougie spoke of what, in her opinion, impels the most poignant and effective drag performances. She told me that “the most important bits of drag come from a moment of personal crisis or fluxus [*sic*] that's funnelled into art”. For Bougie, drag is a way of performatively working through pain – trauma, even – and using the liminal space of the stage in order to deal with such hardships. Where for ShayShay drag offers a space in which they are able to perform selves they have always wanted to be, Bougie is able to use drag to explore selves that maybe she knows she has to confront, and this is the safest way in which to do this. Such a safety is no doubt afforded by the protective qualities of drag and lip-syncing detailed throughout this chapter.

Connections such as these lead Katie Horowitz to call for “a theory of performance that does not limit itself to the realm of mere metaphor, [but] one that actually, unapologetically, and without qualification breaks down the boundary between stage and performance and the performance of everyday life”.<sup>59</sup> I strongly agree with Horowitz, for to live as a queer subject in the heteronormative world is often an enforced performance: whether a societally imposed subscription to one’s assigned gender’s signifiers for safety, or a performance of culturally appropriate signals of “outness” to fit more readily in social categories.<sup>60</sup> What drag performance here provides is a form of Foucauldian heterotopia, a temporally and geographically finite space outside of heteronormativity in which the queer subject can perform parts of their identity normally stifled or policed by heteronormative strictures.<sup>61</sup> Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz posits this as a function of queer performance, describing stages as “our actual utopian rehearsal rooms”, safe spaces in which one might perform inadmissible identities and gain confidence in oneself to live more openly beyond the protection of the stage.<sup>62</sup> As ShayShay and Bougie attest, the freedom of the stage and of drag performance led to their freedom in everyday life: Horowitz’s theory of

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<sup>59</sup> Katie Horowitz, “The Trouble with ‘Queerness’: Drag and the Making of Two Cultures”, in *Signs*, Volume 38, Number 2 (Winter 2013), p. 314.

<sup>60</sup> Richard Dyer, “Believing in Fairies: The Author and the Homosexual”, in *inside/out*, p. 188.

<sup>61</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”, trans. Jay Miskowiec, in *Diacritics*, Volume 16, Number 1 (Spring 1986), p. 25.

<sup>62</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), p. 111.

performance holds true. This is not just a protection of the stage, however, but a protection fostered through the holistic adoption and incorporation of the Other through lip-sync performance. In identifying with the voice of the Other, constructing the physical Imaginaries of drag, and filling the Symbolic spaces of bodies left vacant through recording, the drag queen lays the Other into the self, creating of herself a construction of confidence that then acts as a mirror, reflecting this confidence back into their everyday life. Beyond the Imaginary and the Symbolic of performance one is left with the real of the street, of heteronormative life, in which through becoming queens, these queens become more themselves.

### *III.vi – Conclusion*

Drag queens are not the only ones to construct selfhood through interactions with the Other: indeed, these interactions form the very conditions of what it means to be a self. Similarly, we all, in listening to vocal music, go along the same lines of identification with the voice as do drag queens. There is one crucial way in which all I have outlined differs from typical identification, however, namely in that the drag queen collapses self and Other within a single body. Rather than identifying with the voice of the Other, they lay claim to that voice, enacting a performative singularity. They generate a body of Imaginary proportions that is able to fill the space left vacant by the singer, and thus create a *Gestalt* mirror image with which they may identify. Closing the gap of the body, the drag queen does not simply identify with the singing voice but takes ownership of it: “this is my voice”, says the drag queen, “my body is this voice’s body”. And yet, her Imaginary identification does not slip into destructive narcissism, the silent gaping of her mouth holding in it the resonant void of the *objet petit a* that is dissimulated by her greater-than body. And while I argue for the queerness of such an identification in the previous section due to its potential for multiplicity, its revolving narcissism is perhaps an even greater example of its queerness.

Lee Edelman, in his *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*, makes an interesting move regarding queerness and the mirror stage. In his analysis, Edelman concerns himself with Milton's *Paradise Lost*, specifically the different ways in which Adam and Eve constitute themselves: whereas Adam can see himself in Eve, Eve yearns to see her reflection in the water. For Edelman, "the text affirms Adam as subject by justifying his love for Eve not as his 'Self', but as the 'image' of himself, as, in this particular context, the *object* through which he can recognize (and thus attain) his rightful position as subject" [emphasis in original].<sup>63</sup> Eve, as she is not made in the image of Adam, must look to herself in order to gain her rightful place as subject. This leads Edelman to fascinating conclusions. Conflating the gay male subject (I extend Edelman here to encompass queer subjectivities) with Eve, in their preclusion from the hegemony, their outcast status, their perceived social "evil" in many cases, Edelman suggests that the queer subject must also find themselves as the object of their own identification. Edelman continues to apply this theory to sexual relations, specifically in light of the AIDS pandemic, stating the uniqueness of the queer subject in "permitting [the queer subject] to take himself, narcissistically, as an object, and allowing him, in consequence, as an object, to be 'taken'."<sup>64</sup> Edelman's theories have an apposite relation to the identifications at play in drag lip-sync performance. While Lacan's mirror stage does use the subject as their own object of relation, the mirror image of themselves related back to them, this is in the inauguration of the subject, and after this first relation mirrors are erected everywhere; as subjects, we could never only define ourselves in relation to ourselves. What the drag queen performs here, though, is an especially queer narcissistic identification. She creates a mirror image that both is herself and isn't herself, she constructs an Imaginary body that houses an Imaginary voice with which she may identify, and she uses such an identification with herself in order to gain confidence beyond the performance. Yes, the mirroring installs the voice of the Other within the self and goes some way in suturing the gap between self and Other. But what is perhaps more dramatic and more forceful in

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<sup>63</sup> Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 103.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* p. 105.

this process is not to understand this identification as some utopic sublation, but rather that such a performative synthesis allows one to be in relation to one's self as Other, and is therefore able to experience one's self as more "whole" – in its lack – as subject.

In this chapter I hope to have shown the processes through which the drag queen is able to identify with the voice of the Other, and ultimately themselves. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, "the analysand will look to the analyst as the ultimate mirror, believing that there might finally be an answer to the question 'Who am I?'"<sup>65</sup> With drag queen as analyst the ultimate mirror is erected; yet, rather than asking "Who am I?" the drag queen says "this is who I am". With each new performance, the drag queen analysand-cum-analyst creates a mirror image for themselves with which they can identify, amassed in the *Gestalt* of their drag persona. And like Lacan's own mirror stage, this Ideal-I provides a protection, an armour, a confidence that follows them and constitutes their selves: in assimilating the fantasies of the Imaginary, they find protection in the real. And with each performance, with each lip-sync, these performers enact a reconstitution, a re-laying of the Other into the self, in a process of constantly becoming queen.

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<sup>65</sup> Deborah Luepnitz, "Beyond the Phallus: Lacan and Feminism", in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 225.

## Chapter 4

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### Constructing a Composite Voice

*The word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own*

~ Mikhail Bakhtin<sup>1</sup>

*Being an artist isn't easy when the question is not of loving your own image, but of re-creating the self through deliberate acts of alienation*

~ Orlan<sup>2</sup>

#### *IV.i – Introduction*

When a drag queen lip-syncs, I have argued that she embodies the voice of an Other; through intermodal mirrors of identification, the drag queen hears a voice and makes it her own. While this is undoubtedly true, and the voice does to a certain extent belong to the performing queen, what happens to the singer's original identity? Does Rodent, in lip-syncing "Spectrum", efface the identity of Florence Welch? While it's possible that an audience may not know the song – though, admittedly, unlikely – and while I would argue that Rodent's identity does take centre stage, it would be reductive to suggest that Welch's identity is utterly usurped. Moreover, it's nigh-on impossible to imagine a drag queen lip-syncing to, say, Judy Garland, Madonna, or Lady Gaga without the queer icons' presence being felt somewhere in the performance. It is clear that identity and identification

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<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), p. 294.

<sup>2</sup> Orlan, quoted in Elizabeth Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and Its Discontents* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 412.

is more complex than simply identifying with the voice, though this is an important first step, and that there are layers of identification and horizons of knowledge that will affect both the reading of any performance and the feeling of performing. Nowhere are such layers more evident than in the prevalent practice amongst drag queens of “edits”.

In its most simple definition, “edits” are tracks, constructed by the performer, that feature multiple voices. There are, however, a hugely abundant variety of edits and editing styles. In one instance, an edit may take a single song as its base structure, and insert other pieces of audio that support a central theme: for example, one might take Beyoncé’s “Run the World (Girls)”, a song clearly foregrounding female empowerment, and insert audio footage from a plethora of sources (a clip of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie speaking, a sharp comeback from *Sex and the City*’s Samantha Jones, and perhaps an interview soundbite of Madonna, exhibiting a combination of sources around a theme, but of disparate cultural references). In another, one may take several songs of the same theme, perhaps “That’s Me” from the movie *Death Becomes Her*, “Perfect Isn’t Easy” from *Oliver and Company*, and “Gorgeous” from *The Apple Tree*, and weave them together to create a track that speaks to the performer’s perfection.<sup>3</sup> And one might weave these songs together with audio found from any number of disparate sources, or indeed a drag queen may make a track out of any number of songs and any number of audio pieces. One drag queen, with whom this editing process is synonymous, is the legendary Lypsinka, who, in the 1980s, made tracks of astonishing complexity. Lypsinka included scores of references, strings of witty one-liners from the stars of Hollywood’s Golden Age, by standing onstage and picking up a mimed telephone each time it rang. Every time she picks up the imaginary receiver, another Greta Garbo or Joan Crawford quip comes out of her mouth, answering an unknown speaker, and exhibiting a synchrony that is truly astounding. This trick, using a phone call to break up the track’s flow and insert another voice, is now a favourite of

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<sup>3</sup> A performance in fact already perfected by global drag queen, Dinah Lux.

drag queens, leading world-famous drag queen Trixie Mattel to joke: “drag queens love to answer fake phones onstage”.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, each of my interlocutors performs such edits – in fact, almost every queen I’ve met performs them. Rodent’s edits exhibit an extreme cultural diversity: one performance, for example, begins with Lady Macbeth’s “come, you spirits / that tend on mortal thoughts” and moves into Lady Gaga’s “Aura”; another includes a track from punk duo The Dresden Dolls interspersed with interview clips of Sylvia Plath. Bougie, in an edit to which I devote the final chapter of this thesis, uses lecture material and audio from medical training videos with Robyn’s “Do It Again” to create a complex narrative about HIV transmission. And ShayShay, in a much more comic display than Bougie or Rodent, interweaves *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, *The Lion King*, Sia’s “Free the Animal”, and MIA’s track “Double Trouble” in a single edit. While these performances all merit attention, here I will focus on two edits by Sue and Ruby, that I refer to as “Boudica” and “Crazy” respectively. What the combination of each of these queen’s edits shows is the broad range of cultural references and of emotional content that edits can evidence.

An edit, therefore, is not a static or easily definable genre, save for the fact that it must always include at least two pieces of audio material, song or otherwise, that don’t typically go together. It’s worth mentioning that “edit” is my own coinage. There doesn’t seem to be a unique term that queens use for these sorts of performance, most often saying generic things like “I made a new track”. “Edit” as a verb does come up frequently though, with ShayShay, for example, speaking of “editing a track”, and Bougie saying that she doesn’t remember spending “very much time editing” one of hers. I choose “edit” here mainly because, though “an edit” as a noun suggests a completed object, “edit” foregrounds the *editing* process, the fact that there is not only something that has changed, but also something that has undergone a process of edit, arrangement, and indeed composition on the part of the queen. An edit, to my mind, suggests a track that had a

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<sup>4</sup> WOWPresents, “UNHhhh Ep 67: ‘The Last Random’ w/ Trixie Mattel & Katya Zamolodchikova” (November 2017) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjGXsi-wlSY> (accessed on: 25<sup>th</sup> of November 2017).

previous existence and now takes on another, and one that, just as it was edited, could be edited again. Moreover, “to edit” inheres a sense of looking over with fresh eyes, perhaps drawing out different themes, indeed perhaps looked over by an editor, drawing new subjectivities into the mix. And, editing also conjures an idea of rearranging, moving parts around, segmenting into blocks, finding new pathways between ideas. All of these shades of “edit” are important for these performances.

I will begin by exploring the idea of the lip-sync edit further, comparing them to similar practices of sampling and mash-ups, but arguing that their uniqueness qualifies them as a type of compositional bricolage. Following this, I will begin my analysis of two tracks by Sue and Ruby respectively: “Boudica” and “Crazy”. Sue’s “Boudica” combines Boudica, Mary Beard, and Beyoncé into an empowering retelling of Boudica’s story, offering an alternative history, and a call for female empowerment. Ruby’s “Crazy”, on the other hand, rather than exploring a linear narrative, presents a kaleidoscopic array of voices, with multiple references to “craziness” from film, television, music, and biography in a performance that, in Ruby’s words, amounts to a form of “self-portraiture”. Having analysed these two performances, I will then come to my theorisation of the composite voice, a key move for drag lip-sync performance. Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva, I argue that these edits exhibit a type of voice that is intensely intertextual on multiple levels; and yet, though these edits include multiple voices, they combine as one in performance to create the voice of the performing queen. This combination, however, does not efface or nullify the original contexts of its component voices, but creates a web of intertext and residual identities that are essential for a rich understanding of the performance. The fact that the queen identifies with them as one voice, however, makes of them, as I discuss in the previous chapter, an Imaginary entity, greater than the sum of its own parts, a *Gestalt* whole. Such a theorisation not only offers powerful new ways of rethinking the voice, but also has important repercussions for the performing queen.

#### IV.ii – Lip-Sync Edits: Influence and Departure

In many ways, these edits exhibit an intertextuality that bears resemblance to two other musical practices: those of sampling and mash-ups. Edits and sampling do indeed seem to be two sides of the same coin. Sampling, while itself similar to other forms of musical quotation, is a technique specifically mastered by hip hop artists, that began with the stringing together of different musical breaks in disco tracks, and has since become a highly attuned compositional technique.<sup>5</sup> In sampling, quotations from other tracks are embedded within the musical fabric of the piece in a variety of ways: one might sample specific works for their meaning, for example N.W.A.'s "Fuck Tha Police"; one may isolate a specific riff and sample that, for example the drum riff that opens The Incredible Bongo Band's "Apache"; or one may sample a sound for its unique textural quality, as is the case in the now perennially sampled orchestral hit, used in hip hop classics like Afrika Bambaataa's "Planet Rock" and sampled originally by Peter Vogel from, of all places, Stravinsky's *Firebird*. There are obvious parallels with lip-sync edits. Drag queens certainly use audio from recognisable sources for their semantic content, and they also quote and use tracks that link their edits to a certain lineage and evoke a specific mood. However, an edit is most often comprised only of reworked content and imparts no new musical material. Similarly, I have never come across a drag queen isolating specific riffs or constructing new vertical musical textures out of pre-existing material; whereas sampling's craft shows itself most intricately in densely layered vertical textures, lip-syncing edits work much more horizontally. To be sure, there are similarities, but sampling and edits are by no means the same.

Perhaps a closer sibling is the musical mash-up, which, like lip-syncing, often imparts no new musical material. Indeed, Ragnhild Hanssen-Brøvig and Paul Harkins write of mash-ups that they exhibit "a particular kind of technical virtuosity and set of listening skills, rather than [...] the creation

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<sup>5</sup> Justin Williams, "Intertextuality, Sampling, and Copyright", in *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, ed. Justin Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 206.

of something entirely original”.<sup>6</sup> A mash-up, rather, is a track in which two or more songs are “mashed” together. Hanssen-Brøvig and Harkins claim that the success of a mash-up depends on the “musical congruity and contextual incongruity between juxtaposed samples”; in other words, the two tracks or samples that are placed next to one another work musically, but jostle thematically or culturally.<sup>7</sup> Contextual jostling is often a feature of edits, with, as I have mentioned above, their wide variety of cultural references. Moreover, Hanssen-Brøvig and Harkins mention that mash-ups foreground “the irony, empowerment, and re-appropriation of contemporary culture”, which is a decided feature of lip-sync edits. Sue, for example, told me that “drag and lip-syncing is so much about feeding pop culture back to people”, but, rather than just presenting popular culture back to the audience, drag queens “parcel up what’s happening in popular culture and feed it to the gay scene and are like, ‘look at this, isn’t it mad and isn’t it funny and ridiculous’”. In this way, there is a clear connection between mash-ups and lip-sync edits in the way they use material. However, unlike mash-ups, the contextual incongruity in edits is often matched by a musical incongruity. In edits, the sound-world can change drastically, and such changes are used narratively, often relishing juxtaposition. Whereas mash-ups pride themselves on being able to take two tracks and seamlessly make one musical work, lip-syncing edits don’t strive for the same goal.

To carry the metaphysical “work” concept of these musical forms further, Christopher Bartel has sought to understand what formal integrity such mash-ups hold. Bartel claims that mash-ups “are musical works, and they are also instances of the works that constitute their source materials”.<sup>8</sup> Bartel states, and I agree, that mash-ups are musical works in their own rights, but also that the presence of quotation in them similarly instantiates the quoted musical works: in other words, a mash-up like Mark Vidler’s “Rapture Riders” which combines Blondie’s “Rapture” with the Doors’ “Riders on the Storm” is a musical work in its own right whilst also offering instantiations of both

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<sup>6</sup> Ragnhild Hanssen-Brøvig & Paul Harkins, “Contextual Incongruity and Musical Congruity: The Aesthetics and Mash-Ups”, in *Popular Music*, Volume 31, Number 1 (January 2012), p. 87.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 90.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Bartel, “The Metaphysics of Mash-Ups”, in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 73, Number 3 (Summer 2015), p. 298.

Blondie's and the Doors' original tracks. In many ways, this is a useful distinction for lip-sync edits, for surely the power of using, for example, Lady Macbeth's speech next to Lady Gaga's "Aura" as Rodent does is predicated on the fact that the audience understands these two source materials to be different (better still if they understand the references fully) and therefore they must present themselves as instantiations beyond simply parts of the edit. In this way, Bartel's metaphysical discussion of mash-ups allows for the presence of multiple identities, times and places in edits which will be crucial throughout this chapter.

Yet, I am not convinced that one can relate Bartel's first assertion to lip-sync edits: namely, I am not convinced that edits constitute musical works on a sonic level alone. These edits, when listened to as tracks, do make a certain degree of sense, but they are in no way as powerful as when they are experienced in performance. Again, while I will come to Sue's performance in detail in a moment, Sue mentioned the importance of having the lip-syncing drag queen onstage, rather than listening to her performance as a solely sonic track. She said:

If I wasn't onstage being ridiculous you wouldn't get the "isn't it ridiculous" bit, you'd get "I've put this track together and it's quite earnest and it's sort of a documentary made out of found footage", some sort of Adam Curtis documentary, but then when I'm there and when I'm lip-syncing it just ties it back to queerness and "isn't this all silly". It just like subverts it and sort of questions it.

The drag queen adds to Hanssen-Brøvig and Harkin's essential incongruity and irony and has the power to spin potentially quite sincere information in an entertaining way. Indeed, speaking of her "Boudica" performance which I will move onto in the next section, Sue stated:

Actually, the first time I did the Boudica one as a longer piece it ended actually relatively preachy, you know, sort of spelling out "why are women [reduced to] bare bodies? Isn't it really bad? It's not fair!" and I was like: that's the danger of me treating it as a finished piece in itself and not a bit of cabaret. It's about me doing a performance onstage, so it [in its longer form] ends up being way [too] earnest.

Here Sue cautions herself for ever conceiving of her edits as “a finished piece in itself”, recognising the layers of interpretation that are generated by her performing body being present onstage. Therefore, these edits, while similar to mash-ups, do not constitute metaphysical works in their own right as sonic documents. These edits exist as performances, and their full frame of reference can only be understood within performance.

While edits are certainly similar, therefore, to sampling and mash-ups, they have important divergences: they are closed musical objects only to the extent that they last a determined amount of time, but are marked with layers of intertext and need to be enlivened through performance, and while they exhibit a beginning and an end, their boundedness as musical performances does not work on a solely sonic level; moreover, the means by which these drag queens construct their edits, while skilful, to be sure, are not highly trained, but sit closer to the side of amateur music production (though, of course, there are exceptions); and, not only do the sources of their references exhibit an incongruity and juxtaposition, but often their musical styles also.

It is for these reasons that, though they bear strong resemblance to practices both of sampling and mash-ups, edits can helpfully be considered as a process of bricolage. Bricolage – first theorised by Claude Lévi-Strauss but later expanded upon by other scholars, notably Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, to whom I shall return in my discussion of Ruby – is a mode of production that informs my understanding of lip-sync edits considerably. First, I am interested by the fact that the bricoleur privileges “the process, performance, and language over the object”.<sup>9</sup> Such a focus on, in this case, performance certainly lends itself to lip-sync edits, rather than considering the edit an object in and of itself.

Second, the bricoleur, whilst undoubtedly skilful, is typically a “do-it-yourself person”, for whom the “means for achieving goals [...] are in some relevant respect circuitous or indirect”.<sup>10</sup> Here,

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<sup>9</sup> Anna Dezeuze, “Assemblage, Bricolage, and the Practice of Everyday Life”, in *Art Journal*, Volume 67, Number 1 (Spring 2008). p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Hatton, “Lévi-Strauss’s ‘Bricolage’ and Theorizing Teacher’s Work”, in *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, Volume 20, Number 2 (June 1989), p. 75.

I in no way wish to diminish the skill these queens have in producing engaging and entertaining pieces of theatre, but they certainly make do with the editing software and skills they have at their disposal. Sue, for example, says:

I can make a track. [...] I am not a DJ, so I can't really do any very good mixing, which is fine for me. That's not really what performances are. They're theatrical, so you can cover all manner of sins with a sort of kooky little soundscape or a little explosion.

Here Sue notes outright that her skill set is adequate, but not exceedingly skilled. Her mention of “a little explosion” is worth more attention. In these edits, in order to insert another voice, or switch tracks, queens will often insert the sound of small explosion, or a record scratch (a favourite in Ruby’s “Crazy”), much like Lypsinka’s telephone interjections some decades ago. When listening to the edits without the performance, these moments sound a little hackneyed, obvious interjections into the fabric of the track, wrenching the edit from one place to another; however, in performance, with a declamatory movement or a sudden change of mood, the moments are wonderfully effective. In these edits, one doesn’t find the same level of musical editing as one might find in the masterful tapestries of samples created in hip hop tracks, but this doesn’t particularly matter. To be sure, certain queens, such as Rodent, have undertaken considerable training to better equip themselves, but often the skill set is used more for other musical endeavours, rather than for edits. Indeed, having sat in with Rodent as they made an edit for a gig the very next day, the edit included references as diverse as “Casta diva” from Bellini’s *Norma* and “Nancy Boy” by punk band Placebo, connected with record scratches and Loony-Tunes-style whizzes and bells, all completed (and rehearsed!) within a few hours. Ripping audio from YouTube and quickly editing it in programmes such as Audacity or Garageband, these edits are extremely compelling, but certainly performed by a bricoleur rather than an engineer. They are processes of “trial and error, the oblique integration of disparate parts”, that come to life in performance.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher Johnson, “Bricoleur and Bricolage: From Metaphor to Universal Concept”, in *Paragraph*, Volume 35, Number 3 (November 2012), p., 359.

And third, “the elements of *bricolage* are ‘heterogeneous’, a rather neutral translation of the French term *heteroclite*, which carries the stronger sense of disparate, ill-assorted, sundry, etc.” [italics in original].<sup>12</sup> This, clearly, marries well with lip-sync edits. These edits, as I have shown, use an incredibly vast array of cultural and musical references. Amongst my five interlocutors alone, I can cite references to: *The Lord of the Rings*; Bellini; Shakespeare; My Chemical Romance; Theresa May; *The Lion King*; Caryl Churchill; and the extremely lengthy side-effects of the anti-smoking medication, Chantix. These references, as Christopher Johnson states in the quotation above, are not only heterogeneous, but excessively so: they are “disparate, ill-assorted, sundry”. These queens pull from all over, often chancing upon extremely niche audio material whilst searching YouTube. But, alongside the niche, there is the obviously recognisable, of say Britney in Ruby’s “Crazy” or Beyoncé in Sue’s “Boudica”.

One mustn’t forget that in combining these disparate materials, these queens are also dissecting and recombining a broad variety of different voices. While I will discuss my full theorisation of the voice in lip-sync edits in the final section of this chapter, here it is worth noting the decidedly rhizophonic manipulation of such voices and its interaction with the process of bricolage. Here, following Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut, “rhizophonia describes the fundamentally fragmented yet proliferative condition of sound reproduction and recording, where sounds and bodies are constantly dislocated, relocated, and co-located in temporary and aural configurations”.<sup>13</sup> Dismissing “schizophonia” as a needlessly tautological term, Stanyek and Piekut’s coinage of rhizophonia is particularly useful here. The audio material used in these edits is ripped – both in the technical and metaphorical sense – from its original recording context and spliced and recombined to new and potentially dichotomous ends. Sound is, as they say, dislocated, relocated, and co-located in these edits, with references juxtaposed and enlivened by the performing queen. While I will speak of the importance of the queen’s presence later, and the theoretical implications

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 359.

<sup>13</sup> Jason Stanyek & Benjamin Piekut, “Deadness: Technologies of the Intermundane”, p. 19.

of combining so many voices in one body, here I find strong parallels between rhizophonia's inherent proliferative nature and bricolage's *heteroclite* nature: sound is divorced from sources, repurposed, refashioned, and placed in conversation with pieces of audio from entirely separate cultural situations. The broad array of sources, their jostling, and their rhizophonic manipulation, lead me to consider these lip-sync edits through the lens of bricolage.

There is also an important political element of bricolage that supports its association with drag lip-sync edits. In one sense, bricolage decentres the human, in that, as Christopher Johnson states, "*bricoleur* as human agent is secondary to *bricolage*" [italics in original].<sup>14</sup> Such an understanding sees the human agent as a part of a broader assemblage, an idea that is constitutive of the "rhizo" of rhizophonia, referencing Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome. Here, however, I am interested in another sense, in that bricolage in some way works against capitalist dicta. If bricolage concerns itself with the materials one has at hand, it is only a matter of time, especially under capitalism, that one lands upon materials belonging to someone else. Indeed, Sue found this out the hard way when her performance was removed from YouTube for violating copyright laws. Her use of Beyoncé in "Boudica" seemingly did not go unnoticed:

Beyoncé tore it down – as in like Sony Music. But I like to think it was personally Beyoncé, she's always been threatened by me. Anyway, they took it down because it had a Beyoncé track in it. And it's like: how do they do that? How? It wasn't even, like... "Beyoncé" wasn't in the title. Do they actually have people watching every video?

While Sue's performance was removed from YouTube – though, thankfully, it remains up on her personal Facebook page – the fact that it was seen as a crime, whether in threatening Beyoncé's talents or as a copyright infringement, is important. For the bricoleur, all materials are up for grabs, and their use is not predetermined.

Lip-sync edits can therefore helpfully be considered a process of bricolage, combining disparate elements into a single performance. Now, I will turn to these performances. I will begin

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<sup>14</sup> Christopher Johnson, "Bricoleur and Bricolage", p. 360.

with Sue’s “Boudica”, analysing the performance and exploring both her compositional technique and the meaning behind her combination of these specific voices. I will then offer a similar analysis of Ruby’s “Crazy”, a performance that has a strikingly different compositional tack, and a much more personal meaning. Having analysed these performances, I will come to a theorisation of the composite voice as I see it in lip-sync edits, arguing for the creation of an Imaginary voice out of a broad variety of voices, voices that are not completely effaced of their past, but layer into a rich web.

#### IV.iii – “Boudica”



Fig. 18: Sue performing “Boudica”

“It reminds me of doing acid in Kilkenny, in a caravan with Graham Norton”, said John Sizzle – drag emcee extraordinaire – in praise of Sue’s “Boudica” when she performed it at The Glory for the finale of their lip-sync competition *LIPSYNC1000*. A peculiar compliment, though perhaps with some merit. In this routine, Sue begins as Boudica’s apocryphal burial mound on Hampstead Heath, flanked by shirtless men in Ancient Roman pteruges, transfigures into the newly resurrected Boudica, briefly adopts the voice of Mary Beard, before slaughtering the two men whilst lip-syncing to a Beyoncé song bedecked in fetish-wear and a tartan cape. Suddenly Sizzle’s comments seem more

understandable. This hallucination is, however, revelatory, and Sue's "Boudica" presents a considered critique of a phallogentric historiography, noting its perennial perniciousness, a fact that is, in Sue's words "true of Boudica maybe more than anyone, because she is a real person but who's written about as myth"; against this, Sue offers a radical rewriting of such histories in which women come out on top. This is a common feature of Sue's performances, which are "usually about a historical character – someone from classic Hollywood, or a Weimar cabaret girl, or Elizabeth I – [and seek to] find the alternative story". In this routine, Sue draws connections between Boudica, both mythical and historical, Mary Beard, and Beyoncé, weaving these voices and histories together in order to speak a powerful critique of female representation. In this section, I'll first outline "Boudica" in more detail, describing the edit thoroughly; I'll then move on to analysing the use of each component part, noting the performance's compositional effect and its meaning, through both my own and Sue's views.

Sue's routine can helpfully be compartmentalised into four sections: Prologue, Section 1, Section 2, and Section 3. The Prologue begins with a swirl of noise, moving through a crescendo till one of Sue's characteristic "little explosions" cuts into the track. Sue is standing onstage between the shirtless men, her body shrouded in a hessian blanket and her face obscured by a mask that is covered in white flowers, but, at the explosion, a light illuminates her face from within the mask: Sue is Boudica's burial mound. Then follows a new soundscape, a quiet murmur of strings and bagpipes in 4/4, punctuated by a bass drum on the strong beats. Over this, a woman's voice emerges, and declares:

There is an artificial mound on Hampstead Heath, surrounded by a ring of trees, planted there... why? Legend has it a queen is buried there and that on a full moon she will rise once more to seek the vengeance that was denied to her. To seek the men who wrote her history. For the rape of her daughters. For the theft of her land. For the doggers, the men rutting on her mound, pushing down an unwritten history. Her name: Boudica.

Throughout this speech, the music swells, reaching a battle march before cutting out just as the queen's name is announced. This Prologue, written by Sue and voiced by her actor friend, evokes, in Sue's words "Cate Blanchett at the start of *Lord of the Rings*", and it certainly does have that effect, with the actor's ethereal, elvish voice.

From here begins Section 1. With the Prologue ended, a new musical source enters with the easily recognisable opening piano riff of Evanescence's appropriately titled "Bring Me to Life". The two men remove the mask for Sue as she lip-syncs the opening verse of the song, beginning with the words "how can you see into my eyes, like open doors?" sung by female lead vocalist Amy Lee. The men then pull back the hessian throw that is covering Sue to reveal her mostly naked body, save for underwear, a fetish harness, and a tartan cape attached to her harness and her wrists. The men return to their positions beside Sue as she lip-syncs the rest of the verse, up until the drop.

Just as the audience prepares for the infamous drop, where Paul McCoy from the band 12 Stones enters, Sue denies them the satisfaction, and, with a characteristic drag record scratch, ends the Evanescence song as Mary Beard's voice enters saying "no, no, no": here begins Section 2. Section 2 is comprised of another speech, actually a short clip from one of Mary Beard's lectures that Beard recorded for Sue following a short email correspondence between the two of them. The speech is as follows:

No, no, no, you find it's the men who were telling the stories about either women being in charge or women running communities on their own, like the Amazons, and why they're telling them is not out of any kind of sense of sneaking admiration for that, they're telling them either because it's completely and utterly ridiculous or it's something to be absolute terrified about [echo to fade].

Sue lip-syncs this section directly to the audience, moving around the stage, gesticulating to the audience, in a moment of declamation that differs entirely from the stylised opening Prologue and the rock singing of Section 1.

Section 2 ends with Beard's voice fading away as the bagpipes, strings, and drums from the Prologue return, only to cut out suddenly and leave Beard's voice, no longer an echo but an assertion, saying: "absolutely terrified about". Here begins Section 3, which is a short clip of Beyoncé's song "Don't Hurt Yourself". Beyoncé's song, a track admonishing her husband for his infidelity that is marked by its emphatically empowered female protagonist, includes the lines: "This is your final warning / You know I give you life / If you try this shit again / You gon' lose your wife". During this section, Sue turns to her denuded men, whom she has up until this point neglected. First, she slits the throat of the man on her left, producing a long red piece of fabric seemingly out of his neck; second, she kisses the man on her right, and as she pulls away another red ribbon is drawn from his mouth with her teeth as he falls to the floor. The track then falters on the line "Tonight I'm fucking up all your shit boy", and the music swirls again in a way similar to the beginning, before cutting suddenly, leaving Sue standing stoic centre stage.

Compositionally, "Boudica" works linearly, with blocks of musical material juxtaposed. Though the piece is bookended by the same sort of sonic swirling, and a thread is woven through the piece by the brief reappearance of the Prologue's underscoring at the end of Section 2, the different musical sources are placed next to one another and further a linear narrative. This narrative sees Boudica rise from her burial spot, realise the wrongs done to her, and slaughter the men who shamed her. But, is this as simple as a Boudica story re-told? Is Sue impersonating Boudica at this moment? I would argue not. Though impersonation certainly figures into it, Boudica, rather, is metonymic of phallogentric bias, a bias and inequality that Sue charts from Boudica through Beard to Beyoncé. Indeed, though Sue doesn't say it in so many words, she does suggest such a metonymic relationship when she told me that "Boudica was Mary Beard and Beyoncé and the real Boudica". This distinction between the real Boudica and the Boudica of performance, presumably the mythic Boudica Sue mentions above, marks the Boudica in performance as a symbolic Boudica, indeed, a metonym for women who have been wronged by phallogentrism, whether, as the Prologue states, through injured crimes or historiographic biases.

What, then, is the connection between Boudica, Mary Beard, and Beyoncé? Sue explained the connection between Boudica and Mary Beard as follows:

Mary Beard was like, you know, she actually went through a lot of that trolling stuff. So, she was just like a woman in a public position and suddenly because of the trolling that she got we became aware “oh you know women aren’t actually in this position, this is a male thing” because now that she is everyone has really reacted. So, I just thought, right, woman in a sort of public position is turned into her body: Boudica in a public position turned into her fictional body. So, I thought there was some parallels there.

There are two key strands to highlight here. The first is that both Boudica and Beard are women with a considerable degree of success. Boudica, as Sue tells me, a queen who was owed the land her husband had left her, and when it was not given to her, burned it to the ground; Beard, an eminent Classics scholar, Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire, Fellow of the British Academy, and Professor at the University of Cambridge. The second strand runs from the first: that their preminent position in society cannot go unnoticed because they are women, and as such they are subjected to vilification. Not only did Boudica have her land robbed, but Sue tells me that some accounts include Boudica being raped. Sue draws a connection between this sexual abuse and the mythic idea of Boudica being particularly beautiful, because “of course she’s beautiful”. This highly sexualised account of Boudica seems to act in order to negate her power, reducing her to a sexualised object, or rather “turned into her fictional body” as Sue says. Similarly, Beard was bombarded with online “trolls” in an onslaught of vitriolic messages, featuring, Beard writes, a “predictable menu of rape, bombing, murder, and so forth”.<sup>15</sup> As with Boudica, Beard’s power must be destroyed through sexual violence. In placing these two examples in tandem, Sue evidences that the retaliation to female power with female-directed sexual abuse is horrendously timeless. In this

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<sup>15</sup> Mary Beard, quoted in Rebecca Mead, “The Troll Slayer: A Cambridge Classicist Takes on Her Sexist Detractors”, on *The New Yorker* (August 2014) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/01/troll-slayer> (accessed on: 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2020).

way, it's reductive to say that Sue *is* Boudica in the performance in a simple act of impersonation, rather she layers Boudica and Beard in order to create a more powerful narrative.

Sue also sees a further connection with Beyoncé, "Don't Hurt Yourself" being, as Sue tells me, "a very aggressive song about a woman scorned". As such, Sue draws another line to Beyoncé and the mistreatment of women by men. And, though Sue doesn't mention it herself, there is a potential connection with Evanescence's Amy Lee. While the song is most obviously used in "Boudica" for its helpful semantic content in making obvious Boudica's resurrection – "Bring Me to Life" – the inclusion of the male singer on the track is noteworthy. Paul McCoy is not part of Evanescence, but rather of 12 Stones, and it has been speculated that his presence on the track was tactical in an attempt to get the song more airtime, it being Evanescence's debut single and reflecting the difficulty that female-fronted bands can face.<sup>16</sup> While this isn't directly referenced by Sue, and has not been officially substantiated, it can only strengthen Sue's point that such an accidental parallel might form with the track.

"Boudica" therefore weaves together Beard, Beyoncé, Boudica, and Amy Lee, joining generations of artists, academics, and queens – both monarchical and drag – to evidence the wrongs that women endure under a phallogocentric society. And indeed, Sue seeks vengeance, killing the two mute and overtly sexualised shirtless men – in her words, "then I just murder the boys. The static abs die". In many ways, the performance is wonderfully empowering, stitching together the voices of powerful women and embodying them as one. One potential issue arises, though; I mention above that Sue believes her presence onstage to be essential, as "it ties it back to queerness and 'isn't this all silly'", undercutting the seriousness with humour, for, by Sue's own admission, though she's "definitely talked about it as though it's a big theoretical work, it was a silly little cabaret, with some pretty boys and I pranced around to Beyoncé". Is this a silly little cabaret, though? A

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<sup>16</sup> Anonymous, "Bring Me To Life" on *Songfacts* (2020).  
<https://www.songfacts.com/facts/evanescence/bring-me-to-life> (accessed on: 8<sup>th</sup> of June 2020).

hallucinogenic acid-trip with Graham Norton, perhaps, but a silly little cabaret, I'm not sure. Indeed, Sue is aware of this, she tells me:

I guess it's a dangerous thing: if you're going to be a drag queen, you know, you don't want to play Elizabeth I, one of the few women in history who really became more famous than any man in history, and really achieved a lot in that way, you don't make her a silly, silly billy, do you? You don't want to reduce all the women of history.

Indeed, one doesn't want to reduce the great women of history to "silly, silly billies", but I don't believe that Sue does in this. Sue's statement is lacquered undoubtedly in her own charming self-deprecation, and it certainly isn't a silly little cabaret, but its enjoyment as an entertaining piece of theatre is important. If Sue sees drag as a way of parcelling up culture and feeding it back to the audience, then "Boudica" is a brilliant way of showing the truly vile treatment of women throughout history and endeavouring to add an alternative history to that. It joins the voices of Boudica, Beyoncé, Beard and Lee not to mock them further, but to channel their energy into her performance.

This final point will be increasingly important in the penultimate section of this chapter, but first I will analyse Ruby's "Crazy". If "Boudica" sought to offer an alternative history and speak to an endemic issue in society, "Crazy" offers a much more personal account of mental health and trauma that is similarly presented in an entertaining way. Moreover, whilst exhibiting many of the same themes and techniques as "Boudica", "Crazy" diverges as an edit in important ways.

#### IV.iv – “Crazy”



Fig. 19: Ruby performing at The Royal Tease

In contrast to the linear narrative of Sue’s “Boudica”, Ruby’s “Crazy” exhibits a less narratively teleological edit. Rather than thinking in terms of chronological progression, Ruby’s performance is much more kaleidoscopic, exploring a motif from different angles with a rapidly shifting lens. Indeed, she tells me that she seeks “to put conceptual ideas into [her edits] and try and have a story running throughout, even if other people don’t find the story”. The performances have a thread and a structure, to be sure, but these are not so easily demarcated as in “Boudica”; rather, Ruby plumbs a specific idea, exploring and embodying it in manifold ways, the topic of this performance, unsurprisingly, being craziness and insanity. Such a formal imagining is fitting, given Ruby’s assertion that her “acts tend to be autobiographical”, and that they “explore the ideas of blurring portraiture and self-portraiture and what can constitute as either or both or neither”. In conceiving of her performances as ambiguous acts of self-portraiture, I contend that Ruby’s kaleidoscopic approach to editing is an apposite compositional approach. Rather than suggest that the self could be accurately depicted as a single, authoritative, linear narrative, Ruby surmises the self as contingent,

manifold, and quotational. Ruby's "Crazy" exhibits a decidedly postmodern idea of the self, a contested self that she diffracts through performance, an act that at once presents the potentialities of self, whilst contradictorily cohering it as a single self within performance. In this section, I will explore these ideas further, first by outlining the unique composition of "Crazy", and then exploring what this may mean in terms of Ruby's self-presentation. Given the subject matter and formal style, I will ultimately settle on a Deleuzo-Guattarian reading of this performance, understanding it and its compositional technique as examples of bricolage and schizophrenia.

For a performance that explores some relatively dark subject matter, "Crazy" begins in an unexpectedly twee way, with Carly Rae Jepsen's "Call Me Maybe". This song has become something of guilty pleasure, Ruby tells me, after it skyrocketed to success in 2011, its saccharine all-American-girl-next-door sweetness heard in gay bars to this day. The juxtaposition of Jepsen's honeyed voice and demeanour and Ruby's punky aesthetic is purposeful, intending to put the audience on the backfoot ("it opens with Carly Rae Jepsen, and everyone in the room goes: 'what!?'", Ruby tells me). In the lead into the chorus, however, on the line "where d'you think you're going, baby?", the track sours and Ruby distorts the voice into a demonic growl. The track then oscillates between Jepsen's original voice and its demonic variation, Ruby's face contorting as it does. Soon the track fractures entirely, with record scratches introducing repeats of the word "crazy".

With Jepsen gone, the next voice the audience hears is from the 2006 crime thriller *The Black Dahlia*, a fictionalised retelling of the infamous 1947 murder of Elizabeth Short. The voice eerily asks "who made, what made, who crazy?" before cutting dramatically into the chorus of Britney Spears's 1999 "Crazy". As Spears prepares to sing "crazy" in the chorus, Gnarl Barkley's voice interjects with the single word "crazy" from his 2006 single "Crazy", before returning to Britney.

After the chorus of Britney Spears is over, there is then an extended dialogue taken from Stephen Daldry's movie *The Hours*, in which Virginia Woolf – played by Nicole Kidman – argues with her husband, Leonard, telling him "that I wrestle alone in the dark, in the deep dark, and only I can know, only I can understand my own condition". As Kidman's voice fades away, the introduction of

Björk's "Crystalline" fades in, with the drop punctuating the end of the Woolf dialogue. Björk's track, with its motoric intensity and jagged rhythms, reflects accurately a crazed mentality, with Ruby throwing herself about the stage in jerking paroxysms. "Crystalline" suddenly cuts and Kathy Bates's readily recognisable voice enters with her monologue from *The Misery* as she approaches the bedbound author, Paul, with a sledgehammer, explaining how she has to break his legs so that he can't escape.

As Paul screams and the sledgehammer drops, the crunch the audience hears is not metal meeting bone, but the drop of Muse's song "Hysteria". Here follows a more musically integrated final section, with Muse's track being used as an instrumental backdrop to several filmic quotations. Interjected between the sung words of Muse's song, the audience first hears a quotation from *Pulp Fiction* – "if any of you fucking bitches move I'm gonna execute every mother fucking last one of ya!" – followed by Angelina Jolie in *Girl, Interrupted* warning a supercilious conservative mother not to "point your fucking finger at crazy people". Then enters the only extended male voice in the track (save for Gnarl Barkley's single exclamation of "crazy") with Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*, threatening to "bash [Wendy's] brains in", and finally ending with Nancy from the 1990s cult witchcraft movie *The Craft* screaming in anger. In the last minute, the increased tension generated through the underscoring of Muse's rock track and the intense quotations comes to a head with a giant explosion that ends the routine.

From this whistle-stop summary of the edit, it is clear that Ruby's edit seeks to explore an emotional concept from different angles, rather than present a structured alternative history, as does "Boudica". "Crazy", while a formally cohesive performance, is a patchwork of stitched together narratives, zooming into worlds and exploding out of them. Its approach is, if anything, cubist rather than linear, explorative rather representative. Ruby draws together multiple examples of craziness – almost exclusively female craziness, about which I will speak in greater length shortly – and presents them before the audience, her body a prism through which the concept diffracts around the stage.

Artist/Director	Title
Carly Rae Jepsen	"Call Me Maybe"
Brian de Palma	<i>Black Dahlia</i>
Britney Spears	"Crazy"
Gnarls Barkley	"Crazy"
Stephen Daldry	<i>The Hours</i>
Björk	"Crystalline"
Rob Reiner	<i>Misery</i>
Muse	"Hysteria"
Quentin Tarantino	<i>Pulp Fiction</i>
James Mangold	<i>Girl Interrupted</i>
Stanley Kubrick	<i>The Shining</i>
Andrew Fleming	<i>The Craft</i>

Fig. 20: "Crazy" Materials (in order of appearance)

I am intrigued as to how such kaleidoscopic displays are figured as self-portraits, an understanding that generates a fascinating conception of selfhood, self-realisation and self-alienation. Ruby elaborated on how she understands drag and drag performance as self-portraiture thusly:

I had this realisation that all of the work I was producing was like contemporary-based portraiture, so then I started exploring ideas of what constitutes portraiture or self-portraiture within a contemporary, twenty-first-century idea of the representation of the self. [...] Of course, there's Cindy Sherman and things like that, where they sort of create different people through self-portraiture ending up in portraiture, yet it's this weird sort of divide, yet crossover between the two. So that's kind of where the exploration of trying to find the twin sister I never had and always wanted came from. The curiosity of trying to find another human being within myself, essentially. I'm one of those people who is obsessed, like, one of the reasons I think that I'm obsessed with things like tarot and astrology and things like that is because I'm constantly searching for myself in this weird narcissistic, like, beyond reasoning way, trying to figure myself

out all of the time, and I've started to explore other areas of performance to try and find separate areas of my being. It's said with a Gemini you should expect about six different personalities: I'm trying to find all of them.

Ruby highlights several key points here, all of which are fascinating not only in relation to this performance, but to a conception of lip-syncing and the voice that I come on to in the final section of this chapter. Here, Ruby discusses the desire to explore and present the self, yet, within this she understands the necessary and dichotomous occlusion and creation of the self in its performance. Ruby speaks of the confused relationship between portraiture and self-portraiture, for surely in any act of self-portraiture one must self-alienate to such a degree that what is manifested is potentially indistinguishable from portraiture; yet, through her mention of Cindy Sherman, she also invokes the opposite, about which I speak below. Moreover, she details a self that is not whole or unitary, but one that is multiple (for Ruby, six-parted), and one that is not presented to one's self without work; for Ruby, seemingly these selves are to be found, whereas I would argue they are to be explored, and in such an act created. And, finally, the multiple self, Ruby states, requires a decided self-alienation, not only in its representation as (self-)portraiture, but even intelligibly, Ruby figuring some part of herself as the twin sister she never had. Ruby's understand of her work as self-portraiture coupled with her kaleidoscopic compositional technique creates a captivating performance in which form carries content.

To speak first more closely about Ruby's figuring of her work as self-portraiture, I find her invocation of Cindy Sherman to provide a particularly rich parallel. Sherman is known for her photographic portraits, in which she uses her own body as the subject, inhabiting a different persona in each photo. Of her practice, Sherman states "I don't do self-portraits. [...] I always try to get as far away from myself as possible in the photographs. It could be, though, that it's precisely by doing so that I create a self-portrait, doing these totally crazy things with these characters".<sup>17</sup> There is a way in which, by alienating herself so entirely from the photographs, that an actual self-portrait is

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<sup>17</sup> Cindy Sherman, quoted in Elizabeth Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject*, p. 413.

created. The similarity with drag is evident: in creating a self that is seemingly so diametrically opposed to one's quotidian self, these performers present their own self-actualising creations. Elizabeth Bronfen, in her analysis of Sherman and her subjectivity, outlines the tension between portraiture and self-portraiture eloquently by comparing her photographs as performances in the typical sense and performances in the linguistic speech-act theory sense, in which typically a vocal utterance performs the action it describes; such a definition of performance has then been expanded upon and popularised by Judith Butler's gender theorisation, in which performance creates the subject of its performance.<sup>18</sup> For Bronfen, the implications of such a comparison mean that "the subject of the portrait has been created performatively, in fact, it can only be articulated in performance", and crucially these subjects are "that other, unconscious self who can only emerge in the process of staging the imagination".<sup>19</sup> In other words, Sherman's photographs are performances of subjects that in their performance articulate that subject: it is not a performance of a pre-existing subject, *per se*, but a performance that generates the subject.

I find striking parallels here with the conception of selfhood I take to be axiomatic in the previous chapter, that the identification with the specular and vocal Other generates the self: it is not the reflection of a given self, but rather in the realisation of reflection that selfhood is generated, and then continuously supported through more series of identifications. For Ruby, therefore, "Crazy", and lip-sync performance more generally, is a way of performing onstage and at the same time exploring parts of the self that are articulated through that performance. In her exploration of craziness onstage, Ruby explores parts of herself that are only extant in their specific articulations in performance, coaxed out through her "curiosity", trying to find the people hidden within her. Of course, these cannot be self-portraits in a common-sense notion: Ruby's similarity to murderous Nicholson and maniacal Bates is not actual. Rather, these voices offer ways of articulating potentialities of self, perhaps exaggerating certain proclivities of character, or a cathartic cathexis.

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<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject*, p. 414.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 414 & 417.

The explorations of self in “Crazy” are, emphatically, traumatic, even if the routine is enjoyable to watch. In Ruby’s own words “‘Crazy’ is about the suffering I have with anxiety and paranoia and, sort of like, going through those motions of being, like how that can affect you as a human being, and how sort of crazy – craziness – can sort of take forms in so many different ways”. This is relatively self-evident in both the edit and the performance, with the edit clearly highlighting several different aspects of mental health, from suicidal depression to psychotically impelled violence. As such, I believe “schizophrenia” is a useful model with which to work when considering “Crazy” and edits of this sort more generally.

In the first instance, while schizophrenia has broad psychological definitions and applications, its most quotidian understanding, that of auditory hallucinations, is most closely aligned to paranoid schizophrenia, in which “complete auditory hallucinations” are “present to a marked degree or of a persistent nature”.<sup>20</sup> To be clear, reading “Crazy” through a schizophrenic lens clinically speaking is no way diagnostic, simply thematically helpful. For the inclusion of multiple voices, the sudden changes in manner, presence of multiple characters within one person – after all, onstage it is only Ruby lip-syncing and each of these voices issues from her body – all point to an understanding of the piece as utilising the tropes of paranoid schizophrenia.

In a second sense, however, thinking etymologically, the “splitting” of the “mind” seems more crucial to Ruby’s understanding of lip-syncing in a theoretical sense. If Ruby is seeking to explore different parts of herself, indeed six whole different selves, then surely she takes seriously a certain mental split. Such a split need not inhere a pejorative medical or clinical meaning, however, but if one takes Ruby’s explanation of her practice in conjunction with the thematic content of her work, then a schizophrenic theoretical structure seems fitting. Indeed, I have made recourse throughout this chapter to describe Ruby’s process as one of kaleidoscopic diffraction of the self, a process that is undoubtedly schizophrenic in the basest definition of the term.

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<sup>20</sup> Ming T. Tsuang & George Winokur, “Criteria for Subtyping Schizophrenia: Clinical Differentiation of Hebephrenic and Paranoid Schizophrenia, in *Arch Gen Psychiatry*, Volume 31, Number 1 (1974), p. 45.

This leads to the third way in which schizophrenia is a useful lens through which to analyse Ruby's performance, utilising a schizophrenic theoretical apparatus already propagated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Moving further away from a clinical definition, Deleuze and Guattari employ schizophrenia as a productive paradigm, and a way of figuring desire as process rather than as lack. Brian Massumi helpfully defines it as such:

The "schizophrenia" Deleuze and Guattari embrace is not a pathological condition. For them, the clinical schizophrenic's debilitating detachment from the world is a quelled attempt to engage it in unimagined ways. Schizophrenia as a positive process is inventive connection, expansion rather than withdrawal. Its twoness is a relay to a multiplicity. From one to another (and another...) From one noun or book or author to another (and another...) Not aimlessly. Experimentally. The relay in ideas is only effectively expansive if at every step it is also a relay away from ideas into action. Schizophrenia is the enlargement of life's limits through the pragmatic proliferation of concepts.<sup>21</sup>

Schizophrenia, far from being understood as something negative, is figured as a constant process of production, and critically one of experimental production and "inventive connection". Such an understanding leads Deleuze and Guattari to state that "the schizophrenic is the universal producer. There is no need to distinguish here between producing and its product".<sup>22</sup> This second sentence of theirs is critical. In their understanding, production cannot helpfully be split into producer and product, just as desire cannot helpfully be sated by the acquisition of products; rather, "the 'thisness' of the object produced is carried over into a new act of producing".<sup>23</sup> I find strong parallels here between a schizophrenic ideal of producer-product and the linguistic speech-act theory of performance espoused by Elizabeth Bronfen above. If Cindy Sherman's self-portraits and Ruby's "Crazy" are examples of performances that create the subject of their performance in the process,

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<sup>21</sup> Brian Massumi, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1983), p. 17.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 17.

then such an identity of producer and product in Deleuze and Guattari's schizophrenic apparatus is applicable here.

This theorisation is not merely to note pleasing concurrences between theory and content – a schizophrenic performance performing the theory of schizophrenia – but rather Deleuze and Guattari's schizophrenic production links in with the compositional process Ruby undergoes in lip-sync edits. For, if the schizophrenic is the universal producer, then bricolage is their medium. Similarly citing Lévi-Strauss, Deleuze and Guattari characterise bricolage as:

The possession of a stock of materials or of rules of thumb that are fairly extensive, though more or less a hodgepodge – multiple and at the same time limited; the ability to rearrange fragments continually in new and different patterns or configurations; and as a consequence, an indifference toward the act of producing and toward the product, toward the set of instruments to be used and toward the over-all result to be achieved.<sup>24</sup>

Much of this corroborates Ruby's compositional technique. As I discuss in the beginning of this chapter, while my interlocutors do indeed have the ability to create convincing edits, they operate via "rules of thumb", and by Ruby's own admission the process can be "pretty gratuitous". Moreover, the references she chooses, while all fitting with the theme, do indeed, when placed next to each other as they are in figure 20, appear a hodgepodge. This "ability to rearrange fragments continually in new and different patterns or configurations" is key, however. When I asked how Ruby finds all these pieces of audio, she told me "I just go through films and just take audio off them, I just have files full of bites and I'm just going through like, 'which one can I put here? Which one can I put here?'" Ruby has a veritable database of pithy bites from which to pick, a smorgasbord of isolated audio moments that are brimming with the potential to be placed into new surroundings, rearranged continually. And while I wouldn't argue that this results in an indifference to the product for Ruby, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest of the bricoleur, perhaps here Sue's words are useful: these edits are

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 18.

not performances in their own right, but must be enlivened in performance, and therefore the indifference perhaps can be levelled at the edit as a piece of audio in its own right.

I find the application of schizophrenia as a tripartite theoretical model to be particularly enlightening when analysing “Crazy”. Read from clinical, etymological, and Deleuzo-Guattarian angles, schizophrenia sheds light on the content of the piece, its structure, and its compositional process. Undoubtedly, this analysis can only be enriched by analysing what it means to have so many different voices present in a single body in performance, and what this means for voice theory more generally. While I will discuss this shortly, I would first like to explore briefly a few possible contentions with Ruby’s choice of subject matter, questioning the ethics of a piece, in Ruby’s words, “full of insane women, women unravelling”.

#### *IV.v – Crazy?*

Why perform a track devoted to craziness? Given a performance slot onstage, why choose to fill that time with an exploration of, primarily female, psychosis? Before answering the question, I should say that Ruby is not alone in her exploration of the female mind. When asked what draws them to their tracks, ShayShay, for example, said that in one number they could see the female characters as “losing their sanity”. Similarly, Rodent performs an ode to female depression with their number dedicated to Sylvia Plath, entitled “Sylvia Anachronism”. This number begins with an interview with Sylvia Plath, moving into Julia Davis in *Psychobitches* (a Sky Arts British comedy show in which famous, historic, and fictional women seek psychotherapy) as Sylvia Plath, and ending with “Girl Anachronism” by The Dresden Dolls. Closing with The Dresden Dolls, Rodent lip-syncs about “the scars on my arms” and how “I keep breaking more”. Like “Crazy”, this is an exploration of female breakdown, and, like Woolf in *The Hours*, a breakdown the audience presumably knows will end in suicide.

When I first saw these performances, I felt an uneasiness. There is something unsettling, perhaps even offensive, about two AMAB<sup>25</sup> persons dressing up in drag and singing of female fragility for an audience of, primarily, gay men; in a way it becomes a postmodern mad scene, the drag queen as Lucia. Yet, in re-watching these performances and in speaking with the performers, it is clear that this is not their intention. Both Ruby and Rodent felt deep personal connections with these pieces: as I say, Ruby spoke of her work as “self-portraiture”, finding resounding autobiographical connections with her audio constructions, while Rodent spoke of the relation they felt towards Plath’s figure of, in their words, “the tortured poetess”. Rather than mocking these women (as comedic as moments of Ruby’s performance may be) these performers find solidarity with these women, in no small part, I believe, due to their role as, in my coinage, “fallible mothers”.

I take my theory of fallible mothers as a combination of Lacanian mother figures and Richard Dyer’s theorisation of the gay male fascination with Judy Garland.<sup>26</sup> Dyer contends that Garland was so loved by gay men because she reflected a part of them that no one else did, what he describes as “a special relationship to suffering” that structured much of Garland’s reception amongst the gay community.<sup>27</sup> In her films, Garland was portrayed as an ordinary girl — whether gingham-frocked in *The Wizard of Oz* or a country girl in the big city in *The Clock* — and often played characters lacquered with “the happy gloss of normality in MGM films”.<sup>28</sup> And yet, behind this contented façade, there was a story of difference, one that became markedly apparent following Garland’s first suicide attempt in 1947. Dyer understands the gay male fondness for Garland stemming from this interaction between normality and suffering: Garland was stifled under the imposed happiness and ordinariness of her MGM filmic career, just as gay men are stifled and forced into modes of acceptability and ordinariness by heteronormative society. Where MGM sanctioned Garland’s appearance, so too does heteronormative society oppress gay people. Crucial, however, is that

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<sup>25</sup> Assigned male at birth.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 138.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p. 138.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p. 154.

Garland, once seemingly so dejected that she attempted to take her own life, returned to the stage, fulfilling her promise that “somewhere over the rainbow skies are blue”, and showed a resilience, a need to “come back from something (sufferings and tribulations) and always keeping on coming, no matter what”.<sup>29</sup> She became a symbol of strength and empowerment in the face of adversity, and a role model gay men could relate to.

Alongside Garland, Dyer cites Edith Piaf and Shirley Bassey, but we can helpfully add to the list people like Britney. Similar to Garland, Britney’s public image was expertly constructed as the paradigmatic “girl next door”; however, there are, of course, distinct dissimilarities, not only between Britney’s overt sexuality and Garland’s more innocent portrayal but also between the differences in promotion and public profile that arise from Garland’s 1930s-1950s successes and Britney’s much later career. Just as Garland, plagued by the demons of her success, attempted suicide, so too did Britney suffer an extremely public nervous breakdown in 2007. Yet, like Garland, Britney rose from the ashes. After Britney’s 2007 breakdown, she released her album *Blackout*, including the tracks “Gimme More” and “Piece of Me”, with the lyrics boldly reasserting her sanity and fame with lines such as “it’s Britney, bitch” and “you want a piece of me?” respectively. And, more recently in 2020, Britney Spears has been heralded as a Marxist icon within the queer community after she recently called for the redistribution of wealth on her Instagram grid, leading many to perform lyrical analyses of her songs – notably “Piece of Me”, “Work, Bitch”, and “Slave 4 U” – through a Marxist lens.<sup>30</sup>

Britney Spears and Judy Garland: these women, seemingly quite distanced from each other in their style and time period, find a shared home in the gay male psyche. They reflect back an image to the gay male of themselves but greater, and importantly these images are of relatable hope, rather than ostracising perfection. I find parallels here with Lacanian mother figures. I have

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p. 146.

<sup>30</sup> Britney Spears (March 2020) <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-FppKxAFxm/> (accessed on: 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 2020); Josh Milton, “6 Britney Bangers that Are Actually – Probably – About Socialism”, on *Pink News* (March 2020) <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/03/25/britney-spears-socialism-communism-karl-marx-gimme-more-toxic-circus-mimi-zhu/> (accessed on: 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2020).

mentioned within the mirror stage that the child identifies with its own image and with the voice of the mother, but mirrors are manifold, and the child also identifies with the image of the mother; in the child's corporeal and linguistic imperfection it sees its mother as an image of totality, a whole greater than the sum of its own parts. Moreover, in Lacan's estimations, the mother, rather than be kept in a primary maternal preoccupation with her infant, is "a subject in her own right, who does not look to the child to complete her".<sup>31</sup> I propose one consider these female gay (and queer) icons as similarly Lacanian mother figures: in their stage performances they are greater than the individual; in their vocal prowess they are more talented than the individual; in their resilience and strength, they are what the individual aspires towards. They are women who show defiance in the face of adversity, an adversity often fueled by strict image policing. Yet, these figures are not wholly perfect, but human, they have weakness, they have flaws, and that is what makes them relatable; they reflect more accurately ourselves, and therefore one can identify better with them. They are fallible mothers.

Indeed, a friend, whose inclusion here may be methodologically unorthodox, though consenting, described it poignantly in a Facebook post: "Queer people are drawn to lip-syncing because it allows you to embody a persona that society forbids you from being. Little gay boys often grow up lip-syncing camp pop queens because they envy their glamour and sexuality, and they envy that they are validated by fame, themselves never validated by the heteropatriarchy around them". I agree entirely: lip-syncing is powerful in that it allows one to occupy the position of femininity and camp that is typically chastised in queer youths. Better even, then, to be able to relate to these queer icons in more than their camp glamour, but in their experience of phallogocentric admonishment.

One can understand, therefore, Ruby and Rodent's choice of material and thematic content as a way of exploring the shared social prejudices that befall women and queer people; reflecting the image of the fallible mother into themselves, they too can grow strong. I believe this identification is made stronger through the stitching together of multiple voices, evidenced in both

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<sup>31</sup> Deborah Luepitz, "Beyond the Phallus", p. 224.

Ruby and Rodent's performances. By uniting the voices of pop star Britney with that of Virginia Woolf (and to add to those the voices of Lisa Rowe through Angelina Jolie describing her ordeal in a mental institution in *Girl, Interrupted*, etc.) Ruby joins the experiences of many into one track. Again, one is presented with a Kittlerian Imaginary; just as Kittler described in film, here voices are cut and spliced and assembled together. The real of these voices, the real of these lives, are sewn into an Imaginary patchwork, one that creates a final product greater than the sum of its parts. The track becomes part of the Imaginary, and a voice of the Other (an Other that itself is implicated with many others) with which the drag queen can identify. The track reflects the drag queen's own struggles, and the embodiment of these fallible mother figures assures the drag queen that there is hope. By embodying the voice, by lip-syncing these voices, the drag queen lays the voice of the Other into her being, constituting a selfhood across multiple voices and bodies. It is to this composite, Imaginary voice that I devote the final section of this chapter.

#### *IV.vi – The Composite Voice*

This section will explore the notion of the composite voice in lip-syncing – a voice stitched together through citations of multiple other voices. Such a voice is radically intertextual, an intertextuality that is not only founded upon the relationship between one voice and another, commenting on the complementary or dichotomous interactions between identities and sources, but also upon the inherent dialogism of any utterance, and indeed the stratification of any text into multiple texts. The composite voice in lip-syncing does a significant amount of work: it draws in other identities and whole other fields of reference, that, when placed in tandem with other voices on the track and the performing body of the drag queen, influence the meaning of the lip-synced word; as this is performed by a single body, and is understood as a single voice in performance, such a citational and composite voice also dramatises the heteroglossic potential of any utterance, having multiple voices within a single voice; and, beyond this, moving into a different realm of linguistic theory, the

composite voice, in its rhizophonic nature, cuts and splices voices not only to create symbolic patchworks of signification, but also semiotic webs of *signifiance*, following Julia Kristeva, exploring and bringing to the fore the relationship between pheno- and genotext. In lip-syncing such a composite voice, the drag queen exhibits a truly unique example of intertextuality within the spoken and lip-synced word, a kind of linguistic performance that draws attention to the wildly intertextual nature of language. In so doing, however, the drag queen also presents a radical politic. In the disavowal of a unitary voice, she welcomes a decided queerness in her presentation of a subject that is both citational and in process. Moreover, in her identification with these voices as one in performance, covering over the fraught semiotic nature of the voice through the mirror identifications mentioned in Chapter 3, she performatively grasps at a “textatic” unification of these disparate parts.

To frame it most simply, it is clear that the multiple voices that make up the composite voice in performance are not only used for their semantic content – what their words linguistically communicate – but for who is saying them, and how. In “Boudica”, it is crucial that one understands that it is Mary Beard’s voice in order to grasp the connection between Beard and Boudica; and in “Crazy” one’s understanding is exponentially increased if one can spot Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*, or the history of Britney Spears’s “craziness”, or the gruesome crime about to be committed in *Misery*. These narratives work on two levels, therefore: on a simply semantic, communicative level, and on a broader more social understanding of these words. “Boudica” and “Crazy” exhibit, for want of a better term, an ur-narrative – a fundamental narrative, a narrative in its most simple form – that is then expanded into a ceaseless web of enriching intertextual reference.

The essentially social element of the word that initiates a broader understanding of these performances can helpfully be figured as a kind of dialogism, following the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin’s work on the novel, and particularly the novels of Dostoevsky, seeks to uncover the critically social dimension of the word, in contrast to its more abstracted considerations, as espoused by

Ferdinand de Saussure.<sup>32</sup> Rather than language working only within its own system, Bakhtin stresses the important social dimensions of all language. Within such an understanding, the focus is on the utterance, on the spoken word as spoken by a particular person at a particular time. Of this, Bakhtin writes:

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue.<sup>33</sup>

An utterance cannot exist as a singularly meaning phenomenon, on the contrary its meaning is always shot through with “thousands of living dialogic threads”, and in so doing becomes a part of such dialogue. Bakhtin’s understanding of the utterance is clearly applicable to both Sue and Ruby’s edits. The historicity of utterance and its meaning is foregrounded by Sue, whose routine is driven by a historical exploration of prejudice and misogyny. The different social contexts of Boudica’s speech in the Prologue and Beard’s speech in Section 2 are in direct dialogue, and the meaning of both inflects the other. Such a meaning is more pronounced when surplus information is known, i.e. the history and mythology of Boudica, the fact that the speaking voice is Beard, her vilification by misogynistic trolls etc., not to mention the added layers when Beyoncé enters the mix. And in Ruby’s performance, such a dialogism is arguably more pronounced, with multiple utterances not simply directed toward the same object, as in “Boudica”, but to the same word, “crazy”. What does it mean to have Gnarl Barkley interject Spears? Or for Spears to take over from Jepson? Or for the meandering voice from *The Black Dahlia* to speak the same word as Angelina Jolie in *Girl, Interrupted*? The word “crazy” is set up in a web of Bakhtin’s “living dialogic threads”, influencing the meaning of the word, layering it with each new addition. The multiple voices of the composite voice are not sequential, but dialogic, weaving a narrative both pro- and retrospectively.

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<sup>32</sup> Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 276.

Bakhtin reminds his reader, however, that though “dialogue is studied merely as a compositional form in the structuring of speech” we must not forget “the internal dialogism of the word (which occurs in a monologic utterance as well as in a rejoinder), the dialogism that penetrates its entire structure, all its semantic and expressive layers”.<sup>34</sup> Here, Bakhtin inserts a critical idea for the composite voice in lip-syncing: it is not that dialogism is a property of dialogue, but of the word, whether, as he says, a statement outright (monologic utterance) or a response or reply (rejoinder). The word’s internal dialogic structure has extremely helpful theoretical applications for lip-syncing, in that lip-syncing is quite literally speech *as* dialogue: using someone else’s voice as your own, using two subjects (at least) in speech. Where this seems an especial consideration of lip-syncing, Bakhtin understands it as an essential part of speech. In his discussion of Dostoevsky’s novels, he writes: “someone else’s words introduced into our own speech inevitably assume a new (our own) interpretation and become subject to our evaluation of them; that is, they become double-voiced”.<sup>35</sup> When one uses someone else’s words, Bakhtin positions this as quite literally double-voiced – the confluence of two voices within one. Whether this is in repeating in exact words, or simply in reiterating certain speech styles, one’s voice can be double-voiced, imbued with two voices. Indeed, Bakhtin goes on to say that “when a member of a speaking collective comes upon a word, it is not as a neutral word of language, not as a word free from the aspirations and evaluations of others, uninhabited by other’s voices. No, he receives the word from another’s voice and filled with that voice”.<sup>36</sup> For Bakhtin, language is essentially a multiplicity of voices. Bakhtin’s words indeed seem to define lip-syncing quite perfectly: “he receives the word from another’s voice and filled with that voice”. The drag queen receives the voice of another and is filled with that voice.

The meaning of the voice is inflected by the drag queen, however, in a move that Bakhtin terms “heteroglossia”: “heteroglossia [...] is *another’s speech in another’s language*, serving to

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* p. 279.

<sup>35</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. & trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 195.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 202.

express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. [...] It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author” [emphasis in original].<sup>37</sup> Where dialogism helps to understand the relationship between all of the voices in lip-sync edits, heteroglossia outlines the layering of these identities with the performing queen. In such an understanding, the queen is author, using the multiple voices of the edit to her will. This layering of the original voice’s and the queen’s intention can be “unidirectional” or “vari-directional”, meaning that either they work together or are opposed, often with parodistic intent. Ruby’s invocation of Jepsen, therefore, in all of her twee Americana, might be an example of vari-directional heteroglossia (Jepsen speaks of going “crazy” for the boy next door), whereas her lip-syncing of Jolie in *Girl, Interrupted*, seems much more unidirectional, a more direct representation of Ruby’s emotions.

Double-voiced discourse and heteroglossia offer useful theoretical models for how the layering of different identities and intertextuality function within lip-sync edits, but there are considerable differences between novelistic discourse and the composite voice in lip-sync performance. To Bakhtin’s double-voiced discourse, one might helpfully add double-bodied performance. The performing body is far more important in lip-syncing than it is in novelistic discourse, and the confluence of voices is much more yoked to the body. In the first instance, these voices are actually aural, and are heard, rather than read or imagined.<sup>38</sup> The voices in these lip-sync edits are not signs shot through with the social, as such, but are sounded voices that project vocalic bodies. They intimate a considerable amount of detail, indeed, to such a degree of specificity as to tell the audience exactly who they are. This invocation of the body therefore jostles or complements with the body onstage. Sue’s dress fits, for example, with a *Lord of the Rings*-style fantasy, but not so much with the lecturing of a Professor Emeritus (however arbitrary that may be...). In lip-syncing, the double-voice is always then connected with the double-body, and the presence of the bodies of

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<sup>37</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 324.

<sup>38</sup> Though, Richard Aczel does write compellingly of Bakhtin and “over-hearing” in “Hearing Voice in Narrative Texts”, in *New Literary History*, Volume 29, Number 3, Theoretical Explorations (Summer 1998), pp. 467-500.

these voices is crucial: Britney, Woolf, Beard, Beyoncé, Jolie. These are voices *and* bodies that matter.

I am conscious also of a potential contradiction between this theorisation and my understanding of the silent scream in Chapter 2. In Chapter 2, I argued that the silent scream obviated many of the fears of the spoken word, as Antonin Artaud saw it, categorised by Jacques Derrida as *la parole soufflée*: the word that is at once spirited and stolen, inspired by the words of others and robbed from oneself by the impossibility of original speech, each word, as Bakhtin states, imbued with an endless history and future of utterances. In many ways, they jostle: one, trying to get as close to a Real voice, a voice of one's own, by paradoxically using another's; the other, a realisation of the essential dialogism of the word and inviting it to redouble one's words with meaning. However, I believe they can be drawn together. In Chapter 2, I closed with the assertion that anything other than a performative encounter with the *objet petit a* was disastrous, and the disavowal of one's own voice in lip-syncing was most poignantly a queer act of silencing, of unbeing, of whispering secretly. My theory of the silent scream seeks to analyse lip-syncing without recourse to the specific performances or people, simply to explore the silent nature of the lip-syncer. Here, in Chapters 3 and 4, I seek to explore the identifications of lip-syncing, where these specific voices come to the fore. If the silent scream sought to safeguard the lip-syncer's voice, to protect it, then the heteroglossic composite voice seeks to fill that space with the powerful voices of my interlocutors' idols.

Bakhtin's intertextuality rests on an understanding of the word as both semantic and social. As such, twin narratives are built, the ur-narrative and a second narrative that is replete with an endless potential of references, references that do not end with the drag queen's intention but are generated by the audience. Though the split between the semantic and the social is fruitful, I hope to take this analysis one step further by introducing Julia Kristeva, and a split between the symbolic and the semiotic.<sup>39</sup> Against the symbolic, that is, all that is communicable in language, Kristeva posits

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<sup>39</sup> I use here the lower case "symbolic" to follow Kristeva.

the semiotic, a term not to be confused with semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, but understood “in its Greek sense: [...] distinctive mark, trace, index, precursory sign, proof, engraved or written sign, imprint, trace figuration”.<sup>40</sup> If the symbolic works in the typical sense, as figuring semantic meaning through the interplay of signs, then the semiotic is what works beneath. The semiotic is the trace of the pre-symbolic in the utterance, the dynamic concatenation of pre-symbolic drives. As Graham Allen states, for Kristeva:

The symbolic field involves socially signifying language operating under the banners of reason, communication and the ideal of singularity and unity. The semiotic involves the “language” of drives, erotic impulses, bodily rhythms and movements retained from the infant stage prior to the subject’s splitting during the thetic phase.<sup>41</sup>

The semiotic is all of the bubbling residues of a pre-symbolic carnality that can erupt in language, destabilising the symbolic. And, where the symbolic deals with signification, the semiotic works in *signifiance*, defined by Leon Roudiez as “the work performed in language (through the heterogenous articulation of semiotic and symbolic dispositions) that enables a text to signify what representative and communicative speech does not say”.<sup>42</sup>

I believe that the cutting and stitching together of different voices in lip-sync edits exhibits a decidedly semiotic approach to language, for while the symbolic, semantic element is important, surely the joy of watching a lip-sync edit is through the exploration of multiple voices within one body. As such, I believe, in addition to understanding these edits as employing an ur-narrative and second heteroglossic narrative, they must be considered in their role as both geno- and phenotexts. Where the phenotext concerns itself with “semantic and categorical fields”, the genotext “will include semiotic processes”.<sup>43</sup> Kristeva defines them thusly:

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<sup>40</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Mary Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 25.

<sup>41</sup> Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, p. 49.

<sup>42</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, & Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 18

<sup>43</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 87.

The phenotext is a structure (which can be generated, in generative grammar's sense); it obeys rules of communication and presupposes a subject of enunciation and an addressee. The genotext, on the other hand, is a process; it moves through zones that have relative and transitory borders and constitutes a *path* that is not restricted to the two poles of univocal information between two full-fledged subjects [emphasis in original].<sup>44</sup>

Outlining the phenotext in lip-sync edits is rather simple: it is the meaning of the words, the narrative that is spelled out, the understanding of the piece as a performance by a performing queen. The genotext is more complicated. The genotext explores the semiotic and is a process, a meandering path that bounces not between poles but diffracts outwards. Indeed, in defining the genotext more in depth, Kristeva writes that it includes "the transfers of drive energy that can be detected in phonematic devices (such as the accumulation and repetition of phonemes or rhyme) and melodic devices (such as intonation or rhythm)".<sup>45</sup> I find the splicing together of multiple voices to explore the constitution of a genotext important on several levels: first, if a genotext is concerned with melodic intonation and rhythm, then these edits foreground not only changes in intonation but changes in the very subject of intonation, adding depth to the genotext by exploring multiple bodies that speak; secondly, where the genotext is concerned with bodily propulsions and drives, so too is the lip-sync edit, as I explain above with my conception of the double-voice and the double-body, drawing out the bodily exigencies of language; and thirdly, if the drag queen generates a form of subjectivity through performance, performing a routine *and* performing into existence a subject, then such a process-driven understanding as ascribed to the genotext is applicable here. In this way, through the invocation of Kristevan intertextuality, one can deepen the layers of intertext offered by Bakhtin: the word is no longer simply social, but semiotic, shot through with bodily drives, creating a deep intertextual web not only between voices and bodies but between language and the body. The composite voice in lip-sync performance radically dramatises the multiple layers of intertextuality present in the utterance.

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p. 88.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* p. 87.

An understanding of the composite voice as an interaction not only of multiple voices but of a layering of the semantic and social, the symbolic and the semiotic word does more than just expose lip-syncing's fascinating theoretical potential. There is a concerted political angle to such an approach, a politic that welcomes changeability and multiplicity, namely a queer politic. For example, figuring texts as radically intertextual as both Bakhtin and Kristeva do stands in contradistinction to any idea of these texts being closed or even potentially closable: they are endless fields of potential. This is true of lip-sync edits. For example, Sue mentions above that she had to remember that these edits were not finished products but needed to be enlivened in performance for their meaning to be understood. However, this meaning is surely not singular, as Ruby explains:

Anyway, you know [it's as though when someone] goes to an art an art exhibition and they see a piece of work and they don't understand it, or they understand it in a way that is different to how the artist interpreted it, then that's, you know, personal, you can't you can't control how people are going to be affected by something.

Ruby notes the essential openness of her performances, and one that I would say holds for all performances, for while Sue's may have a more linear narrative in comparison to Ruby's kaleidoscopic display, the audience will always imbue the performance with meaning – there is no meaning without reception. Such an openness, not only in performance but in all texts, points to the essential production of the object of analysis: meaning is constantly produced, rather than given or presented. Indeed, “Kristeva stresses that it is not merely the object of study that is ‘in process’, the process of being produced, but also the subject, the author, reader or analyst. Author, reader or analyst join a process of continual production, are ‘in process/on trial’ (*le sujet-en-procès*), over the text”.<sup>46</sup> The subject is not a given but is produced in the act. Such an understanding of intertext and subjectivity sits well not only with Deleuze and Guattari's endless chain of production and the bricoleur, but similarly with Elizabeth Bronfen's invocation of speech-act theory and performativity

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<sup>46</sup> Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, p. 34.

mentioned above. The subject is not a given, is not unitary, is not stable, but in process, being produced, produced in the moment of performance. And this is surely emphasised to a unique degree in lip-sync edits, in which the voice, that most special signifier of identity and subjectivity is reimagined and repurposed along such novel lines. The intensely intertextual undertakings of lip-sync edits reflect a radical queer politic that sees the subject as anything but singular, fixed, or static: it is in a state of constant production.

Herein lies the potential contradiction essential to the composite voice: while it foregrounds intertextuality, changeability, multiplicity, queerness, it acts as one, and is identified as such by these queens. When watching these performances, though I am aware of Mary Beard, and of Britney Spears, I am also aware of Sue and Ruby. Even though I know exactly whose words are coming out of their mouths, I have no doubt that it is their (Sue/Ruby's) voice. And, it seems that this is reflected in my interlocutors' own understandings. For example, when speaking of their edit "Sylvia Anachronism", Rodent tells me that they sublimated all of the voices on the track into the character of "the tortured poetess" that was then embodied by Rodent, becoming Rodent's voice. Much like the Imaginary body of Chapter 3, therefore, I contend that the composite voice can be figured as a similar Imaginary, of *Gestalt* proportions, with which these queens may identify. This patchwork of endless citation and bricolage is still amassed as one, and identified with as such, becoming the Imaginary voice to fill the Imaginary body. I do not wish for this to seem as though I am aping towards an idealised synthesis, a Romantic desire to find unity. Far from it, this is a foregrounding of radical multiplicity. But, as with any Lacanian identification, the disparate parts are imagined into a whole in order to cover over the split at the core of subjectivity. Such a oneness is not to iron out the messiness of the composite voice, but simply the manner in which it works. If anything, these edits highlight the essential messiness that is tidied up in everyday life.

There is also a degree to which this identification is forever at distance. In Chapter 2, I speak of the desire to touch the *objet petit a*, a desire that must also remain at a distance, for such an encounter would result in self-shattering *jouissance*. Robert Young suggests the desirous joys of

*jouissance* are similar to that of *signifiance*, in that they both “invoke the sense of an ecstatic loss of the subject in a sexual or textual coming – a textasy”.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps it is not too far to suggest that the identification with the composite voice, therefore, is textatic: being filled with bodies, the voices, the drives, the impulses, the signification and the *signifiance* of powerful, idolised women in performance.

#### IV.vii – Conclusion

Lip-sync edits are a fascinating example of the rigorous explorations of selfhood, identity, and the voice that drag queens undertake. Through the stitching together of multiple voices, these queens are able to convey powerful stories and intimately reflective explorations, dramatising the heteroglossic potential of utterance. In their inclusion of disparate voices, these edits layer identities in such a way that enriches the understanding and meaning of the performance, but also underscores a critical genotext, one that attends to the materiality of the body and its drives, supporting the broader phenotext drawn narratively. These voices are not arbitrary, and the identities that they invoke are important, coming together to create a *Gestalt* whole with which the performing queen may identify: the identities of the original singers and actors leave, as in Anahid Kassabian’s understanding, an affective, sticky residue, with identity sticking and building throughout these edits.<sup>48</sup> I am struck particularly by something ShayShay once said of drag more generally: “why not piece together personality traits that are the most me, the most extreme version of me, and throw them all together for a night out?” ShayShay’s words appropriately inform a discussion of lip-sync edits and the composite voice: the composite voice pieces together elements that are most paradigmatic into a whole that is the “most extreme” version of the queen or the concept of the performance. In “Boudica”, Sue draws together three key examples of women

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<sup>47</sup> Robert Young, *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader* (London: Routledge, 1981), p. 32.

<sup>48</sup> Anahid Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), p. 26.

scorned, and creates a powerful, mythical example of vengeance with which to identify; and in “Crazy”, Ruby draws from women in history and film that she relates to in some way, and combines their pain as a vanguard for her own recovery.

With Woolf on the mind, as it were, I am similarly reminded of a quotation from *Mrs. Dalloway* that chimes pleasingly with ShayShay’s description above. Looking in the mirror, Clarissa Dalloway thinks:

That was herself – pointed; dart-like; definite. That was herself when some effort, some call on her to be herself, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing room and made a meeting point.<sup>49</sup>

Much like Clarissa Dalloway, the composite voice draws together its parts when called on to be a subject – draws together the layers of intertext, the voices, the webs of signification into a whole – but a whole that is “different, incompatible and composed”. There is no possibility of a unitary self under the surface, only a spackled over Imaginary gauze that holds together the turbulent fractured self beneath. To my mind, lip-syncing edits and the composite voice foreground this perfectly. Whether in linear form or kaleidoscopic, they present a self that is changeable and multiple, that is informed by others, that is citational, that is constructed out of many, and presents itself as one, as one self that is, lest we forget, a self that is alien to the performer: Ruby to Theodor; Sue to Chris.

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<sup>49</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: CRW Publishing Limited, 2003), p. 42.

III

## THE MATERIAL VOICE

## Chapter 5

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### Haptic Aurality

*“Il se touche” means that it or he self-touches itself or himself (in a loop, with the mouth lip-synching the looping — of a circle, literally of an o or a zero)*  
~ Jacques Derrida<sup>1</sup>

#### *V.i – Introduction*

Listening is the first fundamental of lip-synching; as the drag queen stands onstage, she must always be listening closely to the voice on the track, pre-empting and following that voice, proleptically figuring the auto-affection of speech. It is unsurprising, therefore, that my interlocutors spoke at some length about listening experiences, whether the differences between those of the audience and themselves, or the unique mode of listening that results in an ideal performance for the queen. In this instance, I take “ideal”, following my interlocutors, to describe a performance in which the bisection of body and voice inherent to lip-synching – between the loudspeaker and the body of the queen – is felt to be sutured by certain qualities of sound and the listening experience. Several key areas informed my interviewees’ discussion: technological equipment; directionality; sonic masking; immersion; perception of space; tactility; and perception of emotion. Within this chapter, it is my aim to elucidate the importance of these variables, with a focus on the personal experiences of these queens. What will emerge is that they seem to engage in a mode of listening I have termed “haptic

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Touching*, p. 34.

aurality”, one that has great implications for the personally realised success of their performances as well as theoretical implications for lip-syncing as a performative practice.

The queens I shall be focussing on in this chapter are Ruby Wednesday, ShayShay, and Rodent, whose listening practices complement each other in fascinating ways. Beginning with the more pragmatic issues of lip-syncing, Ruby spoke at some length about the negative experiences of being behind the sound in performance, without a monitor or PA system to direct the sound back onto the stage; on the other hand, Rodent spoke of the beneficial consequences of positioning themselves in front of the loudspeakers in certain performances. Therefore, I will begin this chapter by assessing the importance of sound’s directionality in lip-syncing. Beyond directionality, my interlocutors mentioned that an even more fortuitous listening experience was afforded when, rather than simply being in front of the loudspeakers, they felt immersed in sound, where directionality seemed to diffuse into a more holistic submersion in sound. Within this discussion of immersion, I shall also articulate my interviewees’ comments on ideas of masking, space perception, and tactility.

Focussing on ShayShay’s and Rodent’s words in particular, I find haptic aurality to be a particularly useful way of understanding these modes of listening in performance. Taking my cue from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the installation of hapticity within aurality attends to the presence of perceptions in hearing that are typically considered to exist in other sense organs, most notably the sense of touch.<sup>2</sup> Extending their plateau through theorisations of haptic visuality by Laura Marks, as well as coincidental yet differing theorisations of haptic aurality by Lisa Coulthard and Franziska Schroeder, ShayShay’s and Rodent’s descriptions of their experiences performing cement into a theory of listening that beholds the whole body and its proprioceptions.<sup>3</sup> What I find

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<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Lisa Coulthard, “Haptic Aurality: Listening to the Films of Michael Haneke”, in *Film-Philosophy*, Volume 16, Number 1 (2012), pp. 16-29; Franziska Schroeder, “Network[ed] Listening: Exploring a Haptic Aurality”, in *Performing Technology: User Content and the New Digital Media: Insights from the Two Thousand + NINE Symposium*, ed. Franziska Schroeder (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 122-132.

most interesting, however, is how it may be possible to reconcile the feeling of a connection with the voice through haptic aurality and the fact that there is always a disjuncture and schism between voice and body at the root of lip-syncing. Using Michael Heller's theory of listener collapse, I will explain how haptic qualities of sound have been theorised as collapsing the boundary between self and other; however, I will then go on to problematise this idea through a theorisation of touch, as explicated by Jean-Luc Nancy.<sup>4</sup> When related back to lip-syncing, one is able to form more critical understandings of listener collapse and tactility as a form of incomplete reversibility, after Maurice Merleau-Ponty.<sup>5</sup> Such theoretical interrogations not only situate lip-syncing within a broader context of phenomenology and perception, but also show how lip-syncing's uniqueness adds a critical lens to these theories.

The final portion of this chapter will address the emotional responses such a haptic aurality can engender. Honing on Rodent's experiences, both in and out of performance, I find strong parallels between their experiences of a heightened emotional response to loud, immersive music, and the psychoanalytical theories of Didier Anzieu.<sup>6</sup> Using Anzieu's theory of the Skin-ego, I hope to show that the immersive potential of lip-syncing can be understood as providing an emotional connection to the voice on the track.

Throughout this chapter, therefore, I will detail how the engineering of sound in the performance space and the subsequent listening practices this engenders can create a feeling of unification with the voice on the track. A unification, however, that is always only a suspension of disbelief, as Rodent puts it, forever including the unavoidable break between body and voice in lip-syncing and, as shall be elucidated, in potentially any act of utterance.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Heller, "Between Silence and Pain: Loudness and the Affective Encounter", in *Sound Studies*, Volume 1, Number 1 (2015), pp. 40-58; Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007); Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, ed. Claude Lefort (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> Didier Anzieu, *The Skin-Ego: A Psychoanalytical Approach to Self*, trans. Naomi Segal (Karnac Books: London, 2016).

## V.ii – Directionality

In lip-syncing it is important to remember, given the fact that the actual source of the sound is separate from the intended perceived source of sound (the loudspeaker and the drag queen respectively), that the directionality of sound and the performer's position in relation to it is crucial. This fact was first brought to my attention by Ruby, who spoke of how being positioned behind the speaker system, without the aid of a PA or monitor, resulted in an unconvincing lip-sync. Ruby said:

Usually, what happens is, within a sort of cabaret scenario, the speakers all face outwards, or into the middle of the room, and there's no, like, when I was in a band and stuff, obviously you have a monitor, so you can hear how loud you are in comparison to everything else, and if everyone can hear you or not, whereas in lip-sync everything goes out, nothing really comes in, so, there's sort of this paranoia.

Two things here are crucial: first, that the speakers face out into the room rather than positioned around the room; second, that in lip-syncing there is no monitor. Both of these facts mean that the performer is positioned behind the voice, with the voice going out ahead of them (as it always does) but not starting from them. As Adriana Cavarero writes, typically the voice always begins within the body that emits it, yet this is not the case in drag performance.<sup>7</sup> As shall become apparent, there are certain performative contexts, actions, and modes of listening that can begin to suture this inherent break in lip-syncing, yet what Ruby describes here is that, with the voice in front of her, lip-syncing feels less convincing. Though Ruby may be able to hear the voice, she can never begin to believe that it is coming from her, due to the fact that, as Casey O'Callaghan reminds us, "sounds seem to come from sources in a sense that includes distance as well as direction, and not in a sense that includes travel"; in this sense, the sound will always seem to begin in front of and apart from Ruby.<sup>8</sup> In addition to this, Ruby also mentions that when she does perform with a monitor (when she sings with her band, for example) she cannot only hear if she's loud enough, but also "how loud you are

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<sup>7</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Casey O'Callaghan, *Sounds*, p. 36.

in comparison to everything else". This ability to adapt to your performance surroundings is, for many musicians, an important element of their practice: listening to others in an ensemble, being attentive to musical textures and one's place within them, tuning from other performers etc. However, there is no live musical input in lip-syncing, and therefore the drag queen is not afforded the same adaptability as in other examples of musical performance, thus drawing attention to the fact that in lip-syncing the act of voicing is not one that produces voice in the typical sense. Ruby's statement that "everything goes out" can be requalified as "everything goes out from a source that isn't me". In this sense, Ruby describes the importance of directionality in lip-syncing in negative terms, highlighting the problem of being positioned behind the voice.

Where Ruby spoke of being behind the voice, Rodent describes the experience of being in front of the voice very differently. Rodent returned time and again to a performance they did at The Troxy in East London as a particularly brilliant example of the sensation of feeling at one with the sound. The Troxy is a large Art Deco theatre in Limehouse, which boasts a capacity of more than 3,000 people across a tiered auditorium, with balcony seating and a ground-floor dance space. For this particular performance, the stage had been extended, with a runway erected that entered into the audience. Rodent performed from the end of this runway, breaching the audience/stage divide, and thus finding themselves in front of the sound that issued from behind them, an experience they described as "like performing in a wall, or in front of a wall of noise". From this position, Rodent is in some sense able to repair the break between body and voice that is always at the core of lip-syncing, for, even though the sound source has not changed and is not coming from them, the sound is now travelling *through* them. Though the sound may not find its source in their body, it still, for some brief period of time, vibrates through it, and therefore satisfies to a certain degree Cavarero's typical creation of a voice.

Yet, I find Rodent's choice and re-evaluation of words very interesting. They state that performing at The Troxy was like "performing in a wall, or in front of a wall of noise"; while this may seem like a slip of the tongue, Rodent then went on to say in their next sentence: "there must be

some sort of physiological reaction to having that much loud sound *around* you, because your adrenaline just amps up, and your perception of emotion becomes so much higher” [emphasis added]. While I will speak about the emotional importance of these sound conditions later, I believe their use of the word “around” is vital. The triptych of “in”, “in front of”, and “around” suggests that while directionality is undoubtedly important, perhaps a confusion of direction, or an immersion, is also crucial.

### *V.iii – Immersion*

While the directional nature of sound is important in lip-syncing, immersion also figured strongly in my interlocutors’ explanations of how sound can cover over the break between voice and queen.<sup>9</sup> For example, when speaking about the ideal sound in performance, ShayShay emphasised not only the audibility of the track but also a feeling of total immersion that resulted in a sense of unity with the track:

And you really want to be able to hear, you really want to be engulfed in the music so that you feel like you’re living in that song.

Rodent similarly spoke of how an immersive sound quality – specifically the sensation of “the music [...] resonating around” them – was able to make it seem like the voice was coming from them.

I think sometimes there’s a disconnect, and I’ve realised it’s to do with the sound quality of the room and the acoustics of the room. So I’ve been in places where I’ve done a lip-sync and it sounds like it’s not coming from me and there is such a disconnect but it’s because the music isn’t resonating around me.

Interestingly, this immersive feature is concomitant with loud sound, the reverberation Rodent experiences a consequence of loudness, in their words stating that “you can feel it kind of

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<sup>9</sup> This is not to say, however, that immersive sound lacks a source, as O’Callaghan notes: “When a sound seems to ‘fill a room’ or to ‘engulf’ us, this is not a matter of the sound seeming to lack location. Rather, the sound auditorily appears to occupy some larger portion of the surrounding space or to be ‘all around’.” O’Callaghan, *Sounds*, p. 33.

reverberating through you because of the loudness of it". Similarly, ShayShay states that sometimes "the sound is good for the audience but onstage there's not much sound", suggesting that more sound, i.e. louder sound reflecting back onto the stage, would be ideal. The immersive potential of loud sound and the ways in which it can affect the experience of an unmediated singularity between sound source and perceiver has been talked about at length by Julian Henriques in his study of reggae. Speaking of reggae sound system sessions, he writes that "you're lost inside it, submerged under it. The volume of sound crashes down on you like an ocean wave, you feel the pressure of the weight of the air like diving deep underwater".<sup>10</sup> His description of these events clearly echoes ShayShay's and Rodent's experiences of sound in performance, with similar similes of being underwater, or engulfed in sound. Intriguingly, Henriques states that these loud-sound listening practices make "the experience imminent, immediate and unmediated".<sup>11</sup> Henriques's proposition that loud sound engenders an unmediated experience between sound and its perceiver goes some way in explaining why Rodent and ShayShay feel like the voice is coming from them, or that they're living in that song.<sup>12</sup>

However, these two situations – of lip-syncing and reggae – have their dissimilarities; as Henriques makes pains to set out, the sound systems at play in reggae sound system sessions are incredibly powerful, uniquely so, and are structured and positioned to afford the most immersive outcome for the audience.

Usually three speaker stacks are used in a triangular configuration to point inwards into the "Dancehall crowd" or audience, rather than directed outwards onto an audience as they would

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<sup>10</sup> Julian Henriques, "Sonic Dominance and the Reggae Sound System Session", in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, eds. Michael Bull & Les Back (Oxford: Berg, 2003), p. 452.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 452.

<sup>12</sup> It is also worth noting Stefan Helmreich's discussion of the potential "oneness, a sensory communion" of immersion, that, in Don Ihde's words, can result in a "'dissolution' of self-presence"; while these comments are used to then further Helmreich's conceptions of soundscapes and transduction, they assist in situating the unmediated engagement with sonic material Rodent and ShayShay describe, Stefan Helmreich, "An Anthropologist Underwater: Immersive Soundscapes, Submarine Cyborgs, and Transductive Ethnography", in *American Ethnologist*, Volume 34, Number 4 (November 2007), p. 624.

be either side of a stage. The sound system session creates a special bowl, or receptacle, or amphitheatre that is entirely filled with the sound and the crowd, but open to the sky above.<sup>13</sup>

As Ruby and Rodent have attested above, the directionality of sound emitted from loudspeakers positions the queen in front of or behind the sound, and the sound is not as consciously engineered around the room. Rather than the ideal positioning of three towering speaker stacks, these queens' loudspeaker options are seemingly much more restricted. For example, Ruby relayed a story of how she once refused to perform because the loudspeakers were so small, and, given that the venue was outside, the track wouldn't be heard:

I just said to the organiser, "I'm really sorry, but I'm not going up there. I'm doing a lip-sync based piece, and those speakers" – which were literally about this big [*makes small hand gesture*] – I was like, "they are not putting out enough, enough noise to like, like it has to grasp attention".

Far from being able to decide how the loudspeakers are placed as in Henriques's example above, Ruby simply had the option of deciding, just by assessing the size of them, whether the loudspeakers would be able to produce enough sound for her performance.<sup>14</sup>

One of the reasons why loud sound's immersive properties make it seem like they are living in that song is because of the masking actions it performs. This fact was highlighted by ShayShay and Rodent, who echoed each other in surprisingly exact ways. ShayShay mentioned how off-putting it can be to hear their costume making noise above the music:

There's nothing worse than performing and dancing around and you can hear your shoes too much, or your necklace rattling, I hate that so much.

Rodent similarly described these distractions but added an interesting element with regards to their own voice.

The whole thing is that when you can hear, it's almost like breaking your own suspension of disbelief. If I can hear my feet and my heels moving on the floor, and if I can hear the rustle of

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 454.

<sup>14</sup> This is not to say, however, that certain club venues might not have better acoustics for immersion; for example, Simon Emmerson speaks about the types of "amniotic immersion" that was afforded by the dance clubs of the 1980s and 1990s, Simon Emmerson, *Living Electronic Music* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2007), p. 161.

my dress, or worse me whispering under my breath and the movement of my lips, if that is drawing my attention more than the sound and the song and the lyrics, it's like you get kind of thrown out of it, because you become more aware of the reality of your performance, and the performance, especially what I'm trying to do, is so illusionary and so kind of like meant to be, like, it's meant to be like another world, like magical realism.

Rodent's focus on the sound of their breath is noteworthy, for when they can hear their own mechanics of phonation, they are made aware of the fact that they cannot be producing the voice on the track; being reminded of their whispering breath or of the smacking of their lips that rehearse the words being sung on the track draws attention to the fact that their own apparatus of voice is not the one creating the sound that they hear. In this sense, masking hides the break between queen and track by obscuring the fact that there are two systems of phonation occurring at once. ShayShay makes an interesting addendum to this line of argument:

That's why people never really mix a lip-sync with spoken, like, on a microphone, because it's distracting.

In order to be fully immersive, one must completely mask the sounds of the phonetic apparatus – were one to use one's own voice the illusion would be completely lost. And yet, it is harder to explain why hearing one's shoes or necklace would be similarly distracting, for everyone is able to hear their clothes move, necklace rattle, or shoes click when speaking or singing. In this instance, I believe Rodent's qualification of realism with the adjective "magical" is vital; the "realism" of performance is always at a remove, more ideal, more "real" to the point of fantastical, in which all sounds must give way to the primacy of the voice. Moreover, it is perhaps also true that this masking reconfigures Rodent's activities of "hearing" versus "listening". Stefan Helmreich argues that immersive sonic environments are conducive to "hearing", often associated with passivity, "a letting of sounds wash over the ear", rather than "listening", which implies "efforts to interpret or discern auditory sensation".<sup>15</sup> If the music is not loud enough, Rodent would have to engage a doubly intentional

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<sup>15</sup> Stefan Helmreich, "An Anthropologist Underwater", p. 625.

listening, in that they would first have to block out the noise of the club and their own shoes and dress etc., and then attend to the song; with the noises of their environment already masked through the intense volume of the track, Rodent is free to engage their active and highly focused listening on the specificity of the words on the track.

Alongside masking, my interlocutors also emphasised the importance of how space figures into ideas of immersion, specifically how immersive sound can affect sensations of depth. As shall become apparent, such spatial perceptions influence the experience of “living in” the song, connecting discrete parts. For example, when I asked Rodent what it was like performing without this loud, immersive sound, they said:

It kind of just all falls apart really, well it feels like it does anyway, it feels quite, it feels shallow, and I mean that as in the music itself feels shallow around you, so it’s like being not fully submerged in water where you’re just having it lap over you, but not completely submerging you.

Rodent’s metaphor here, of stating that too quiet music “feels shallow” around them, brings spatiality into the concept of immersion and takes the theory beyond Henriques’s ideation of being submerged in sound. Rodent’s invocation of depth suggests a distance between them and something else, where shallowness is considered negative, thereby suggesting depth to be a positive consequence of loud sound. Depth invokes a distal relationship between Rodent and the source of the sound, and while a shallow perception may seem ideal, having a smaller distance between queen and source, Rodent suggests that in fact depth is key as it has the ability to extend across distance and connect discrete parts; indeed, playing off the double meaning of “volume” in this instance, the sound’s volume has a correlative relationship with the perceived “fullness” of the venue’s spatial volume. The sensations of depth associated with loud sound encompass the whole performance space, and therefore connect Rodent to the source of the track, immersion figuring not only to submerge them in the space, but as Helmreich writes, to become one with it.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 631.

One of the most striking ways, however, that immersion figured in my interlocutors' descriptions was in its closeness to an idea of tactility. When Rodent furthered their descriptions of these ideal immersive situations, they spoke at some length about the seemingly tactual effects such loud sound had on them.

It does feel like you're kind of almost moving in a different plane, it does feel like there is another element that you're kind of engaging with around that's almost tactile, because how the sound reacts to the space, and the fact that you can feel it kind of reverberating through you because of the loudness of it, that is part of what really gets you into feeling more of the sound, I guess, and thus the emotional content behind it.

Here, Rodent highlights the materiality of sound's vibrations, noting that at this level the sound seems to move them physically; but more than simply feeling the sound, the consequence of this is that sound in its materiality has the ability to connect discrete entities. The sound, so loud that it affects the body, therefore supplies a link between loudspeaker and Rodent, stretching across the deep expanse. Authors such as Luis-Manuel Garcia have theorised this as "sonic tactility", reminding his reader that "sound is by no means an intangible phenomenon", and that "it entails vibration and impacts that can be registered directly by the body's tactile and haptic sense organs"; further to this, affective sound's connective potential is addressed by Henriques, who writes that the sound in sound system sessions "cannot but touch and connect to your body" and that these experiences "tend to be grounding 'into body' experiences".<sup>17</sup> The concept of "into body" experiences is crucial for lip-syncing, for in loud sound's immersive, connective potential it houses the voice of the singer in Rodent, closing up the bisection of body and voice in lip-syncing. This fulfils one of the key tropes of voice, that it begins within the body. Adriana Cavarero, for example, writes that the voice must always have a body of "flesh and bone" behind it; while this may too narrowly delimit many opportunities for creating voice outside of a Humanistic and able-bodied realm, the fact that this

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<sup>17</sup> Luis-Manuel Garcia, "Beats, Flesh, and Grain: Sonic Tactility and Affect in Electronic Dance Music", in *Sound Studies*, Volume 1, Number 1 (2015), p. 60; Julian Henriques, "Sonic Dominance", p. 452.

loud sound, as Rodent says, reverberates through them, meaning that voice does, for some time, exist within the body, satisfies a quotidian understanding of how the voice functions.<sup>18</sup>

The tactile benefits of loud sound relate to another crucial element of lip-syncing: that in lip-syncing there is no live input, no monitor system, and no microphone. Where in other forms of amplified singing, there is a physical, tactual connection with the loud sound through the microphone, here there is quite literally no physical connection between Rodent and the sound, whether by creating the voice themselves or by holding onto the piece of technology that will amplify that voice.<sup>19</sup> Steven Connor speaks about something similar in his discussion of intermodality, specifically in terms of the telephone, when he states that “the [telephone] wire seemed to provide a new tactual image of the voice as capable of immense extrapolation or extrusion, its powers concentrated and accelerated into a vector rather than a radiation”.<sup>20</sup> The telephone wire, therefore, installed a new sense of sound’s connective directionality, one that Connor believes can be rooted in the Western practice of ventriloquism. For, as he reminds us, “there is no practical reason why the dummy needs to be manually operated by the ventriloquial performer himself or herself [...] But ventriloquism seems to need the confirming circuit of touch, which acts both to intensify and to protect against the disembodiment of the voice”.<sup>21</sup> This remains true in lip-syncing: the tactile element of loud sound’s immersive properties works against the free-floating nature of the voice in recorded music, and cements its rehousing in Rodent’s body.

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<sup>18</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*, pp. 7 & 3.

<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to note that, while not relevant to this study, there is another important tactile and connective element in certain lip-syncing traditions, in which the drag queen touches the audience in accepting their monetary tips.

<sup>20</sup> Steven Connor, “Edison’s Teeth: Touching Hearing”, in *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening and Modernity*, ed. Veit Erlmann (Oxford: Berg, 2004), p. 159.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 160.

The synthesising of all that Rodent, Ruby, and ShayShay have said leads me to the theorisation of a mode of aurality that seems to be of vital importance for the success of lip-syncing.<sup>22</sup> This type of aurality is one that attends to the immersive potential of sound, spatial dimensions, tactility, and intersubjectivity/intercorporeality. I choose the term “aurality” here for several reasons: firstly, aurality circumvents the need to distinguish between the knotty terms of “listening” and “hearing” and allows for both to be present; secondly, aurality’s etymology, relating to *auris* in Latin meaning “ear”, brings the body into the field of reference beyond the solely cerebral act of perceiving sonorous material; and thirdly, following the work of Ana Maria Ochoa, I choose aurality for, just as it includes the meanings of hearing and listening, it also includes the sense of producing sound, of being aural, and therefore produces “an ontology of *relationships*, an idea of how to think the interaction between entities that produce/hear sounds” [emphasis in original].<sup>23</sup> Such interrelationships will become increasingly important in the following sections.

“Haptic” has a slightly more loaded meaning.<sup>24</sup> While it can be understood as an umbrella term, which includes several sensorial experiences, including: “touch (the active or passive experience of the human skin, subcutaneous flesh, viscera and related nerve-endings); kinaesthesia (the body’s sense of its own movement); proprioception (the body’s sense of its orientation in space); and the vestibular sense (that of balance, reliant upon the inner ear)”, it also has a far more acute meaning.<sup>25</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari spend much time considering the haptic in their

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<sup>22</sup> “Haptic aurality” is not my own coinage and has been used by theorists such as Lisa Coulthard and Franziska Schroeder in interesting, even if not mutually corroborative, ways. I see no issue in our differing applications of the term, as Deleuze and Guattari’s original theorisation of the haptic intentionally, and hopefully, leaves its plateau open to further interpretation.

<sup>23</sup> Ana Maria Ochoa, *Aurality: Listening & Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> Indeed, it is due to the specific definitions of “haptic” I detail above that I understand this concept as different from “sonic tactility”, as theorised by Luis-Manuel Garcia. While Garcia does make specific use of the word “haptic”, I believe he uses the term intentionally in its more general sense, rather than in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense, as is my reading, see Luis-Manuel Garcia “Beats, Flesh, and Grain”, p. 60.

<sup>25</sup> Abbie Garrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 16.

discussion of the “smooth” and “striated” in their *A Thousand Plateaus*. They describe the smooth as:

A space of affects, more than one of properties. It is haptic rather than optical perception. Whereas in the striated forms organise a matter, in the smooth materials signal forces and serve as symptoms for them. It is an intensive rather than extensive space, one of distances, not of measures and properties. [...] Smooth space is occupied by intensities, wind and noise, forces, and sonorous and tactile qualities.<sup>26</sup>

Within this quotation, Deleuze and Guattari already place the haptic within the smooth, and understand it in opposition to the optical, which inhabits striated space; where the haptic attends to close-range, tactile qualities, the optical defines that which is placed at a remove. At first glance, to associate “smoothness” with the idea of intense volume may seem an antinomy, with such intensely affective loudness perhaps most typically being considered “rough”; however, Deleuze and Guattari’s term, I believe, refers more to the expansiveness of smoothness, its undifferentiated-ness, in contrast to the striated’s strict sectionalisation.<sup>27</sup> Crucially, however, the smooth does not inhere an undifferentiability, on the contrary, Deleuze and Guattari specifically reference the sea as a place of the utmost smoothness and striation – open expanses that are segmented through cartography.<sup>28</sup> In much the same way as the sea, therefore (invoking similar aquatic imagery, to return to Rodent’s previous quotations), while loud sound in lip-syncing undoubtedly could be understood within taxonomies of striation and exact decibels, it is rather perceived as a grand expanse or wash of sound, affecting the body through haptic encounters, both sonically and tactually.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the haptic enters their discussion most notably in the visible arts.

They write:

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<sup>26</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 557.

<sup>27</sup> Ota Yoshitaka, “What is ‘the Haptic’? Consideration of Logique de la sensation and Deleuze’s Theory of Sensation”, in *The Japanese Society for Aesthetics*, Number 17 (2013), p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 557.

First, “close-range” vision, as distinguished from long-range vision; second, “tactile,” or rather “haptic” space, as distinguished from optical space. “Haptic” is a better word than “tactile” since it does not establish an opposition between two sense organs but rather invites the assumption that the eye itself may fulfil this non-optical function.<sup>29</sup>

Here they specifically reference the haptic functions of the eye, but one can, as they suggest elsewhere, open up this plateau to explore the potential for the haptic as a function of aurality as well.<sup>30</sup>

What strikes me particularly about Deleuze and Guattari’s explication of the haptic is that it can lead to a “reduction of space”, in that there is no longer the strict differentiation of topographies that is found in the striated.<sup>31</sup> In this way, the experiences of immersive listening outlined above can be understood as adopting a haptic element, in which the attention to tactility is married with a connectivity that extends across space; where Deleuze and Guattari may speak of the eye caressing a painting, in lip-syncing the ear, and indeed the whole body, comes into physical contact with sound. Film theorist Laura Marks furthers this idea by suggesting that haptic perceptions “must be beheld by the whole body”, in that “I am not subjected to the presence of an other (such as a film image/film screen); rather, the body of the other confers being on me”.<sup>32</sup> In perceiving with one’s whole body, Marks highlights the intersubjective nature of haptic perception, going so far as to say that haptic visuality has the potential to “mudd[y] intersubjective boundaries”.<sup>33</sup> Crucially, Marks deals with a visual medium, and one that in its affective encounter with the perceiver differs greatly from the intense sound confrontations of the particular form of haptic aurality being analysed here; what Marks’s study shows, however, is a precedent for the adaption of Deleuze and Guattari’s theoretical apparatus. While they exhibit key differences in their performative contexts, these discussions of reduction of space in the smooth, of the affective encounter of haptic space, and of the attention to

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p. 572.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p. 572.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p. 575.

<sup>32</sup> Laura Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 12.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 17.

close-range perception reflect what Rodent has detailed in their experiences of lip-syncing. In this sense, I believe one can speak of a haptic aurality that, in a similar way to Marks's haptic visuality, attends to the materiality of sound, and in so doing affects the spatial awareness of the room and the directionality of sound, as well as conferring the sound onto the perceiver.

Crucially, this hapticity does not imply homogeneity. Whereas the dissolution of discrete topographies may seem a call to homogeneity, Deleuze and Guattari state that it is in fact "the more regular the intersection, the tighter the striation" that engenders such a sameness: it is "the extreme result of striation", rather than a part of the smooth.<sup>34</sup> As such, a haptic aurality accounts for the fact that part of lip-syncing's central identity is that there is not a co-presence between discrete parts, there is no homogeneity, but rather the affective interrelation of separate units.

#### *V.v – The Problem of Touch*

I find the nomination of haptic aurality in lip-syncing and its ability to blur intersubjective boundaries, but never to the point of erasure, pleasing; Rodent spoke of a response to sound that affected space, inhered the sense of touch, and brought together the discrete entities of the loudspeaker and the drag queen in order, up to a certain point, to install the voice of the track into Rodent's body. Moreover, I find the degree to which this explanation focuses on a sense of touch, or haptics, to be key, for, as I shall elucidate fully below, touching must always foreground difference. Clearly, the intercorporeality in lip-syncing is not a complete or unmediated installation of the voice in another person, and Rodent speaks in the full knowledge that there is a dissonance between the "reality" of the performance and the "suspension of [their] disbelief". In this respect, Rodent moves beyond extant theories of intersubjectivity in listening, or "listener collapse", as I shall explain, and generates a theory that adds to the present literatures.

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<sup>34</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 566.

In many ways, what Rodent describes has already been theorised in part by Michael Heller in his concept of listener collapse. Paraphrasing Jean-Luc Nancy, Heller argues that “to listen is to encounter an exteriority, yet it elicits an experience that is located firmly within the body of the listener”; while this statement may be true in some situations, such affective encounters as detailed here certainly undercut such a theory, in which listening takes place within and across the body of the perceiver.<sup>35</sup> In any case, Heller uses this premise then to define listener collapse, which occurs “when loud sound dissolves the ability to distinguish between interior and exterior worlds, especially in regard to sound and self”, and that “it is a moment in which penetration erases our ability to distinguish between exterior/sound and interior/self, bringing both together in a single inescapable vibration”.<sup>36</sup> While such a theory would suggest a pleasing unification between body and voice in lip-syncing, I wonder whether such a totalising inability to distinguish between exterior and interior might not erase some of the most interesting aspects of these affective encounters; indeed, Heller’s assertion that loud sound “confront[s] the body through an experience of direct physical touch” and that it is this “single inescapable vibration” that aids in the process of listener collapse seems to overlook what I find to be the most interesting aspects of a vibratory touch.<sup>37</sup> Heller’s theory draws considerably from noise music and rock literatures, in which loud sound is considered an integral part of the performance. David Novak, for example, speaks of loud sound’s ability to close up distance when he states that “very loud sounds are perceived as closer and clearer because they are compressed in the auditory canal under higher levels of acoustic pressure”.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Theodore Gracyk claims that “for a receptive audience, volume bridges the sense of distance between the audience and the performers by erasing the gap between the self and the music”.<sup>39</sup> In many ways, what Grayck, Novak, and Heller underline complements Rodent’s words elegantly; however, I

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Heller, “Between Silence and Pain”, p. 44.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 45.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p. 41.

<sup>38</sup> David Novak, *Japanese: Music at the Edge of Circulation* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 46.

<sup>39</sup> Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1996), p. 106.

believe one can add a further dimension to Heller's theory that affords it a greater precision, especially when viewed in specific relation to touch.

In his extension of Nancy, Heller places a potential contradiction at the foundation of his argument, which when followed through doesn't offer listener collapse its full field of nuance. In emphasising the sense of touch, which I believe he is right to do, Heller's theory of collapsing interior into exterior, self into other, meets a primary difficulty, due to the inherent difference that touching must always foreground. Touching does not afford a blending of interior and exterior worlds. Touch is the closest point of contact, and in its contiguity it highlights the fact that the two sides of touch remain distinct. Even within our own bodies, Nancy argues, this is the case:

My body becoming other, by touching itself there, by being touched there, becoming thereby the same, more absolute, more separated than ever, more identified as taking place of touching (of extension).<sup>40</sup>

The paradox of "touching itself here, [...] being touched there" formulates self-touch as a constant oscillation between subject and object, never collapsing into the same entity; therefore, in Heller's conception of listener collapse, sound's tactile qualities, enveloping the listener in a sonic bubble, pressing against them, would not facilitate a collapsing of two discrete entities into one, but would rather place them, as Nancy states, "more separated than ever". This concept of self-touch is crucial, I believe, in questioning Heller's claim that the vibratory effects loud sound has on a subject can result in a loss of self, for, rather than vibration initiating the dismantling of subjectivity, breaking down the borders between self and other, it is in fact a prerequisite (without implying chronology) of the self, in Nancy's understanding. As Geoffrey Bennington paraphrases of Nancy's phenomenology: "being is always being-in-contact. [...] Contact is never established or given as presence, it is (only) the rhythm or vibration of touching and separating, its own touching (even poignant) separation".<sup>41</sup> And in Nancy's own thinking, the opening up of listening in the self is one

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<sup>40</sup>Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, p. 37.

<sup>41</sup> Geoffrey Bennington, "In Rhythm: A Response to Jean-Luc Nancy", in *SubStance*, Volume 40, Number 3, Issue 126: Plus d'un toucher: Touching Worlds (2011), p. 18.

that calls “to the resonant body, to its vibration”, in that there is a constant oscillation, an affective encounter, that does not dissolve relationality but is dependent on it.<sup>42</sup> This is an important distinction: if loud sound and its affective vibration do not dissolve boundaries altogether, how can this be married with a haptic aurality in lip-syncing that does offer ways of feeling “within” the song, connecting to the voice in a more nuanced way?

An interesting element that was spectrally present in Rodent’s descriptions of lip-syncing was that of reciprocity. As much as lip-syncing attends to sound, listening pre-emptively to the lyrics, this is only ever the first step and must be followed by physical movement – to lip-sync without moving is simply to listen. And yet, lip-syncing is also much more than its namesake. For example, when speaking about unideal acoustic spaces, Rodent made an interesting addition:

When I lip-sync I try and imagine as though it is coming out of me, and try and use as much of my body as possible with doing it; it’s not just the lips and the mouth and the jaw, it’s tensing my stomach, tensing my arms, using all the things that you would do to make those sounds.

These sentences underscore the fact that while the sound quality, volume, and acoustic space add to the sensation of the voice coming from Rodent, they themselves also have a great part to play in it. Rodent goes through the physical routine of creating voice, even though they expel nothing.<sup>43</sup> Rather than locating the voice in the throat alone they engage with the full corporeality of voice, feeling a reciprocity between the sound they hear and the movements they perform and feel.

Reciprocity is a critical feature of immersion, involving an interaction with the atmosphere around you rather than simply a subjugation. Mark Grimshaw, for example, in his analysis of immersion in video games, draws attention to the fact that the soundscape of virtual reality games is not fixed, but is dependent on the choices and actions of the player, creating a reciprocal

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<sup>42</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, p. 25.

<sup>43</sup> Originally, it seemed paradoxical that Rodent expels nothing in lip-syncing, not even releasing breath in a whisper; however, Rodent stated that often they do not expel any air, only “get[ting] really taut in [their] core and facial muscles”. Indeed, when one attempts to lip-sync a belted note, it is considerably easier to choke the voice somewhat in the back of one’s throat and tense one’s stomach muscles. What this causes, therefore, is an essential out-of-syncness, one that can be seen to reflect the vibratory nature of sound and touch.

relationship between self and game.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Frances Dyson speaks at length of her experiences in Char Davies's virtual reality art project *Osmose*, and how even the slight tilting of the head would change the entire environment around you; such actions create a relationship with the immersive environment that foregrounds the participant's agency, and thus makes the experience feel more "real", eliding, as it does, "the distance that technological mediation imposes".<sup>45</sup> Rodent clearly does engage in a reciprocal process in lip-syncing, mouthing the words to the voice of another, but how does this reciprocity function specifically in lip-syncing?

To speak of reciprocity – or, reversibilities – in this way brings the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty squarely into the discussion, whose presence was felt spectrally, in any case, with Nancy. Nancy's words above – "by touching itself there, by being touched there" – echo those of Merleau-Ponty, who describes this phenomenon as the third distinct experience of touch, "when my right hand touches my left while it is palpating the things, where the 'touching subject' passes over to the rank of the touched".<sup>46</sup> The left hand that touches, when touched by the right, changes from the perceiver to the perceived, and as such the body that perceives separates the two hands, as Nancy states; yet, were the right to move over and touch the left, the sides of perception would switch. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty dubs the body a "percipient-perceptible", referring to the two sides – or folds, or leaves etc. – of the body.<sup>47</sup> This is what Merleau-Ponty describes as a reversibility, and it is this idea that will elucidate a clearer and more critical understanding of listener collapse and haptic aurality in drag lip-syncing.

Merleau-Ponty's first example of reversibility features the same sense – touch – being redoubled onto itself; however, reversibilities also encompass intermodality. Merleau-Ponty himself, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, speaks at length of the relationships and reversibilities

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<sup>44</sup> Mark Grimshaw, "Sound and Player Immersion in Digital Games", in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*, eds. Trevor Pinch & Karin Bijsterveld (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 350.

<sup>45</sup> Frances Dyson, *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture* (California: University of California Press, 2009), p. 7.

<sup>46</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, pp. 133-134.

<sup>47</sup> Sue L. Cataldi, *Emotion, Depth, and Flesh: A Study of Sensitive Space, Reflections on Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Embodiment* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 61.

between the tangible and visible, and Sue Cataldi, extending Merleau-Ponty's unfinished final work, suggests there are more "interperceptual complementary doublings or reversibilities", between touch and hearing, for example.<sup>48</sup> Intriguingly, Merleau-Ponty speaks at some length about this same intermodal relationship of the voice, relating it specifically to ideas of reversibility, and in many ways laying the foundations for the reciprocity essential in lip-syncing that Rodent details.

Merleau-Ponty describes the voice as "this new reversibility", locating an intermodal reversibility between "the movements of phonation and of hearing", in which the physical movements necessary to create voice – the "facial [and the] strange movements of the throat and mouth [that] end in sounds" – find their inverse in hearing that voice.<sup>49</sup> This directly references what Rodent stated, finding a reciprocal relationship between the audibility of sound in lip-syncing and the physical sensations of the body in the act of voicing (albeit, in lip-syncing silently). Rodent and Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the phonation – i.e. the production of voice and the physical movements – has an especial importance in terms of touch and haptic aurality. Psychoanalyst Édith Lecourt, for example, states that "it is in fact through the presence or absence of motor and tactile participation that sounds produced are differentiated from sounds external to the self", suggesting that it is through the sensation of touch in the mouth matched with the experience of hearing one's own voice that one is able to differentiate self from other.<sup>50</sup> In the case of Rodent, therefore, being able to feel themselves go through the phonetic routine of creating voice, by pressing their tongue against their teeth to create "th-", or pursing their lips to create "o-", and hearing the voice on the track not only completes the folding of Merleau-Ponty's reversibility from discrete locations, but also suggests psychoanalytically that one can suspend one's disbelief and believe that voice to be emanating from them.

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<sup>48</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 134; Sue Cataldi, *Emotion, Depth, Flesh*, p. 71.

<sup>49</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 144.

<sup>50</sup> Édith Lecourt, "The Musical Envelope", in *Psychic Envelopes*, ed. Didier Anzieu, trans. Daphne Briggs (Karnac Books: London, 1990), p. 215.

Mapping Merleau-Ponty's "new reversibility" onto lip-syncing generates a new reversibility of its own. While Merleau-Ponty's description above and lip-syncing have a pleasing symmetry, lip-syncing extends Merleau-Ponty's theory in that it is formed through two discrete entities, rather than the same body. Indeed, this crucial factor, unique to lip-syncing's mode of voicing, opens up Merleau-Ponty's theory in enlightening ways. While Merleau-Ponty writes of two hands touching – skin touching skin – and the reversibility of voice – sound perceived simultaneously with touch – lip-syncing initiates a reversibility of a different sort: haptic auralty alongside the sensation of feeling the corporeal procedures of voice from its two sides. This formulation bears similarities to Merleau-Ponty's, in that it still deals with tactility and hearing as the senses at hand; however, rather than these being separated onto opposing sides of percipience, they are layered, with touch underscoring both haptic auralty and the corporeal sensations of creating voice. Within this relationship, lip-syncing extends the possibilities of vocal reversibility, arguing for the phenomenological creation of a voice from discrete locations.

While in Merleau-Ponty's original formulation he clearly explains that "I hear my own vibration from within", synthesising the phonetic and hearing functions within the same body, lip-syncing dramatises the bisection of body and voice.<sup>51</sup> It is here that sound's ability to tactually affect the body through increased amplification, perceived through haptic auralty, assists Rodent, closing up the space between their body and the speaker system, leading to a satisfaction of the two sides of percipience in vocal reversibility and thereby a phenomenologically supported creation of voice. Rodent not only feels the music resonating around them, but, as Rodent states, the sound runs through them, allowing them to feel the voice from within, perceiving the two sides of vocal reversibility within a single body whilst maintaining their inherent separation. In some senses, this understanding goes against Merleau-Ponty's explanation, as he specifically states that "my voice is bound to the mass of my own life as is the voice of no one else"; and yet, he later goes on to suggest the possibility of a sort of vocal intercorporeality, one that is particularly intriguing when read

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<sup>51</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 144.

through drag lip-syncing.<sup>52</sup> Merleau-Ponty's rumination that "if I am close enough to the other who speaks to hear his breath and feel his effervescence and his fatigue, I almost witness, in him as in myself, the awesome birth of vociferation" offers the potential for a vocal intercorporeality that is founded upon proximity. Indeed, elsewhere in "The Intertwining – The Chiasm" Merleau-Ponty offers a type of "intercorporeity" within the handshake, asking "why would not the synergy exist among different organisms, if it is possible within each?"<sup>53</sup> Merleau-Ponty's admission of the possibility of intercorporeality ultimately reveals the potential of a reversibility that involves discrete agents, which, when added to reversibility's intermodal potential, generates a synthetic theory of reversible listener collapse. Indeed, while such a theory may seem unique to lip-sync performance, and more specifically to Rodent's actual practice, this explanation certainly chimes with current vocal phenomenologies, especially the work of Zeynep Bulut. Bulut's notion of a voice that works dialogically, in a relationship between speaker and listener, as well as her notion of the "skin-voice", as that which "addresses the physical and the metaphysical emergence of the voice as a continuum, which evolves from inside to outside, and which in turn echoes outside back to inside", add useful complements to this research, and extend the theoretical importance of haptic aurality beyond lip-syncing.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, and most crucially, however, satisfying Nancy's definition of touch and vibration as it does, is the fact that these reversibilities – all reversibilities – must always be incomplete, experiencing a hiatus at the moment of the switch between perceiving and perceived, never fully collapsing into the other. Merleau-Ponty states that "a reversibility [is] always imminent and never realised in fact[, wherein my] left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand and touching the things, but I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization".<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* p. 144.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* p. 142.

<sup>54</sup> Zeynep Bulut, "Theorizing Voice in Performance: György Ligeti's 'Aventures'", in *Perspectives of New Music*, Volume 48, Number 1 (Winter 2010), p. 55; Zeynep Bulut, *La Voix-peau: Understanding the Physical, Phenomenal, and Imaginary Limits on the Human Voice through Contemporary Music*, Doctoral dissertation, UC San Diego (2011), p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 147.

In this way, reversibility sits in a state of vibration, one cannot collapse into the other, but switches at the moment of percipience, for vibration is “simultaneously contact and non-contact”, a blurring of boundaries.<sup>56</sup> The hiatus, the break, that must always occur between the folds of percipience means that the right hand and the left can never collapse into one; it means that in Heller’s listener collapse, the confusion of self and other effected by the increased amplification of sound can never fully sublimate one into the other; it confirms Nancy’s original statement that touch, and thereby vibration, must always foreground difference in that it constantly oscillates between the touched and the touching; and it allows for the fact that the emittance of the voice and the feelings of production come from different bodies in lip-sync performance, dramatising the always and inherent break in the incomplete reversibility of vocal utterance.

In considering lip-syncing through the lens of Merleau-Ponty’s incomplete reversibility one is able to account for the perceived sensation of singularity characteristic of listener collapse whilst also attending to the seemingly contradictory nature of touch. Rodent spoke of volume’s necessity in taking them away from “the reality of [their] performance”. The use of increased volume closes the space between the performing queen and the voice, and even goes some way in installing that voice within them; and yet, rather than suggesting a complete collapsing of the self into the music, Merleau-Ponty’s reversibility tempers any such rendering with the knowledge of the essential incompleteness of this vocal reversibility.

*V.vi – Sonic Skins*

I have thus far elucidated how haptic aurality, and in many instances a haptic aurality that is concomitant with loud sound, is able to produce a feeling of seeming singularity between the discrete entities of the loudspeaker and the drag queen, albeit a singularity that must always

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<sup>56</sup> David Bissell, “Vibrating Materialities: Mobility-Body-Technology Relations”, in *Area*, Volume 42, Number 4 (December 2010), p. 482.

foreground difference; however, I am yet to explain how this form of aurality can emotionally affect the performer. Considering the emotional effects of this haptic immersion began from a discussion I had with Rodent about the emotional responses they experience when performing to loud sound.

They stated that:

There must be some sort of physiological reaction to having that much loud sound around you, because your adrenaline just amps up, and your perception of emotion becomes so much higher.

They later furthered this idea, adding:

I mean I definitely wholeheartedly think that loudness and noise is a really powerful emotional stimulus [...] if the sound feels like it's got weight to it, and it's like present in the space because of the quality of the sound, or the volume of it, then it helps convey and kind of hold the emotional consistency of any performance that you're doing.

This emotional reaction is very much situated within a performative setting, so, out of curiosity, I asked whether the same thing happened during their headphone listening during the day – away from the sheer loudness of the club, the immersive potential of iPod listening seemingly offers similar benefits.

Jacob: And do you get a similar thing from, for example, walking through the street with like good headphones?

Rodent: Always, whenever I leave the house, have headphones in, I really don't like walking around without headphones, that's really kind of a personal thing. I guess it's an emotional, "put on the bubble as a queer person", put yourself into your own little musical bubble, and I personally definitely feel more comfortable and secure when I'm not able to hear everybody else around me, mostly because I kind of have a pre-presumption that I'm not going to want to hear what's going on around me, if that makes sense. So like, the quality of the headphones, I mean, I just have shitty quality headphones, so I can't really comment on that, but I would definitely say that, yeah...

J: That immersion?

R: That immersion in sound and stuff is definitely an emotional support. Outside of performance as well for me.

When put in tandem with Rodent's descriptions of their headphone listening practices, it appears that, while loud sound certainly does have a separate emotional effect, immersion alone – “putting on the bubble” as they say – supplies a degree of emotional support.

I find strong parallels between Rodent's explanation of the protective bubble of musical immersion and Didier Anzieu's theory of the Skin-ego. Anzieu's Skin-ego is a far-reaching and adaptable term, which, by his own admission, is “not yet a concept; it is instead, intentionally, a vast metaphor”, one with which one is able to work with and against.<sup>57</sup> In its most commonplace definition, the Skin-ego is

a mental image used by the child's Ego during its early stages of development to represent itself as an Ego containing psychical contents, based on its experience of the surface of the body.<sup>58</sup>

The Skin-ego functions as a wrapping, something that supplies the subject with a form of protection, a sac that keeps everything in place.<sup>59</sup> And yet this relationship with the surface of the body does not only have to do with the literal skin, as Anzieu takes care to note early on in his treatise; rather, skins can be both “of the organic and the imaginary”, representing literal and psychical contact between ourselves and others.<sup>60</sup> As such, Anzieu is keen to install other forms of skin within his Skin-ego, or, rather, other ways that the Skin-ego can be strengthened beyond the strictly cutaneous. Though Anzieu mentions olfactory realms in passing, his attention focuses on how the sonorous deeply impacts the Skin-ego, mentioning primary wrappings as being “breast-feeding, everyday care, and the experience of being bathed in words”.<sup>61</sup> It is this focus on being bathed in words – the mother humming, singing, or speaking to their baby – that I wish to focus on here. The function of the Skin-ego as protective container works not only through tactile sensations, but also through aural ones, offering intriguing applications to the feelings of heightened emotions experienced through haptic aurality in the case of the drag queen.

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<sup>57</sup> Didier Anzieu, *The Skin-Ego*, p. 6.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* p. 43.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* p. 43.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* p. 43.

Édith Lecourt extends Anzieu's theories with a particular focus on the sonorous in her discussion of the musical envelope, and it is here that I find parallels with the experiences of Rodent, and also ShayShay. Lecourt speaks of the possibility of a "sonorous envelope" as a way of supporting the Skin-ego through music and sound; within Lecourt's theories, one can already hear pre-echoes of Rodent's understanding of a transposition from a metaphorical "emotional bubble" to the "musical bubble" afforded to them through immersive listening with either headphones or in performance.<sup>62</sup> Crucially for Lecourt, the sonorous experience must be "able to find underlying support, on the one hand in tactile and visual experience, and on the other hand in a mental elaboration of sonorous experience based on the ego-skin".<sup>63</sup>

In drag, both the visual and tactile supports are supplied. Beginning with the tactile, there are several ways in which drag achieves this: as outlined in the previous section, haptic auralities' attention to the body, conferring perception onto the whole body and equipping the ear with the functionality of touch, offers one way in which the tactile support is manifested; following this, the sensations of feeling the plasticity of voice within the mouth as well as the actions of voicing throughout the whole body supply another. In terms of the visual, the drag queen's physical appearance is obviously very important to her performance. At a base level, the visual element is essential for the audience, as witnessing a lip-sync performance without the visual element is simply to listen to a song; however, more uniquely to drag, the way in which the drag queen paints her face and adorns her body is paramount, not only effecting the gender play that is most commonly associated with drag, but also providing a secondary physical wrapping of the Skin-ego that works with the sonic.

Assessing the photograph of Rodent below (Fig. 21), it is clear that make-up is an important armour, even evidencing a history of struggle. Their darkened eyes and exaggerated eyebrows, arched upward, sharply pointed, and thickened in black, offer an image of a powerful character,

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<sup>62</sup> Édith Lecourt, "The Musical Envelope", p. 212.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* p. 212.

ready to go into battle; indeed, the scratch marks scored across their face suggest that this is a battle they may have already fought, and won. This cosmetic physical appearance is highlighted by Anzieu as a type of “socially” developed Skin-ego, in which “a particular social group is marked by cuts, scarification, skin-painting, tattoos, make-up, hairstyles, and the supplementary layer of clothing”.<sup>64</sup> He even goes so far as to compare the “gladrags worn by young, often anorexic models” to “Zeus’s aegis”, a socially constructed layer of the Skin-ego which goes some way to “recreate their narcissism”.<sup>65</sup> The ways in which the external presentation of the self relates to the skin in social and metaphorical ways, and the ways in which the sonorous can play into this, offer valuable explanations as to why the performance of drag, coupled with the tactile perception of the voice of another, can precipitate such extreme responses within these drag queens, whilst satisfying the visual side of Lecourt’s musical envelope.



Fig. 21: Rodent

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* p. 114.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* p. 135.

Lecourt later goes on to describe “sonorous baths” as: “a relationship of surface to volume; the quality of caring; the experience of weightlessness, and of being carried; the function of surrounding”.<sup>66</sup> Rodent and ShayShay echo these words surprisingly closely: ShayShay speaks of being “engulfed in music”, and Rodent as being “fully submerged in water”. Both of these aquatic metaphors attest to Lecourt’s feelings of weightlessness, achieving some sort of metaphorical buoyancy through the musical wrapping, a feeling that is predicated upon the perception of intense volume on the surface of the body. Indeed, Rodent even mentions the fact that the sound needs to be such that “it’s got weight to it, and it’s, like, present in the space”; much in the same way as being submerged in water, the weight of the music implies a pressure that surrounds and binds the body of the performer, pressing against the body and in so doing negatively defining the body as a weightless entity. Given all this, it is perhaps unsurprising that Rodent spoke of their “perception of emotion becom[ing] so much higher”; when lip-syncing’s technological necessities are at their optimum, they effect sonorous baths that caress the queen, creating what Lecourt terms “a veritable acoustic womb”.<sup>67</sup>

Interestingly, Zeynep Bulut specifically relates these theories to the voice in recorded music. Reformulating Anzieu’s Skin-ego as the “skin-voice”, Bulut claims that the skin-voice occurs when the voice can be perceived “as embodied sound, as a physical and phenomenal matrix of senses, a point of contact and difference between self and the external world”.<sup>68</sup> I find her invocation of the relationship between self and the external world, figured through a moment of contact and difference, to be particularly applicable to lip-syncing, given its reliance on incomplete reversibility as explained previously. Indeed, the reversible nature of the Skin-ego is of utmost importance. The Skin-ego is not a unidirectional process from mother to child; Anzieu states that “the bath of sounds prefigures the Skin-ego with its double surface, facing inwards and outwards, since this wrapping is

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<sup>66</sup> Édith Lecourt, “The Musical Envelope”, p. 213.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* p. 213.

<sup>68</sup> Zeynep Bulut, “Planes, Walls, and Bits of Sound: Healing a Voice”, in *Music & Politics*, Volume 10, Number 2 (Summer 2016), p. 2.

made up of sounds emitted by both the baby and its environment”.<sup>69</sup> Here a potential pitfall occurs in relation to lip-syncing. If the sonic wrapping of the Skin-ego, that which creates a sense of protection and containment for the child (and drag queen) is predicated upon the two-way movement of sounds, then how can this be reconciled with the fact that ShayShay and Rodent both claimed that hearing sounds produced by themselves was distracting, even upsetting, especially in Rodent’s case? Instead, I believe one can invoke Anzieu’s intersensoriality, and state that the double-sidedness of the Skin-ego in lip-syncing occurs between the two sides of percipience in the incomplete vocal reversibility that is dramatised by lip-syncing. Rather than the sonorous bath being effected through the soft lullabies of the mother being answered by the pre-verbal sounds of the baby, here the two sides of the bath are supported through the sound of the track, its presence felt upon the body of the performer, and the performance of the actions of voicing by the drag queen.

Finally, it is interesting that these sonic wrappings extend beyond performance. When speaking to Rodent, they said that “immersion in sound and stuff is definitely an emotional support, outside of performance as well for me”; as I cite above, they go on to explain how headphone listening in day-to-day life supplies a form of comfort and security, marking off an internal sonic space for them and blocking out potentially unwanted sounds and voices. The use of music in their everyday life curates a space not dissimilar from what they experience onstage – it fills their ears, wraps them in a protective sac, and excludes the unwanted sounds (whether of other people, or, in performance, of themselves). Such forms of sonic wrappings have been theorised by more recent theorists, such as Michael Bull, who describes iPod usage as placing the listener within “a zone of immunity and security, enveloped in what they imagine to be their own reality as they move through the city”.<sup>70</sup> The same lexicon of safety and envelopment positions both Rodent’s personal and performative usages of music within the same functional category, giving them emotional support.

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<sup>69</sup> Didier Anzieu, *The Skin-Ego*, p 184.

<sup>70</sup> Michael Bull, *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 3.

## *V.vii – Conclusion*

I wrote at the beginning of this chapter that listening is the first fundamental of lip-syncing; I hope now that the full importance and nuance of listening in this context has been elucidated. Far from the practical necessities of listening in lip-syncing, in that one has to be able to hear the words in order to synchronise their mouth and movements to it, these drag queens map out a theory of listening that attends to technological devices, immersive qualities, and emotional benefits. Listening in this context takes on a decidedly haptic function in a mode of listening I term haptic aurality, one that installs tactility within aurality. This tactile element heightens listening's attentiveness to space, depth, and pressure, all of which add to the ways in which the performing queen is able to suspend their disbelief in performance and ascribe their own bodies as the source of the voice on the track. This suturing of the schism between body and voice results in an ideal, and indeed idealised, performance.

Such a theorisation does not encompass other drag performers whose repertoire may differ distinctly. What, for example, of the work of legendary Lypsinka, or current performer Dickie Beau, who both lip-sync to spoken speech, rather than sung words with a soundtrack? Indeed, what about when Rodent themselves lip-sync to spoken word, without the thunderous music afforded them at The Troxy? When I posed this question to Rodent, they responded that “volume [...] helps convey and hold the emotional consistency of any performance, so even then if you go into a quiet bit” the effect is still maintained. To this, enlightening work could be conducted on assessing the concomitant hapticity of silence, as presented by Lisa Coulthard.<sup>71</sup> For this, surely, is the difference between a haptic aurality and a tactile aurality (or, perhaps, Garcia's “sonic tactility”). Hapticity needn't only be effected through volume and its literal affective touch, just as in the more typical haptic visuality the image need not actually bear the texture it projects onto the perceiver; silence, too, can be thick, can press upon, can swallow.

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<sup>71</sup> Lisa Coulthard, “Haptic Aurality”, pp. 16-29.

Within the scope of this chapter, however, in what my interlocutors have said and the theories they espouse, is that this suturing of the break between body and voice, this sensation of living in the song, is never one that binds the queen and the track together into a singularity. Their performances dramatise and exaggerate the inescapable rift between body and voice that occurs not only in lip-syncing but in any act of vocal utterance. The voice escapes, the voice must escape, for that is what makes it voice; however much a body may produce a voice, that voice can never exist in that body. In their specific mode of haptic aurality, Rodent, ShayShay, and Ruby generate the closest relation possible to voice, yet knowingly keep it at a remove.

## Chapter 6

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### The Cyborg Queen

*To speak like Finn Love, that performance was one of the most iconic performances that East London has seen in the past five years. I can't believe it didn't win!*  
~ ShayShay on "Mutual Core"

#### *VI.i – Introduction*

ShayShay's tongue-in-cheek incredulity at not winning *LIPSYNC1000* with their rendition of Björk's "Mutual Core" may have a shred of truth to it, being as it is an intensely personal piece of work. To speak of ShayShay's performances more generally, they tend to marry fun with the political in beautifully emotive ways. Not only this, but the performance nights they are a part of aim at, in their own words, "empowering the queer community, exposing intersectionality, and raising marginalised voices". And they do just that: as curator and host of *The ShayShay Show*, ShayShay strives to find both new and established performers, of all genders, ethnicities, and ages, and to offer them a stage that is not competitive – which is the most typical arena for newcomers to enter – but supportive. And their involvement with The Bitten Peach, a Pan-Asian queer cabaret collective, evidences a similar aim in highlighting the lack of representation queer people of colour experience. As a queer, non-binary person of colour themselves, ShayShay sits at a difficult, yet creative, intersection, one that they fruitfully explore throughout their performances: if a bone is strongest where it breaks, so too does ShayShay find fecundity in between social fractures. Such an exploration is evident in their performance of Björk's "Mutual Core".

“Mutual Core” explores the manifold ways in which social media affect ShayShay’s life, both personally and professionally. Intriguingly, ShayShay expresses such sentiments by foregrounding the technical mediations inherent to lip-syncing, pushing them further, adding layers of mediation, and in turn creating a rich tapestry of metaphor. Where lip-syncing always involves a distributed agency, between the loudspeakers, the drag queen, the original singer, and the attendant recording and distributing technologies, in “Mutual Core” ShayShay capitalises and extends such distributions to create a striking metaphor of the distributed agencies and assemblages at play in the formation of the modern-day subject. In this chapter, I will analyse ShayShay’s performance of “Mutual Core”, arguing that the particular idiosyncrasies of lip-syncing as a musical practice allow ShayShay to create a two-sided analysis of themselves as a cyborg: in the first instance, the performance highlights a deeply empowering potential, one that, through the performance’s foregrounding of a cyborg politic, allows for a breaking down of racist and transphobic hegemonic discourse; in the second, however, it details a far more pernicious side to this monistic mindset, evidencing the ever-present hold technology, and in particular social media, has on ShayShay’s life.

Having outlined ShayShay’s performance of “Mutual Core” in more detail, I shall present these two analyses, displaying how lip-syncing is used to weave nuanced allegories of materialistic discourse in relation to the twenty-first-century subject. To begin, I will explore these technological mediations through a synthesis of both Donna Haraway’s conception of the cyborg and Rosi Braidotti’s notion of the posthuman; through this analysis, I argue that a cyborg politic could offer a vibrant way of renegotiating the difficult intersection ShayShay finds themselves in between discourses of power and oppression, ones that they rally against consistently in their performances.<sup>1</sup> Taking cue from ShayShay’s own reading of their performance, I’ll then go on to describe the intense anxieties that can accrue from having technology and, most especially, social media so closely intertwined in one’s life; using Kiran Asle’s notion of “technological potential” as well as a synthesis of both Erving

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<sup>1</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).

Goffman's notion of the face and Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra, I shall explain how ShayShay feels locked in by social media.<sup>2</sup> Finally, I draw these together, to understand the bind in which ShayShay finds themselves, pulling away from technology whilst being ultimately indebted to it.

#### *VI.ii – ShayShay's "Mutual Core"*

While the piece has evolved over time, I will be focussing on one iteration of the performance, as performed at The Glory, a pub-cum-night club in East London. ShayShay begins onstage in a sci-fi inspired sleeveless dress with a hood cocooning their head. They begin to lip-sync, their movements jolting, mechanical even, as though they are not quite human. During the first verse, ShayShay disrobes, revealing a second outfit. They are wearing thigh-high black boots with green electrical tape ribbing the front seam; black duct tape winds up their legs and meets a pair of black underwear that leads up into a black corset; the green electrical tape is used again on the corset, wrapping round their body and forming a circle on their stomach; over this, ShayShay has wrapped their torso in cling film, which reflects eerily under the stage lights; on their arms are a pair of skin-tight black gloves; and on their head a futuristic helmet. Towards the end of the first verse, ShayShay finds an iPhone in their righthand glove. During the first chorus, they then begin to take selfies with the iPhone: between the bright flashes of the camera, capturing ShayShay's beaming smile, they pull away from the phone with a grimace, photographing a happy exterior with a more pained reality when the camera is down. In the second verse, ShayShay begins to tear at the cling film wrapped around their chest, ripping this second skin, and pulls out a charging cable from their stomach. Their lip-syncing is now more frantic and pained, their face contorted, agonising over the technology that they find within themselves. Reaching round to their back, ShayShay then finds another technological

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<sup>2</sup> Asle Kiran, "Technological Presence: Actuality and Potentiality in Subject Constitution", in *Human Studies*, Volume 35, Number 1 (Spring 2012), p. 78; Erving Goffman, "On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction", in *Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour* (Pantheon Books: New York, 1967); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (The University of Michigan Press: Michigan, 1994).

addition, an iPad, stowed somewhere on their person away from the audience's view. ShayShay then plugs the cable, this technological umbilical cord found in their stomach, into the iPad, yoking both new prostheses. As ShayShay raises the iPad to their face, the screen shows a still image of ShayShay's own mouth. At the drop in the music, the image begins to move, revealing itself to be a video, one that proceeds to lip-sync in lieu of ShayShay, the screen positioned in front of their mouth. At the end of the performance, ShayShay raises the iPad to their eyes and the screen displays an image of ShayShay's own eyes with mascara streaming down their cheeks.



Fig. 22: ShayShay performing "Mutual Core" at The Glory

*VI.iii – A Cyborg Politic*

Donna Haraway, in her landmark text “A Cyborg Manifesto”, made the claim that “by the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs”.<sup>3</sup> Humanity here becomes a hybrid humanity, one that draws together the archaic dualism of machine and organism into a webbed, knotty assemblage. Haraway cites three dualisms that have served to maintain the supposed sanctity of the human, those being: human versus animal; human-animal (organism) and machine; and the boundary between physical and non-physical.<sup>4</sup> These binaries are leakier, Haraway argues, than had previously been thought. In this section, I contend that ShayShay explores the second of Haraway’s distinctions; in foregrounding the technological mediations essential to lip-syncing, I believe ShayShay offers a poignant appraisal of the body as an assemblage, and as such one that rallies against Humanist dicta that would have ShayShay excluded from both racial and gendered discourse. In exploring what it means to be a cyborg, ShayShay lays bare the fallacy of the Human, offering both a powerful critique and an empowering potential.

Within the academic discourse surrounding this topic, two keywords are cited frequently, and should be explained fully here: “cyborg” and “posthuman”. These two words seem to elude exact definitions that separate them, often being used interchangeably, with some texts using both or one or other exclusively. For example, Nicholas Gane, in his brief history of the word “posthuman”, states that the idea of the posthuman made its way fully into the academic zeitgeist with Donna Haraway’s essay cited above, despite the fact that “Haraway does not use the term ‘posthuman’ explicitly”.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, even within academic factions of posthumanism etc. there are discrepancies as to what this means, with authors such as Katherine Hayles arguing vehemently for the importance of the body in posthumanism, rallying against a turn in the theory that focusses too

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<sup>3</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, p. 150.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 151-153.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Gane, “Posthuman”, in *Theory, Culture & Society*, Volume 23, Number 2-3 (2006), p. 431.

strongly on the purely cybernetic, thereby resurrecting an unhelpful Cartesian duality.<sup>6</sup> Personally, I have found “cyborg” to be most helpful when considering the more corporeal, material aspects, and “posthuman” for the more discursive implications. Therefore, I shall be using the terms in this way, except when paying respect to authors’ specific use in quotations.

ShayShay’s overt use of technology in this performance, making use of both an iPhone and an iPad, sheds interesting light on both the nature of lip-syncing and the cyborg body, playing with Haraway’s second distinction of organism-machine as it does. “Central to the construction of the cyborg”, Hayles writes, “are the information pathways connecting the organic body to its prosthetic extensions”, creating an extensity of the body, and one that is certainly evident in lip-syncing.<sup>7</sup> More than this, though, Leila Riszko, in her analysis of boychild’s lip-sync performances, suggests that lip-syncing effects a new extension of the voice. She writes that

if the voice does not stick to its body, it remains unlocatable. Existing as soundwaves, free-floating in a third space – one that is distinctly not-body – it manifests as both extension of and beyond bodily boundaries.<sup>8</sup>

Riszko contends that the voice, in its existence as extracorporeal event, breaches the more typical understandings of the body’s boundaries; in lip-syncing, it follows, there is a radical extensity and co-extensity of the body with other bodies, in attaching voices that originated in one body to another. In attaching Björk’s “free-floating” voice to their own body, therefore, ShayShay offers an extensity of the body: but what is being extended? Indeed, there seems to be both a co-extensity and co-temporality at play here: ShayShay’s mouth, for example, no longer ends or begins within the fleshed body, but traces its lineage, physically, back to the loudspeaker and, temporally, to Björk’s mouth in recording the song. Questions such as: where is ShayShay’s mouth in lip-syncing; where is their throat; when is their lip-syncing taking place? all lead to complex and duplicitous

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<sup>6</sup> Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Leila Riszko, “Breaching Bodily Boundaries”, p. 160.

answers. As ShayShay opens their mouth for their voice to come out, the sound is produced in a different location by the loudspeakers positioned around the room, and this is a voice produced in an anterior time and place. In short, ShayShay, in lip-syncing to Björk's voice, exhibits an extension of the body across time and space.

This conception of the body, its ability to transcend its corporeal shell, is a defining feature of the cyborg. For instance, Haraway deftly asks: "why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?"<sup>9</sup> In the modern world, our skinned, fatty perimeters are but one form of corporeal enclosure, with our bodies extending beyond our cutaneous membrane in countless ways: watches; contact lenses; hearing aids; microscopes; earphones; iPads; iPhones. In this way, ShayShay's use of the iPad in their performance brings this co-extensivity of the body to light, with the iPad literally taking the place of the mouth, technology lip-syncing for ShayShay. Such a move is counteractive to much of the dissimulating processes of lip-syncing I have mentioned thus far: the ascriptive processes, the bodies and voices of Imaginary proportions, the desirously haptic engagement with aurality, all point towards an obfuscation of the spaces of mediation between technology and queen, voice and body. Here, however, ShayShay takes an altogether different tack. In performatively highlighting the technological elements of lip-syncing, ShayShay fans away the smoke and mirrors of typical drag lip-sync performance, whilst also dismissing the idea of a closed and contained body. Such choices lead to fascinating political potential.

Before I assess such a politic, in considering these bodily and vocal extensions, it is worth considering whether they are prostheses or something more nuanced. Is ShayShay's mouth really extended? And, more acutely, how can one attribute the processes of voicing simply to the mouth, making of the voice a single organ to be extended, when voice is such a wholistic, bodily creation? To this end, rather than thinking of this extensivity in terms of prostheses, one can gain a more critical understanding of what is happening here by adopting Asle Kiran's notion of "virtualisation", a term he borrows from Pierre Lévy. Kiran states that "instead of asking whether MSN [Microsoft's now

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<sup>9</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, p. 178.

defunct messenger service] is an extension of our mouth in talking, or of our arm in writing, we should regard it as a virtualisation of communicating, as one of several possible ways of actualising this kind of action".<sup>10</sup> For lip-syncing, therefore, rather than understanding these external elements as extensions in a crude sense, re-invoking as it does a mental image of an encased body, one can understand them as coming together as a virtualisation of the process of singing. This understanding allows for a distributive agency in the processes of lip-syncing (about which I will speak more fully later) and does not suggest that a single orifice has dominion over the process.

As much as these virtualisations renegotiate the boundaries of the body, they also require a reconsideration of the materiality of the body. For one cannot deny that the human body does have a material boundary in the skin, and while Haraway may have asked why the body must stop at the skin, our cutaneous sacs certainly invoke an image of containment. Moreover, skin features heavily in "Mutual Core": ShayShay reveals their skin, removing their hooded dress; they remake the skin with their cling-filmed torso; and they explore the boundaries of the skin by tearing at this new, translucent membrane. What, then, does it mean to have a cyborg skin? Claudia Castañeda calls for a closer inspection of cyborg skin when she states that "cyborg skin becomes important here as part of a material-semiotic body whose limits and borders must be investigated rather than assumed".<sup>11</sup> Skin, therefore, is no longer simply that which encases the body, but is a site of meaning, of interaction, of breakages and sutures between the materiality of the skin and what that skin means.

ShayShay's skin and the ways in which it navigates a material-semiotic dyad form a large part of this performance. As I have mentioned, ShayShay stands with several skins: there is their fleshed skin, peaking out from openings in their costume, bare, a typical skin that, for all its biological materiality, also bears the inscriptions of race and gender that discourse has written on it; similarly, their makeup, their adorned skin, offering a retelling of those discourses, a new semiotics for a skin perhaps misunderstood by society; and the cling film that wraps around them, forming another new

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<sup>10</sup> Asle Kiran, "Technological Presence", p. 85.

<sup>11</sup> Claudia Castañeda, "Robot Skin: The Future of Touch?", in *Thinking Through the Skin*, p. 224.

skin of their creation. While I wish to talk about the discourses of race and gender in a moment, here I am concerned with the cling-filmed skin. Bound so tightly around their waist, it certainly takes on the properties of skin – encasing, protective, yet pervious. Just like the skin it is able to rip and tear, though, while when skin tears one is able to see what is beneath, with cling film one can already see, its translucence an unexpected skinned property. It is from this new skin that ShayShay procures the charging cable for the iPad. The use of the cling film here explores the boundaries of interiority and exteriority and places the machinic not necessarily as a prosthetic addition, but rather something visceral, decidedly *of* the body, making the skin something that must always be discovered. Indeed, this evinces Kim Toffoletti's point, when she states:

No longer is the technological/human interaction configured in terms of a prosthetic extension or invasion of the unified and organic self by technology. Instead, posthuman configurations play with the boundaries separating the organic and machinic, the human and the non-human, interiorities and exteriorities, self and Other.<sup>12</sup>

Here ShayShay does not place the machinic and the non- in a separatist binary, but rather as an emerging body together, the materiality of which is not an *a priori* given.

What ShayShay offers here is not the body as a continuously unified whole, but rather as an assemblage. By assemblage, I mean a collection of human and non-human actors, all of which act in meaningful ways, with nodes of agency distributed across the network rather than positioned at a central axis. Jane Bennett accurately describes assemblages here:

They have uneven topographies, because some of the points at which the various affects and bodies cross paths are more heavily trafficked than others, and so power is not distributed equally across its surface. Assemblages are not governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Kim Toffoletti, *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls: Feminism, Popular Culture and the Posthuman Body* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), p. 87.

<sup>13</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 24.

Making up parts of the assemblage of this performance, therefore, there are: Björk singing; the recording device; the editing software; the editor; the fields of distribution that led to ShayShay hearing the song; ShayShay themselves; the speaker system of the club; the audience; the iPhone; the iPad; the cable; etc. A web of actors stretches across this performance, destabilising the notion of a unitary single subject that is in control and that acts with total power. ShayShay's overt use of alternative agents in their performance brings to light a core value of Rosi Braidotti's posthumanism, that human beings do not wield an incontestable, justifiable, or accurate dominion over everything else, but rather exist in what Braidotti defines as "a transversal inter-connection or 'assemblage' of human and non-human actors [that] does not assume a human, individualized self as the deciding factor of main subject".<sup>14</sup>

It is here that I reach the crux of ShayShay's empowering critique in "Mutual Core". If, so far, I have focussed on the materiality of the cyborg, it is time to turn to the semiotics of such an analysis, to return to Castañeda, and explain how the interplay of the material-semiotic dyad results in a powerful dismantling of hegemonic prejudices. This analysis rests on Rosi Braidotti's formulation of the posthuman. The posthuman, for Braidotti, is that which rallies against the hegemony of the enlightenment Human, a category that excludes so many more subjects than it takes account for.<sup>15</sup> Braidotti argues that "the human is a normative convention, which does not make it inherently negative, just highly regulatory and hence instrumental to practices of exclusion and discrimination".<sup>16</sup> The posthuman, therefore, sits outside of these hegemonic lines of thought, and as such Braidotti argues for a subject that is not contained within itself in an ideal formation of Man, but rather adopts a monistic mindset, remarking upon the connections, rather than the distinctions, between things. Posthumanism is the answer to an entrenched system of beliefs that values a certain body over another: the body of the archetypal Human – of a white, heterosexual, and

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<sup>14</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 26.

cisgender male – will always be considered over any other body. Not even above any other Human body, for all other bodies will be relegated from the status of Human.

ShayShay, as a queer, non-binary person of colour sits outside of Humanism's categorisations; they are constantly policed by the Human, and therefore, by such a discourse, fail. ShayShay's body is inscribed with the discourses of a philosophy that does not bring them into the fold. In this way, "Mutual Core", with its radical rethinking of the body, could be incredibly empowering. Patricia MacCormack writes that

skin is the site of encounter between enfleshed self and society. The skin is where the self involutes into the world and the world into the self. Skin is a marked surface inscribed with texts of race, gender, sexuality, class and age before it is marked by ink.<sup>17</sup>

This is undeniably true, and ShayShay's body has always and already been marked by Humanism's discourse. But, in "Mutual Core" ShayShay refashions their skin as a cyborg skin and places themselves outside of this discourse; they, as Castañeda suggests, renavigate the material-semiotic dyad and offer a new way of being in the world. For posthuman bodies "are not slaves to masterdiscourses", as Judith/Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingstone write, but "emerge at nodes where bodies, bodies of discourse, and discourses of bodies intersect to foreclose any easy distinction between actor and stage, between sender/receiver, channel, code, message, context".<sup>18</sup> This performance, therefore, in highlighting its own assemblage, in exploring agency across the organism and the machine, could be read as exploring a new way of being in the world, a way that makes space for ShayShay. However, after having spoken to ShayShay, it became clear that posthumanism has the potential to be a knife that cuts both ways. Where the cyborg body points towards a potential liberation, other aspects of ShayShay's performance cement it back within hegemonic discourse.

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<sup>17</sup> Patricia MacCormack, *Posthuman Ethics: Embodiment and Cultural Theory* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Judith Halberstam & Ira Livingstone, "Introduction: Posthuman Bodies", in *Posthuman Bodies*, eds. Judith Halberstam & Ira Livingstone (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 2.

What this analysis fails to take into account is the third of Haraway's distinctions, that of the physical and the non-physical, for technology is not only important in its materiality but in its potential, in its affects and in its effects of the human. Kim Toffoletti, for example, says in no uncertain terms that "to be posthuman is to construct a notion of self within a culture of simulation, virtuality and the digital", focussing not on materiality but virtuality; and Katherine Hayles rightly remarks that "the defining characteristics [of posthumanism] involve the construction of subjectivity, not the presence of nonbiological components".<sup>19</sup> Rather than understanding this performance, therefore, as primarily an insight into the diverse assemblage of components in lip-syncing and how this reframes the physiological – and, to be sure, discursive – site of the body, what does it say about the non-physical effects of technology on the construction of subjectivity? ShayShay's own understanding of the piece is certainly more concerned with how technology relates to their life and self rather than its corporeal and political possibilities. In summarising the meaning of the piece, they said:

The piece – the piece! – the piece, kind of is an artistic... Wait, wait, wait... It's a performative metaphor, performative analogy... metaphor? Am I thinking of metaphor or analogy? Hmmm.

Erm, no, it's not an analogy, it's a metaphor! Yeah, a performative metaphor for my actual conflicting relationship with my use of social media.

For ShayShay, these bodily affectations aren't idealised projections of a new politic, but rather emblematic of the pervasiveness of technology in the modern world, entrapping the body rather than liberating it. In this section, therefore, I will trace ShayShay's understanding of the piece, arguing that technology and particularly social media can wield intensely regulatory and disciplinary power, enforcing a simulacrum of the self that only apes at depth.

ShayShay's understanding of the piece can first be noted when they find the iPhone stowed in their glove. ShayShay investigates the iPhone as though it is some novel object to them, inspecting

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<sup>19</sup> Kim Toffoletti, *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls*, p. 27-28; Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, p. 4.

its screen and touching its surface with a singular pointed finger, exploring the base materiality of the device, divining its meaning and utility. Having ascertained the iPhone's potential, the section continues with ShayShay painfully contorting their body, holding the iPhone outstretched, and beginning to take selfies; after each selfie, ShayShay violently switches position, (inaudibly) groaning in the interim between the next forced smile, a back and forth of toothy grins and pained grimaces. Speaking of this section, ShayShay said:

I'm taking selfies with [the iPhone], and using the flash to light myself. The poses I'm doing with these selfies, like someone obsessively taking selfies of themselves, trying to look happy, but not actually happy.

ShayShay highlights here the disparity between one's online persona – epitomised by the selfie – and their real life. Where, some twenty years ago, Hayles remarked that “the thirty million Americans who are plugged into the Internet increasingly engage in virtual experiences enacting a division between the material body that exists on one side of the screen and the computer simulacra that seem to create a space inside the screen”, the situation is now, for many, decidedly at one extreme.<sup>20</sup> If in 1999 people engaged with “computer simulacra” in a virtual world, it seems now that the balance has tipped and that virtual simulacra have usurped the primacy of the material body. As ShayShay brilliantly aphorises:

“What's more important: my face, or my Facebook?” Because, in actuality, you would automatically think “of course your face is more important”, of course, but actually how many more people interact with my Facebook on a daily basis than my face? What I say on my Facebook reaches more people and is more permanent than what I say with my actual face, so what actually is more important? And so, the curation of the digital self, the representation we choose, the curation of the digital self is such a vital part of one's identity.

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<sup>20</sup> Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, p. 20.

Between ShayShay and Hayles, two crucial points are raised: that of faciality and that of simulacra. The interrelationship of these two concepts generates technology's deleterious potential to exercise a disciplinary function over ShayShay.

ShayShay questions what is more important, their face or their Facebook, but what is a face, and does a Facebook not also have a face? Beyond the literal composite of eyes, nose and mouth on the front of our heads, Erving Goffman describes the face as "something that is not lodged in or on [a person's] body, but rather something that is diffusely located in the flow of events in the encounter and becomes manifest only when these events are read and interpreted for the appraisals expressed in them".<sup>21</sup> Rather than an anatomical feature – though undoubtedly it is also this and surely this is involved in the distinction ShayShay makes – the face is all of that which goes into social interactions, and is contingent and relational. To have face, to save face, to lose face: all of these are states of relationality. The distinction, therefore, between one's face and one's Facebook is in the fact that Facebook affords different ways and contexts of interaction. As ShayShay notes, Facebook has greater reach, but it also affords greater anonymity and therefore less culpability, as well as, in a similar way to other mediated forms of communication, the potential for premeditation but uniquely also the potential for instantaneous written response, without visual or vocal cues.

If Facebook affords a new mediated and mediatised way of interacting with people, involving, as ShayShay notes, a curation of the digital self, what kind of digital self can one present? Hayles describes these "digital selves", as ShayShay terms them, as "computer simulacra", invoking the work of Jean Baudrillard, with whom the concept of simulacra is most associated. In his work *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard outlines how simulation has come to supersede the real. He writes that "simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal".<sup>22</sup> In his view, simulation "is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real", the sign thereby preceding the real, and

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<sup>21</sup> Erving Goffman, "On Face-Work", p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 1.

becoming the hyperreal.<sup>23</sup> How might this relate to ShayShay? Were someone to find ShayShay's phone after performance, scroll through its images, and find their face smiling back, what might they think? These images offer up signs of the real in its stead, belying the actuality of ShayShay's condition. The face that ShayShay is able to put out on Facebook, their curated digital self, need not have any relation to how their offline persona actually feels. Indeed, the interrelationship of simulacra, faciality, and social media can be malign: engaging with a curated simulacrum, one that extends the flow of faciality through a mediated network, one could argue the situation is nearing Baudrillard's dystopian endpoint, in which, rather than capitalism suppressing participation, "the problem is that we participate with signs and networks of signs and not with each other".<sup>24</sup> "Mutual Core" shows the vacuous nature of these signs, referential of nothing but themselves. If, as I had suggested in the previous section, such anthropo-technological assemblages can offer new virtualisations of communication, they make no promise to be benevolent.

Yet, in the face of these fallacious simulacra-selfies, there is at least the possibility of breaking away. As ShayShay explains, "after the first chorus I'm able to rip away from the phone – the selfies were taking over my life but I'm getting away from it". But this respite is only brief as, upon thinking they have escaped, ShayShay "discover[s] that the technology has been within [them] the whole time, and the cord comes out of [their] chest, the iPad comes out of [their] back, and [they] plug back into the motherboard". This moment is extremely affective in the performance – ShayShay claws at the cling-filmed flesh of their stomach, the "skin" peeling away as a charging cable slowly unfurls from their viscera. This moment expresses the inescapability of technology in ShayShay's life, their decision to break away from the iPhone mocked by the charging cable protruding from their stomach, more a parasite than a prosthetic. As ShayShay's agency is challenged by the technology's ever-presence within them, a posthuman utopia slips into dystopia.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Ernest Hakanen, *Branding the Teleself: Media Effects Discourse and the Changing Self* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007), p. 62.

This section of the performance speaks to the startling ubiquity of technology, specifically mobile phones, in modern life. I find helpful parallels here with another of Asle Kiran's concepts, that of technological presence. Kiran argues:

Rather [than] focussing on artefacts in-use, technologies' impact should be investigated through the concept of *technological presence*. This concept expresses that besides the palpable sense in which technologies influence the lifeworld through their actuality, they also influence it through their *potentiality* [emphasis in original].<sup>25</sup>

In the case of the mobile phone therefore, even when it's not in use, it still holds the potential to be used; and this potential extends not only to its primary function, but to alarms, reminders, photos, videos, etc. to far more internal (even invasive) capabilities of, for example, monitoring the user's heartrate. A whole plethora of technological potentiality is dormant within the iPhone such that not even placing it to one side can remove its effects on the subject. This ubiquity is dramatised in ShayShay's performance by the realisation that these items have quite literally always been with them, inside of them.

In lieu of the previous section's empowering reading of an assemblage with distributed agency one now finds a much more sinister analysis. Bree McEwan and Jennifer Mease go so far as to suggest that social networking sites, such as Facebook and Instagram, accessed through iPhones and iPads, "serve a similar function as [the] physical panopticon, but they extend the threat of visibility across time and space. [...] Surveillance is no longer bound to particular institutions and spaces, it spans across them".<sup>26</sup> McEwan and Mease's invocation of the Panopticon casts a shadow across "Mutual Core".<sup>27</sup> The Panopticon, that horrific 19<sup>th</sup>-century invention – apocryphally based on the octagonal menageries of French royalty – that offered a physical model for discipline, is

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<sup>25</sup> Asle Kiran, "Technological Presence", p. 78.

<sup>26</sup> Bree McEwan & Jennifer Mease, *Compressed Crystals: A Metaphor for Mediated Identity Expression*, in *Social Networking and Impression Management: Self-Presentation in the Digital Age*, ed. Carolyn Cunningham (London: Lexington Books, 2013), p. 100.

<sup>27</sup> It is worth considering also the broader implications of panoptic social media, specifically with relation to big tech, data collection, and algorithmic malpractice, Nathanael Fast & Arthur Jago, "Privacy Matters... Or Does It? Algorithms, Rationalization, and the Erosion of Concern for Privacy", in *Current Opinion on Psychology* Volume 31, Number 44 (2020), pp. 44-48.

enlightening when applied to social media. This theoretical prison was designed so that each prisoner was isolated in a cell, and that each cell connected to the next forming a grand ring, in the centre of which stood a viewing tower. Each prisoner could see the tower, but not inside it; and from the tower, each cell could be seen. What such a design created was the constant and implicit surveillance of each prisoner, for, unable to see into the tower, each prisoner would feel as though they were being watched, whether true or not. The Panopticon severs completely any interrelation between the seeing and the seen: the prisoner is seen, the tower sees, and there is no inversion.<sup>28</sup> The Panopticon is most powerful not as an architectural entity, though, but as a physical model for discipline, one whose primary effects – the automatic regulation of power through the very subjects under it – are universally transferable.<sup>29</sup>

At first glance, McEwan and Mease's relation of social media to the Panopticon seems obvious: social media's ubiquity through technological presence results in a regulatory and disciplinary function through which users feel as though they are constantly on show. However, it is interesting that Baudrillard, whilst heralding the age of the simulacrum, marks the death of the Panopticon. For Baudrillard, the Panopticon can no longer function because the poles of seer and seen have been abolished, in that now one is already on the other side of the panoptic gaze.<sup>30</sup> Baudrillard gets to this point through the 1970s invention of "TV verité" with *An American Family*, the first reality documentary television show that showed the life, and subsequent (causality aside) breakdown of the Louds family. If reality TV saw the end of the panoptic gaze (though, surely, modern CCTV surveillance testifies to the Panopticon's continued presence), then what might Baudrillard make of Facebook? Facebook differs, to be sure, from the Panopticon: users choose what people see; people can stalk users' pages invisibly, but they can also "like", "share", and "comment" their public approval or concern; and the seer and the seen integrate through the interrelationship

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<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 1977), p. 201.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p. 205.

<sup>30</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, p. 29.

of curated online personae. This new panoptic – to be sure McEwan and Mease describe social media as “similar” rather than “the same as” – model means that Facebook users, like ShayShay, have the ability to put themselves in view of others constantly, and always to be in readiness for a potential interaction.

More concerning, even, than the ever-present potentiality of technology to act, however, is the uncanny experience of technology acting against and in place of ShayShay’s wishes. When ShayShay plugs back into the motherboard, as they put it, they proceed to “battle the lip-sync”, evidencing an extremely different analysis of the assemblages to the one offered in the previous section. With the iPad lip-syncing, ShayShay forces it away from themselves, sometimes lip-syncing with it, at others straining their face in the visible throes of altercation. The close of the fight is particularly telling:

And, at the very end, I unplug, try to escape, but I’m the one that ends up dead, or “off”, and the iPad’s still alive. [...] I’m off.

Rather than an assemblage of human and non-human parts, with nodes of agency spread across the network, ShayShay’s performance foregrounds an explicitly binary opposition between the organic and the machinic, in which the machinic manages to usurp the human. At the close of the piece, the sight of ShayShay shaking in defeat – and seemingly in death – as they raise the iPad to their face to reveal a pair of tearful eyes is particularly uncanny. It is as though the iPad is mocking ShayShay, projecting their tear-stained eyes, revealing the “real” behind the simulacrum of the selfie. This uncanny move, where the iPad seems to take on a startling agency of its own, exhibits what Jane Bennett might describe as the iPad’s move from an “object” to a “thing”. This distinction is made clear by Bennett when she writes that

thing-power gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. xvi.

Traversing the ontological dualism between subject and object, the thing lives in an intermediary realm. Yet, where Bennett argues for thing-power's ability to engender a holistic political and ecological consciousness on the part of the human, an awareness of their role in the greater assemblage of the world, here thing-power rears an ugly visage, a dystopian idea that technology might one day thwart its creator. The iPad's thingness affords it an unsettling agency, and as ShayShay's eyes stare out at the audience at the end of the performance, it is as though their projected eyes are the mythic eyes of the technological panopticon, forever there in technological presence with the human entrapped. The uncanny realisation that the technology is not part of themselves but very much an Other within themselves casts the iPad as a parasite on its host, leeching from ShayShay till it finally kills them.

Clearly this reading differs greatly from the utopic visions of a cyborg politic outlined in the previous section. Where ShayShay could have found themselves free from the strictures of a prejudiced discourse they are instead imprisoned through technology. The situation is more complex, however, and in the next section I will explicate just how bound ShayShay is between these two factions.

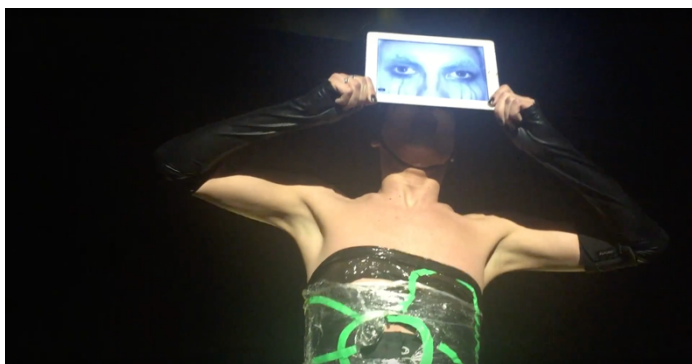


Fig. 23: ShayShay's eyes staring out into the audience as the iPad wins the battle and ShayShay is turned "off"

VI.v – ShayShay’s Bind

ShayShay said that “Mutual Core” is a performative metaphor for their “actual conflicting relationship with [their] use of social media”. Clearly ShayShay has a desire to “unplug from the motherboard” as it were: tired of the compulsive selfie-taking; panicked by the omnipresence of technological mediation in their life; acutely disenchanted by their interaction with signs of signs with no base reality. Why, then, do they not simply get off Facebook? While it may not take them completely out of a society of simulation, surely it would help their personal wellbeing? Unfortunately, it seemingly isn’t that simple:

[Sometimes when] Facebook makes me really mad, or twitter makes me upset, I’m like “ugh I just want to delete it all. I don’t wanna be on there”, or “I wanna take a break from there, or use it less”. But because I can’t do that, every single one of my events – at this moment I probably have about seven events on Facebook – and if I’m not online posting about them and making them happen, they won’t be a success. So, it is like this battle with how to... how do I interact with the internet and use it to my advantage, without it actually causing me extra stress, extra sadness?

This admission from ShayShay highlights the core of the bind they find themselves in. Social media provides an unprecedented level of access for drag performers. Facebook, with its specific “events” feature, offers a way of disseminating fringe artistic materials without having to go down the typical routes that may be monetarily unfeasible or institutionally closed to them; Facebook allows for a bottom-up, performer-led system, without the immediate need for the approbation of the elite.<sup>32</sup> This is certainly true of ShayShay; hosting a plethora of performance events – such as *The ShayShay Show*, *The Bitten Peach*, and *Good Judy* to name but a few – ShayShay uses Facebook as their primary mode of publicising their drag events. Without the free marketing Facebook offers, ShayShay wouldn’t be able to garner nearly as much interest in their shows.

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<sup>32</sup> Dustin Kidd, *Social Media Freaks: Digital Identity in the Network Society* (Colorado: Westview Press, 2017), p. 10.

Being trapped by the opportunity of free marketing hardly seems to be a calamitous issue, though; the issue arises more when ShayShay's personal and professional uses of social media merge. ShayShay describes their personal grievances with Facebook in the following ways:

Whenever I try and say something that I think "oh, yeah, everyone's going to agree with me because it's a forward-thinking idea about equality" and then whenever anyone has anything to say against it, I'm like "whhhhhhy!?" I just get so upset, and sometimes it spins me out for a day or two, and, especially when I engage, sometimes it fucks me over for a day or two. [...] The more bold I am with the things I say online, which I think are often the most important things, that I feel the most impassioned about, that I think are the most strong to say, that obviously on the wider scheme might be controversial things, or, not controversial, just, you know, backward idiots won't agree with, those things I really push for, are also the things that are met with opposition from that middle-ground people who think that they're liberal, lefty, who *think* that they're liberal and whatever and are just, you know, oh god, it just makes me mad.

Here, Facebook's unique mode of communication throws up some complicated issues with regard to face. How can one maintain face when the content they put out can be engaged with by any number of people? True, Facebook's "friends" feature is intended to limit and protect users' privacy, but with thousands of friends on their personal Facebook alone – a significant amount of free advertising – the reach of their posts is vast. The heavily mediated nature of Facebook interactions, coupled with its instantaneity, allows for others to comment, interact, or reproach ShayShay without fear of retribution: they are, as the phrase goes, "keyboard warriors", typing away behind the safety of their screen. Whereas one might be more delicate or embarrassed to confront ShayShay's views on gender politics – a topic they frequently talk about in real life (IRL, not URL, as it were) – Facebook affords a certain armour for attacks.

It is hardly surprising that this criticism is able to affect ShayShay so greatly; for example, Catalina Toma has explained how social media is typically used as an act of self-affirmation, whereby

scrolling through one's own timeline can actively ameliorate one's mood.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, when this cathartic and affirmative process of voicing their opinions on Facebook is met with criticism, ShayShay's original upset that spurred them to write the post is only heightened. Moreover, it cannot help that many of ShayShay's political views are ridiculed and lambasted in the press on an almost daily basis: the transphobic rhetoric that pervades the media, on all sides, is so abhorrently prevalent in the recent journalistic climate that ShayShay is near-daily affronted by headlines, articles, and think-pieces that seek to deny their gender. To have, therefore, ShayShay's views disparaged not only by the political and cultural milieu but also by their friends who "think that they're liberal", as ShayShay put it, can be incredibly demoralising. As Dustin Kidd aptly states: "those hurtful messages are coming from both the entertainment industry *and* our peers, and that just makes them hurt even more" [emphasis in original].<sup>34</sup>

The tension arises, therefore, between ShayShay's reliance on social media for their professional life, and the damage it can cause to their emotional wellbeing. An appeasement may be, as ShayShay suggests, to perform a "curation of the digital self". ShayShay states:

The curation of the digital self, like the representation we choose, the curation of the digital self is such a vital part of one's identity, actually, especially when you are someone who has any sort of spotlight or has any sort of public recognition. Not to say, not to be like, "you know when you're famous you've got to think about these things", but anyone who has a large network of connections – friends, family, fans – has to really think about, or doesn't have to, you don't have to think about what you put online, but you do. Everyone does.

A curation of the digital self need not necessarily be a lie, but it does necessitate a preclusion of the truth; much like a photograph, the curation of the digital self is to frame the self (in many ways quite literally) and in any act of framing one assigns focus to certain aspects and omits others.<sup>35</sup> And, like

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<sup>33</sup> Catalina Toma, "Psychological Benefits and Costs: A Self-Affirmation Framework for Understanding the Effects of Facebook Self-Presentation", in *Social Networking and Impression Management: Self-Presentation in the Digital Age*, ed. Carolyn Cunningham (London: Lexington Books, 2013), p. 228.

<sup>34</sup> Dustin Kidd, *Social Media Freaks*, p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2003), p. 41.

a photograph, this need not be a simulacrum – simulacrum is not equivalent to representation, and it follows that it is possible to represent oneself online with referents to the real. However, one notices in “Mutual Core” a denial of this, less a curation but a manufacturing, ShayShay offering smiling faces to appease the keyboard warriors on their feed, to reel them in to their shows, and silently weeping when the camera is turned off.

What does it mean to mask one’s honest emotions online? More than that, what does it mean to forego one’s politics and instead send out a smiling selfie? The answer to these questions must be met through an acknowledgment of the fact that Facebook, and all social media sites, are products of hegemonic capitalist infrastructures. Dustin Kidd states this in no uncertain terms when he asks how those positioned in marginal subject positions “negotiate the tension between being marginalized peoples and using a tool that is effectively owned and controlled by those with the most social power: economic elites who are overwhelmingly male, cisgender, white, nondisabled, and heterosexual?”<sup>36</sup> While this is a true dichotomy in many situations, Kidd’s question has especial pertinence to Facebook’s relationship with drag queens. In 2014, Facebook began to change anyone’s name on Facebook that was not their birthname, which led to many drag queens having their profiles forcibly amended. Changing their names on social media naturally led to colossal problems in using the free marketing that Facebook offers for performers in the form of “events”, as these events were no longer glamorously marketed by their drag alter egos, but by their rather less glamorous daytime figures. Rightly, drag queens fought this move, also bringing into the argument the fact that the new changes had dangerously forced many trans people to revert to their deadnames on Facebook, causing intense personal distress and jeopardising their safety. Though Facebook did recant the move, with Chief Product Manager Chris Cox issuing a statement apologising “to the affected community of drag queens, drag kings, transgender, and extensive community of friends, neighbours, and members of LGBTQ community”, moves like this show that

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<sup>36</sup> Dustin Kidd, *Social Media Freaks*, p. 29.

social media sites do have an immense power to regulate identities.<sup>37</sup> Where before McEwan and Mease spoke of technological presence as a virtual panopticon, here the power of that disciplinary phantasma comes to light.

Herein lies the crux of ShayShay's bind. On the one hand, ShayShay requires Facebook to promote their events; on the other, Facebook supplies a platform for people to criticise and belittle their political views; and all the while the (Hu)Man holding out both these hands is a capitalist conglomerate that has the power to deny their identity.

#### *VI.vi – Conclusion*

How, then, can one reconcile the bind in which ShayShay finds themselves? A crucial fact to remember is that while my first reading of "Mutual Core" is potential, it is also utopic, and cyborgs have no necessity to be perfect. Donna Haraway writes that "our bodies, ourselves; bodies are maps of power and identity. Cyborgs are no exception. A cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end (or until the world ends); it takes irony for granted".<sup>38</sup> Cyborgs can still be sites of contestable power relations, so it is perhaps unsurprising that ShayShay finds themselves in such a predicament. Moreover, "the main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism, and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism".<sup>39</sup> This point perfectly encapsulates ShayShay's bind – they are the product of the culture that dominates them, but it is through this subjugation that they may find their release; for, as Haraway notes, "illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins".<sup>40</sup> Being caught between is perhaps the inevitable plight of the cyborg. Indeed, in-betweenness itself needn't be negative. Braidotti speaks at

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p. 87.

<sup>38</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, p. 180.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p. 151.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* p. 151.

length about how the posthuman subject takes shape in between “nature/technology; male/female; local/global; present/past – in the spaces that flow and connect the binaries”.<sup>41</sup> Rather than envisaging ShayShay as being trapped therefore, perhaps one can understand the friction of being caught between idealisation and reality as the generative force that will lead to new formations.

For what can it mean to be a subject? As I have argued throughout this thesis, an idealised, unitary subject with sole agency and dominion is a fallacy. In her analysis of power, Judith Butler interrogates the fact that the subject is always and necessarily also subjected, for “‘subjection’ signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject”.<sup>42</sup> In order to be a subject in any sense, one must, according to Butler, be subordinated, for there is no subject prior to this.<sup>43</sup> While Butler’s discussion may be more abstracted, and indeed she states clearly that “subject”, rather than “person”, is primarily a linguistic category, authors such as Fred Moten express the very real-life implications for such enforced subordinations on people. Speaking particularly of black musicmaking, Moten explores the complex relationship between personhood and subjectivity, a subjectivity that is contested and heavily implicated with subordination.<sup>44</sup> For Moten, these issues can be brought to the fore, worked through, contested, in performance.<sup>45</sup> This is what ShayShay is doing in “Mutual Core”. “Mutual Core” takes as its starting position a narrative of subjugation, of inescapable confinement by both the material and digital technological apparatus of their life; yet, at the same time, their performance shows the potential for a new way of reading the situation, of ShayShay’s body, of their life, offering new avenues of discursive thought. “Mutual Core” is a play of subjection, that “discourse we never chose but that,

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<sup>41</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 164.

<sup>42</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* p. 253.

paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency”, one that ShayShay explores, navigates, and rationalises through their performance.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 2.

VI

## THE QUEER VOICE

## Chapter 7

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### Voicing Queerness

*Is gay shame the new gay pride?*

~ David Halperin & Valerie Traub<sup>1</sup>

*And so I tell my poo stories, because it's the only way I know how to free myself from the shackles of shame  
that would see us all bound for life. It's the only way I know how to survive*

~ Crystal Rasmussen<sup>2</sup>

*What can you say about success? Nothing! But the failures – that tiny subspecies of homosexual, the doomed  
queen, who puts the car in gear and drives right off the cliff! That fascinates me.*

*The fags who consider themselves worthless because they are queer, and who fall into degradation and  
sordidness! It was those whom Christ befriended*

~ Andrew Holleran<sup>3</sup>

### VII.i – Introduction

I first encountered Bourgeoisie's performance of "ChemSexxx" at a Mental Health Awareness evening hosted by The Glory, a well-trodden queer pub in East London, and indeed the same locale at which I first saw ShayShay's "Mutual Core", the subject of the previous chapter.<sup>4</sup> The evening was organised by Olly Alexander, frontman of the British pop band Years & Years, as part of a

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<sup>1</sup> David Halperin & Valerie Traub, "Beyond Gay Shame", in *Gay Shame*, eds. David M. Halperin & Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Crystal Rasmussen, *Diary of a Drag Queen* (London: Ebury Press, 2019), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1978), p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> I take here Bougie's stylisation of "ChemSexxx", rather than the more conventional "chemsex", following how she writes of the performance in our correspondence.

documentary he was making for the BBC, focussing on the intersection between mental health and LGBTQ+ identities. Throughout the night, performers took to the stage to perform out their own struggles pertaining to their queer identities. Glamrou, a fiercely funny queen of Iraqi heritage, riffed eloquently on the relationship between their queer and Muslim identities, being “too queer for Islam, and too Islamic for queers”, eventually forging a bond between them by finding similarities between Islamic depictions of Hell and gay sex clubs. Another queen, Barbs, gave a less narratively obvious performance, beginning onstage swaddled in white cloth, which gradually loosened and billowed against a wind machine, denuding Barbs in the process, making of her a sort of Botticelli-style Venus, her penis readily on show. What both of these performances share, and indeed what becomes a focus of Bourgeoisie’s performance, is an unfettering from the shackles of shame. Glamrou spoke of the shame they felt throughout their entire life due to the imposed prohibition of their queerness by misled Islamic teachings (they made pains to stress that Islam *de facto* is in no way queerphobic, but rather, if read in the right, and more obvious, way, offers an empowering queer outlook); and Barbs’s performance seemed to deny the idea that they should be ashamed of their body, one that stands in opposition to a heteronormative confluence of sex and gender. Bourgeoisie’s performance certainly follows in this same vein, shining light onto an issue in the queer community that is shrouded in shame and secrecy.

But, having been asked to present a piece at this Mental Health Awareness evening, what topic to choose? In interview, Bougie, as she is affectionately known, was very clear in what she chose and why it was so imperative to LGBTQ+ mental health now:

I think of the key aspects plaguing gay men right now – and gay, like, gay men, not necessarily queer men and queer creatures, like [gay men] going to XXL, going to Fire, just sort of gay men living their gay lives, totally fine, no judgement – but I think one of the biggest things that’s happening in that scene is a little lack of confidence that’s then boosted by drugs and then it sort of manifests itself that you can only really feel confident and have sex when you’re high on drugs.

Here Bougie outlines the central conceit of her performance: a response to and a commentary on the growing prevalence of “chemsex” practices in London’s gay scene. Chemsex, as defined by Jamie Hakim, “is a vernacular term used to describe group sexual encounters between gay and bisexual men in which the recreational drugs GHB/GBL, mephedrone and crystallised methamphetamine are consumed”.<sup>5</sup> In these settings, gay men, often in large groups, will commune via hook-up apps and meet to consume drugs and often, though not always, have sex; in the public eye, such practices are commonly seen to be at worst degenerate and self-annihilating, and at best tragic cries for help, though both of these readings will be questioned further throughout this chapter. Compounded with chemsex’s perceived hedonism in terms of its flouting of drug laws, pursuance of narcotic highs, and weekend-long (or longer) binges, is the fact that these gatherings are also thought to be high-risk situations for HIV transmission. While much of the fear of HIV transmission is embedded in a particularly pernicious and medicalised form of post-AIDS homophobia, as shall be detailed below, the combination of drugs, sex, and HIV make an unholy trinity in both hetero- and homosexual psyches. Bougie’s performance deals with the complex ambivalence that surrounds gay sex, gay sexuality, community, isolation, and mental health, in a performance that offers an empowering answer to current queer politics surrounding sex, drugs, and shame.

In many ways, this routine is deeply personal for Bougie, for in 2012 Bougie seroconverted, thereby becoming HIV-positive. Bougie’s HIV diagnosis was a direct consequence of her involvement in the chemsex scene in London, a scene in which she began to participate after having moved to the city. While I will discuss this at length below, giving space for Bougie to speak in her own words about such a sensitive topic, here it is important to stress that, in spite of the similarities, this routine is not about Bougie. As will become more apparent throughout this chapter, Bougie continues to refer to the protagonist of the piece as a “character”, effecting a decided self-alienation from the performance’s narrative. Rather than a rendering of her own experiences, Bougie’s primary

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<sup>5</sup> Jamie Hakim, “The Rise of Chemsex: Queering Collective Intimacy in Neoliberal London”, in *Cultural Studies*, Volume 33, Number 2 (2019), p. 249.

intention in the piece is to speak more broadly about ideas of community, and to counter what she perceives to be a malicious culture of disposability when it comes to certain queer relationships, notably those fostered through chemsex. In light of the potential isolation chemsex participants may experience, Bougie wishes to create community and fellow feeling within this routine.

As such, Bougie actively endeavours to involve and engage the audience. Bougie achieves this, I believe, in four ways. The first is through a physical connection with the audience. Throughout the routine, Bougie enters the audience, interacting directly with them, as well as giving six audience members red ribbons that link to Bougie onstage. The second way in which a connection is forged is through the shared cultural memory of HIV and AIDS, and the vicarious enactment of risk and transmission that the performance entails; this reading is one that has been posited in part by Stephen Farrier in his brief analysis of the performance, but one that I further here.<sup>6</sup> The third is through an ingenious turn on the dialectic of shame. Shame, as theorised by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, at one time radically individuates and collectivises the audience; I believe Bougie achieves such an effect not only through thematic means, but also through the necessary aural soundscape that occurs during lip-syncing.<sup>7</sup> The fourth and final way in which Bougie fosters a connection between herself and the audience, and indeed one that flows beneath the preceding three, is through lip-syncing as a performative medium. I argue that Bougie capitalises on lip-syncing's necessary distributed agency in order to implicate the audience in her narrative. Moreover, by choosing *not* to lip-sync at crucial moments, I argue that Bougie effects a radical diegesis that throws the audience into the most highly charged moments of the performance.

I will begin by outlining the sonic structure of Bougie's "ChemSexxx", and then detail her physical movements, which add much to the narrative arc of the piece. I will then present a fuller account of Bougie's intention for and understanding of the performance. Bougie's main thematic

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen Farrier, "Re-membering AIDS, Dis-membering Form", in *Viral Dramaturgies: HIV and AIDS in Performance in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Alyson Campbell & Dirk Gindt (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2018), pp. 155-172.

<sup>7</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

concern is the tension between the ephemerality of physical connections in chemsex sessions and the potential longevity of their epidemiological consequences. Through the performance, Bougie hopes to counter the disposability of human interaction, and to create a community amongst the assembled audience. Given Bougie's focus on the audience, I will then speak about the audience, in conversation with one audience member, Erica.<sup>8</sup> I will then argue that there are two ways in which Bougie does create a sense of community, both of which are aided by lip-syncing's unique performative potential. First, I will assess the intergenerational ties, furthering Stephen Farrier's analysis of the piece. Second, I will interrogate the critical use of shame in the performance, arguing that Bougie creates an intense relation between audience and performer through the dialectics of shame. Ultimately, I hope to argue that Bougie creates a queer voice that speaks with her queer community, a voice that is made possible by the structural assemblage and distributed agency of lip-syncing as a mode of voicing. Identity, affect, and lip-syncing come together in this performance to speak to and with all queers in an ingenious turn on the dialectic of shame.

#### *VII.ii – "ChemSexxx"*

Bougie's edit takes as its constitutive skeleton Robyn's song "Do It Again", a track she made in collaboration with Norwegian electronic music duo Röyksopp. Robyn, a Swedish singer-songwriter whom Bougie describes as "kind of my God", released the track in 2014, the same year that Bougie created this performance. The song's lyrics, while detailing the toxic relationship of two people in a tempestuous on-and-off relationship, are readily transposable to issues of addiction, as Bougie expresses in her lip-sync performance. The first verse and chorus aptly evince this:

One more time  
Let's do it again  
Blow my mind  
Do it again

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<sup>8</sup> Erica's name has been anonymised, though all other information about her remains accurate.

And then it arrives  
The moment before  
The anticipation  
You know it's like mmm  
Wait for it  
Wait for the build-up  
And then let's do it again  
We do what we want  
And as soon as it's done  
We just do it again  
Let's do it all  
And when we come down  
We just do it again  
Don't care what they say  
It hurts so good  
I don't wanna stop  
I know I should  
(But let's do it again)

Lines such as “one more time”, “do it again”, “let’s do it all”, and “don’t wanna stop”, clearly resemble the cyclical ensnarement of addiction, the protagonist drawn into an untenable pattern of drug use (in Bougie’s narrative), in which they “don’t wanna stop” but “know [they] should”. Similarly, the focus on “anticipation”, “build-up”, “blow[ing one’s] mind”, and the subsequent “come down” not only reflect the waves of a drug-induced high, but also depict the more carnal *jouissance* of sexual encounters, lending itself well therefore to Bougie’s narrative of chemsex.

Bougie does not, however, leave the track untouched. In a process that she describes as “mining audio and appropriating it from other sources”, Bougie cuts Robyn’s track and inserts spoken-word interludes of found audio in order to cement fully her narrative in an aural sphere. Before the first verse enters, the audience hears a man’s voice, in what appears to be a lecture-like setting, saying:

What I want to get across to people, and what I think we should be doing as a community, is reminding people that sex and intimate connections between one person and another is one of the most amazing things we have as a species, and we should be using it.

Instantly, therefore, the audience is aware that this performance will have something to do with sex, intimacy, and possibly community. This voice is in fact David Stuart's voice, a key figure in chemsex discussions, and indeed the person who first coined the term "chemsex".<sup>9</sup>

After the first chorus, Bougie inserts her second audio clip, which introduces chemsex into the equation. The clip is a conversation between two people, presumably some sort of GUM clinic employee and a patient:

Person 1: When did you last have sober sex?

Person 2: Sober sex?

P 1: Let's say sex without any chems, like crystal meth, or mephedrone, or G?

P 2: Erm, I don't know, a few years back? Maybe, three years, four years?

P 1: That's a long time

P 2: I mean, I prefer it with, so I don't see the point in having it without<sup>10</sup>

Up until now, these interludes have been inserted into the track, rather than overlain, meaning the listener does not have Robyn's track as an underscore. In the third interlude, however, the audio sits over Robyn's instrumental section after the second chorus.

Person 1: Hi there, Jason, thanks for waiting while these results came back, would you like a glass of water?

Person 2: No, thanks

P 1: Jason, the rapid HIV test that we just did was positive

P 2: Wow, I don't believe it... I have HIV?

P 1: I can understand how this could be a bit of a shock to you

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<sup>9</sup> David Stuart, "Chemsex: Origins of the Word, a History of the Phenomenon and a Respect to the Culture", in *Drugs and Alcohol Today*, Volume 19, Number 1 (2019), pp. 3-10.

<sup>10</sup> Incidentally, the "clinician" in this episode is also voiced by David Stuart: David Stuart, "'Chemsex': A Role Play for Training Purposes" (December 2013) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOdaouGHXqQ> (accessed on: 16<sup>th</sup> of February 2020).

P 2: No, erm, not totally shocked, I've always known it was possible, but I didn't really think... Oh man... I have HIV

This moment in the track is particularly chilling – even if, as Bougie says, it is ripped from “a really sort of naff YouTube tutorial that somebody at a GUM clinic was supposed to watch to teach somebody how to reveal that somebody’s HIV-positive” – and also comes just before the biggest drop in the track, adding extra weight to its meaning.

And finally, as the track ends, the audience hears a repeat of the opening words, that sex is one of the most important things we have as a species, undercutting the sadness of the HIV diagnosis with a silver-lining realisation that sex, surely, is not the thing here to be demonised.

While Bougie’s track certainly spells out a relatively clear narrative, her physical performance adds extremely rich layers of meaning to the piece. At the beginning of the song, Bougie is sat on a stool, wearing a sequinned body suit and a large belt of the same fabric with six red appliqués. During the first piece of found audio, to which she does not lip-sync, the audience sees Bougie mixing a shot of something, inhaling deeply, and after Robyn’s first call of “one more time” at the beginning of the song proper, Bougie drinks back the mixture. While this could be a shot of anything, perhaps tequila or vodka to most people, in the context of chemsex, and confirmed by Bougie, it “starts with a shot of G”, more specifically either GHB or GBL, a drug which, while incredibly easy to overdose on, causes a feeling of intense arousal. During the first verse, Bougie begins to lip-sync in a glossy-eyed euphoria, and, as the chorus begins, she rises and moves into the audience. In the audience, she unclasps one of the red appliqués on her belt, which in turn unfurls into a long red ribbon that remains attached to her; handing the loose end to an audience member with the metres-long fabric leading back to Bougie onstage, these appliqués become ties between the audience and Bougie. Throughout the first chorus, Bougie performs this act of giving three times, before moving back to the stage for the second audio clip. Once again not lip-syncing, the audience hears of the patient exclusively having sex with chems, and watches Bougie miming cutting up a line of what could be cocaine, but again, in this context, one assumes mephedrone (especially given the

clinician’s mentioning of mephedrone in the audio clip), another drug associated with intense arousal. Having snorted the fictitious line, Bougie lip-syncs the second verse, and once again moves into the audience in the second chorus and hands out the remaining three ribbons. During the third, and longest, audio clip, Bougie takes one of the ribbons and uses it as a makeshift tourniquet (Fig. 24), before miming flicking a syringe, tapping her arm, and injecting herself with crystal meth. Raising her arm above her head to allow the viscous drug to drip into her body more swiftly, Bougie’s eyes roll back in her head. Here, the euphoria begins to slip, and as Bougie lip-syncs the bridge, she is visibly, tugging at her “hair” – Bougie, infamously, never wears a wig made of actual hair – and stumbles round the stage, which is a truly heart-wrenching spectacle. She wraps her hands around the ribbons, lightly tugging them, pulling them taut, testing the connection she has with the audience. At the drop, where the third chorus rushes in, Bougie begins to throw herself around the stage, with a surprising amount of force. Knocking over chairs, crashing into walls, and rolling on the floor, Bougie is tied up in a web of ribbons, some still holding strong, others let go of in the melee. As the song ends and the audience hears the first piece of audio repeated again, Bougie unfastens the belt, raising it and the ribbons above her head (Fig. 25). As the music stops, she drops the belt.



Fig. 24: Bougie performing “ChemSexxx” at The Glory – here Bougie imitates intravenous drug use



Fig. 25: Bougie performing “ChemSexxx” at The Glory – here Bougie raises the belt above her head

### *VII.iii – Bougie’s Reading of “ChemSexxx”*

When I first saw the performance, it was an incredibly affective experience, no doubt augmented by the setting of a Mental Health Awareness event. But, what importance does it hold for Bougie? Why this routine, why now, and why for her to tell? As I relay above, Bougie feels that chemsex is “one of the key aspects plaguing gay men right now”, and that it was the “most poignant mental health issue that [she] could present at that moment”; however, there are also deeply personal reasons why Bougie created this piece. Speaking of lip-syncing more generally, Bougie stated:

I think that the most important bits of drag come from a moment of personal crisis or fluxus [sic] that's funnelled into art. So, I think that drag queens create the best work, if they're smart about creating work and they're not just flapping their gums to Liza Minnelli – which, hello, I do that

too – if they're smart when they're creating work, I think it reveals a moment of intense personal crisis or panic, or something, or joy or something and that's being funnelled into the art.

Bougie's statement, rather, I'm sure, than to denigrate Liza Minelli, shows how drag is deeply connected to her outside life, in that performance can be used as a medium to channel wayward emotions resulting from real-life traumas into art. Accordingly, "ChemSexxx" was formed out of some extremely difficult situations in Bougie's own life. Created after moving to London, Bougie describes its genesis touchingly here:

When I first moved to London, I didn't fall into queer utopia Wonderland, like I could have in East London like, I didn't fall into a queer Wonderland. I instead fell into the cesspit of toxic masculinity and... chems. And so, when I created the act, I was with my husband, and, like, we met on the whole scene and we had chemsex together and did the parties and everything. And then his relationship with drugs just sort of like progressively got worse and worse and worse. And so when that album [Robyn's], when "Do It Again" was released – like, I've always been a Robyn fan, she's kind of my God – I heard the song, and then I was looking at what was going on with my husband, it was just like: "oh my God, you have to do something immediately. You have to do something right now." It's just like everything in the universe sort of collided in the perfect way for me to produce this act.

In one sense, therefore, the performance is a direct response to her own and her husband's experiences within the chemsex circuit, falling into a routine of drugs and sex, with seemingly no way out.

The performance utilises a considerable amount of HIV-related symbolism, whether overt audio footage discussing HIV or more interpretable symbols such as the red appliqués; however, for Bougie, though she chooses the HIV-related audio footage, the performance is more about interpersonal connections:

The most common reading of the act, which is totally valid and definitely part of it, is that the bands represented sort of HIV transmission, which is totally true, that's definitely one lens to look at it by; the other lens is this interpersonal thing in which, you know, you've made these

sort of blood ties or these fluid ties with people. And there are these really intense moments in the act where I'm giving somebody a tie, and they get, you know, they get half a verse just to them, they get a really intense personal moment that's really fleeting and is then over. So that's really it. So that creates this connection. And then there's another one and then there's another one, and there's another one. So there's web of connections that are straining *at you*, straining *at me*, and sort of like pulling me *but not actually giving me anything back*, they're just sort of like these weird ephemeral things that are not *actually* ephemeral, they're actually causing quite a lot of harm. And so when the act all bursts, these connections are tried and tried and tried, and obviously, inevitably, during the act, there's some people that will really hold on to it and really be supportive, and there's some people that see me pulling away from it and just drop it immediately. And that's also quite symbolic in the whole world, I think as well.

Bougie's description of the act here places focus on community and connection. Bougie stresses her desire for connection, a desire that is unfortunately not sated. This is, she says, her resounding experience of the chemsex scene in London. Speaking of attending chemsex parties, "seeking out, constantly seeking out, connections", she speaks of how the relationships fostered at chemsex parties "are so ephemeral, they don't actually end up lasting, and no one really wants to meet up with you on a Tuesday and go for a coffee". In a damningly trenchant turn of phrase, she quips: "we'll meet up with you on Saturday and have a shot of G, yeah, but a shot of espresso? Is that too far? It's too intimate". The heart-breaking indictment of intimacy detailed here, wherein intense drug-taking and sex are considered less intimate, more transactive, than a midweek coffee, spells a bleak image of queer community in London.

Bougie highlights a poignant tension between the ephemerality of connections consumed in chemsex relations and the potential longevity such connections may hold. In another insightful explanation, Bougie holds this tension together:

So if I meet these two people on Thursday night, and then move on the next day and meet three more and then move on the next day and meet four more, and, like, the last guy that I slept with, if we think about sort of, like, transmission, and if Person 1 was HIV[-positive] or had syphilis,

you know, if Person 1 had syphilis then Person 7 also has syphilis now, because those ephemeral connections, although you don't really think about [it] or don't think of the lasting connection that you've made, in reality is sort of like epidemiology, like, in that sort of context, they still exist, and they're really important.

Here Bougie stresses the lasting connections transmission can forge, ones that may have seemed innocuous connections in the moment, potentially even anonymous connections, but ones that bind people together in an epidemiological setting. The performance is therefore founded on the layered meaning of the red ribbons: in one sense, they are just ribbons, simple connections that when the going gets tough one can let go of, accidentally or otherwise, thereby losing that connection forever; in another, they are unbreakable, a form of queer kinship that operates clandestinely, connecting one person to another for a lifetime, inaugurated unknowingly and potentially untraceably. By visualising these ties, Bougie seeks to make visible the bonds, the support, and the struggle that such ties can create.

Such metaphorical connections, Bougie explains, translate into very real connections in performance. Bougie takes pride in the routine – by her own admission, “probably one of the best acts [she’s] ever made” – in no small part because “it involves the audience”. For, rather than presenting something to the audience, the performance implicates them directly, and “if they’ve [the audience] had an experience of being part of it maybe it has an impact on them personally”. This desire for interpersonal connection within the performance reflects the lack thereof in the chemsex parties Bougie once frequented.

Bougie’s understanding of the performance must be set in relief to her own serostatus. While Bougie does not see the HIV narrative as the most crucial takeaway of the performance, it is certainly extremely present, and the routine is imbued with a delicate autobiographical trace when put in conjunction with the fact that Bougie is HIV positive. Speaking of this, Bougie told me that

I became HIV positive when I was 21, in 2012. And I became HIV positive, and I sort of, like, knew it was gonna happen. In a sort of, like, macabre way, I think? Or not, not macabre, because there wasn't a negative association with me in the realisation, it was just an honest,

realistic expectation, I think. [...] And I knew the kind of sex that I was interested in, which was at that point not entirely chemsex related and still isn't entirely chemsex related, [was higher risk].

Bougie speaks to a certain inevitability of seroconverting, given her sexual proclivities, saying that "I knew the risks I was taking, I knew what would happen", but also saying that "I also knew anecdotally and medically that being HIV positive wasn't the death sentence that I had been raised thinking that it was". Bougie also conflates her seroconversion with her participation in the chemsex scene in London. Again speaking to a knowing inevitability in light of weighed risk, she says:

And so I guess I sort of knew that I would become HIV-positive and so, I think, when I first moved to London, I got really, really, really, really, really, really involved in, like, bareback sex and the sex scene because I was looking for an intimate connection with somebody. [...] And so I went searching for intimate connections from Balham and then Crystal Palace and then to Brixton, and Stockwell and Vauxhall and Canning Town and Bethnal Green and Bow [*laughing*].

In many ways, therefore, one can see considered parallels with Bougie's own personal experience, seemingly placing herself squarely in the centre of the routine.

However, the routine, while it may bear traces of autobiographical influence or similarities, is decidedly not autobiographical. Bougie demarcates a clear self-alienation between herself and the "character", explicitly referring to the persona onstage as a nameless "character". Indeed, the revealing of the character's HIV diagnosis is described in terms of a narrative decision. Bougie says that "I also knew that the moment that can make an audience gasp, and to make your audience really, like, stop and, like, have that sort of like 'fuck me in the ass raw without lube' sort of way, is to reveal the character to be HIV positive". In this way, the narrative arc of the performance is decidedly distanced from Bougie's own autobiography. Indeed, in no uncertain terms Bougie told me:

I guess what I'm trying to illustrate here is that the reaction to the character in the piece about finding out he's HIV positive doesn't have a literal relation to my life. Like, when I found out that

I was HIV positive I didn't immediately go to a chemsex party and get high. I didn't immediately go to a chemsex party and slam for the first time. But that just works narratively.

Such a removal of Bougie's own life from the performance is an important choice. I would argue that it is impossible to effect a perfect scission between her life and the performance, for, just as she is trying to make the audience feel something in relation to it, it is impossible to effect such an epoché of one's own experiences in that way. But, as a performance, Bougie's decentering of herself from a narrative so close to her own initiates a radical rethinking of subjectivities. By decentering herself and utilising lip-syncing as an inherently distributed medium, Bougie opens up a dialogic space in performance that implicates both audience and performer and traverses the stage as division.

A plethora of questions arise from this performance and Bougie's reading of it. What does Bougie's decentering suggest for the audience? How does this performance create a bond between queen and queer people beyond simply the red ties? In her purposeful subjective ambivalence, where may one draw the line between speaking for and speaking with others? Does her performance, even in light of her personal experiences, offer the most balanced way of thinking about and speaking about chemsex, or does it fall into a perniciously heteronormative trap of gay shame? But, is it perhaps by virtue of gay shame that Bougie forges a community between not only herself and the audience but also between herself and queers who have gone before? What kinds of subject-positions does she occupy herself and offer for the audience? And what does lip-syncing, in its distributed agency, offer as an especial mode of performance for this act in particular? These are all questions to which I turn in the follow sections, outlining what I believe to be the critical importance of Bougie's "ChemSexxx". First, however, given the critical importance of the audience in Bougie's understanding, I will first outline what kinds of audiences are present for Bougie's performances.

#### VII.iv – Bougie’s Audience

If Bougie is seeking to engage the audience empathically and bring to light an issue about which she feels the LGBTQ+ community ought to be aware, to whom is Bougie performing? As I mention in my introduction, I first encountered the piece at an LGBTQ+ Mental Health Awareness evening, an event that was populated by an amassed group of London’s LGBTQ+ community.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the only video of the performance online is from a World AIDS Day event, which presumably was comprised mostly of queer people, and if not LGBTQ+ at least a decided ally.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, in my interview with an audience member, Erica, a queer woman in her mid-twenties, she detailed that she had seen the piece at *The Chemsex Cabaret*, an evening that was, as its name suggests, centred around chemsex in the LGBTQ+ community. Seemingly, Bougie’s audiences when she performs “ChemSexxx” are always queer.

Given the political and queer angle this piece clearly puts forward, I asked Bougie if she had ever performed the routine for a straight audience, to which she replied:

I don't think I've ever performed this act for straight people. It's not the vein of my drag that's straight accessible. Like, it's about a very gay issue, and I think straight people know, like, “oh the gays, they do love to have sex and get fucked”, but I don't think they realise the extent of it, and this sort of endemic problem that's arose between Grindr and easily accessible drugs and antiretrovirals, and how all of these things have combined into this, like, perfect storm of gay men getting addicted to crystal meth. So, I don't think I've ever done it to a straight audience. I think I've only ever done it in queer venues, queer spaces, because I don't think that it would land the same. I think everyone on the gay scene knows somebody that is HIV-positive or, if they've not done it themselves, they know of the chemsex scene because, even if you don't do it, you know about it, you know that it happens, you know that it exists. Whereas I don't think

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<sup>11</sup> Though, it is perhaps worth noting that the event was on an invitation basis.

<sup>12</sup> Tharanutkin, “Bourgeoisie Performing Chemsex” (December 2015) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmgpdE2StIU&ab\\_channel=tharanutkin](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmgpdE2StIU&ab_channel=tharanutkin) (accessed on: 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2018).

an everyday straight person would necessarily know, not the intricacies, but like the depth of the problem.

Here Bougie describes a necessarily empathic response to the routine in order for it to be successful, an empathy that is predicated not simply on being able to feel emotionally as a response to watching it, but to be able to relate personally in some way.

When describing the piece in relation to the audience, Bougie emphasised that, whilst entertaining, this piece was not designed to entertain:

Maybe the difference is that in the other pieces, I'm trying to entertain. My other drag has much more of an emphasis on entertainment and crafting a performance. There's the "ChemSexxx" performance, which is like *a performance* and then there's me lip-syncing to Katy Perry and taking off three different garments, which is like "performance" but, you know, the stakes are lower. In ["ChemSexxx"] I think I'm trying to reveal and reflect and live an experience. And in you know, "E.T.", "Liza with a Z", whatever, I'm just having lol, like trying to make the audience lol with me.

"ChemSexxx" is set apart from her other performances in that this routine is specifically designed with a politic in mind, even a pedagogic angle, a decided and considered reflection of a lived experience, whether hers or someone else's.

Bougie's statements were corroborated by Erica in interview. It is worth noting that Erica, in being a queer woman, is not the typical chemsex demographic. Indeed, she tells me that she has never been to a chemsex party, though she does have sex on chems, the split portmanteau reflecting a critical difference. As a queer woman, I believe her role in the audience is key. Bougie wishes to speak to the queer community, and women are an essential part of the queer community – though a part too often ignored or maligned in certain misogynistic gay male settings. As such, Erica's response to the routine reflects its success, in speaking to issues that affect the community at large, even if it is not an issue she may directly encounter. Reflecting this diversity, the venues at which Bougie performs are not strictly male. In terms of the clientele at *The Chemsex Cabaret*, Erica noted that it was "at least 90% queer", and "a super fluid mix" of gender identities. This was a pleasant

surprise for Erica, as too often, she explained, chemsex, or rather sex whilst on drugs, is only considered in terms of gay men, even though the repercussions can be a lot broader. While, in her words, the academic and media response to chemsex can be “restrictive about who can do it”, the audience at *The Chemsex Cabaret* evidenced a much more varied interest in chemsex. She also remarked that, while the front row, where she was sat, held older men, when she looked behind her “it was definitely quite diverse”, with some people even in drag, if drag is the right word, Erica stating “I wouldn’t even know what category to put it in”. Clearly the audience at *The Chemsex Cabaret* was made up of a diverse array of members of the LGBTQ+ community, seemingly of all genders and sexualities.

Similarly, Erica expressed the fact that she did arrive at an empathic response to the routine. She said that “with any kind of personal story – personal perspective – it just gives you insight into something. [Unlike] an academic one or something, [for example] ‘oh, chemsex is where groups of men who have sex with men meet via dating apps and do this and do this’ and stuff. It just gives you more insight into what it’s actually like”. Bougie’s highly emotional narrative made it easier for Erica to relate, to understand, and to gain a greater understanding of this issue. Moreover, in discussing how the whole event generated a feeling of community, Erica singled out Bougie’s performance: “we are a community, and I wanna support our community, and so it felt appropriate that Bougie would link to the audience in their performance”. Erica evinces all of Bougie’s key points: a necessarily queer audience, a desire to make the audience engage in an issue personally, and to draw people together as a community through their performance.

I wonder whether “ChemSexxx” would work for a straight audience. While I hope the performance would be well received, it’s my conviction that the success of Bougie’s performance relies on its being performed to an audience that acts as a counterpublic. By counterpublic, I refer to Michael Warner’s interrogation of the term public(s) and his neologism, apropos of Nancy Fraser, counterpublic(s). Warner explains that a public “engages a reflexivity in the circulation of texts

among strangers who become, by virtue of their reflexively circulating discourse, a social entity”.<sup>13</sup> A public, therefore – and to be sure there are infinite possible publics – is a discursively structured group of people, comprised significantly of strangers, and of potentially untold number. Publics, in this understanding, are “essentially intertextual frameworks”, through which texts are mediated, organised, and understood, meaning that certain publics predicate different horizons of knowledge and understanding.<sup>14</sup> In contradistinction to publics, Warner inaugurates counterpublics. A counterpublic, “against the background of the public sphere, enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power; its extent is in principle indefinite, because it is not based on a precise demography but mediated by print, theatre, diffuse networks of talk, commerce, and the like”.<sup>15</sup> By virtue of this understanding, I believe one can helpfully consider audiences publics, and the specific audiences that attend queer venues, such as where Bougie performs, to be counterpublics. As such, the counterpublic of the audience at *The Glory*, where I first saw “ChemSexxx” – or at *The Chemsex Cabaret* – acts in several ways: while many are strangers to one another, there is a broader ideological grouping in that everyone makes up a part of the LGBTQIA community (“A” spelled out here in place of “+” to make specific space for allies); given this common denominator, there will be certain knowledges akin to most, if not all, that will affect any readings of the performance within such intertextual frameworks; and, as members of the LGBTQIA community, these frameworks sit in opposition, or at least in a potentially antagonised relation, to hegemonic discourses of heteronormativity, to which public spheres adhere.

Indeed, the horizons of knowledge specific to certain counterpublics were evidenced by Erica. While some of Bougie’s routine may go over the heads of a different audience, Erica was actively drawing on this broader horizon of knowledge when explaining the routine to me. When I asked what she thought “ChemSexxx” was about she said:

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), pp. 11-12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 56-57.

Because of the name of the thing, I thought it as about chemsex. And, like, wanting to do drugs and the tension... the desire for drugs versus all of the risks, you know, [what] people perceive as the risks that are bound up in using drugs. [...] And knowing that it's a chemsex event, you're thinking about the kind of people who traditionally do [chemsex] and that's always men who have sex with men, that's how, like, people who write on chemsex refer to them instead of saying "gay" or "bisexual" because, obviously, people might have other identities. And then the kind of drug use that's associated with people who do chemsex, so I was thinking of crystal meth and G, maybe, and, like, I don't know, mephedrone or ket, other drugs that people are using. [...] What I was getting from it most, I guess, was the conflict between wanting and losing yourself in it versus the implications of doing it and what it means for you long term and how you understand yourself as a person who does it.

Erica's description fits perfectly with the theory of counterpublics. Not only does she engage in specific areas of knowledge given the setting – i.e. the drugs used during chemsex, all of which, save ketamine, Bougie mentions in her description – but she also structures her analysis around such knowledges in relation to different discourses. For example, she holds the more academical "men who have sex with men, that's how, like, people who write on chemsex refer to it" in tandem with her more lived, accrued knowledge of it. Here two different systems of knowledge, two different publics (or perhaps a counterpublic and a public), two different discursive planes, come into contact. Erica's description evinces Bougie's belief that she ought to perform "ChemSexxx" in front of a queer audience.

Framing the audience as a counterpublic makes it clear why Bougie only performs this routine to queer people, as it requires a counterpublic's knowledge in order to achieve the desired result. However, in implicating the audience so actively in her routine, I believe Bougie takes it a step further. To my mind, one of the key features of publics and counterpublics alike is anonymity: the individual is subsumed into the whole, a fact that affords the audience, in this example, a certain degree of protection. As anyone who has been to the theatre can attest, when sitting in the stalls with the lights down one feels perfectly invisible, but the moment a performer crosses the threshold

of the stage and enters the audience for a moment of audience participation one feels so incredibly on show, and even held captive, glued to your seat, waiting to see if you will be picked, consenting or not. I believe Bougie profits from such a set up in her routine. As she goes into the audience, she breaks down the fourth wall, and initiates a move that reinstates the individuality of each audience member. This is more pronounced, perhaps, in bar-type settings where Bougie performs. In a typical auditorium, the middle seats retain a degree of safety, with those in the aisles most on show; but in a bar, there is no aisle, only in-between spaces for the performer to meander. As Bougie weaves throughout the crowd (though, sticking to the front of the audience, as the ribbons aren't so long), she creates individual bonds with audience members. In describing the importance of this, she says:

It involves the audience, I think, in a way that just sitting and watching doesn't, just sitting and watching a 90-minute play about five gay men at a chemsex party will leave an audience maybe being apathetic, maybe being sympathetic, but probably just being like, "well, that's sad, isn't it? There's nothing to be done about that". Whereas if they've had this experience of being a part of it, even if it's in this fantasy, cabaret, glossy land, if they've had an experience of being part of it maybe it has an impact on them personally. And if the person at the table next to them has a thing, and I think there's some, I don't know, there's some really unctuous, like, an indescribable emotion that comes with it all that isn't necessarily reflected in anything else.

Bougie directly compares "ChemSexxx" with sitting in a theatre, positing that the affectivity of being implicated directly within the performance through the ribbons leads to a stronger empathic connection. Such individuating and collectivising potential will become essential in my latter discussion of shame.

It is important to stress here that Bougie does not lip-sync the spoken word sections, adding a critical dimension for the audience's individual subject-positions. In speaking of her decision not to lip-sync these parts, Bougie said:

There was a time that I've thought about lip-syncing the responses because it's, it's a clinician and a patient, and I thought about lip-syncing the responses from the patient to the clinician. But I then thought it would it was better to be left slightly ambiguous. Sort of, like, because it

could be interpreted as this person is... So, there's two different ways that this person is doing these things: so, this person is talking to a chemsex advisor, saying he's never had sober sex, finding out that is HIV-positive, or this person is observing these things. This person is witnessing somebody saying that he's never had sober sex, somebody saying that all you need is love, somebody who's finding out that they're HIV-positive, whilst doing the drugs.

It is of the utmost importance that Bougie wishes to leave the subjectivity of the person hearing this news as ambiguous. Such ambiguity allows for a greater empathic connection, in which the audience assumes the subject-position of the listener/addressee of the statements, for if the person speaking on the track is not aligned with Bougie's subject-position and Bougie is only witness to it, it therefore follows that the audience occupies the same subject-position as Bougie, thus moving the audience from the comfort of their seats squarely into the action. The audience moves from voyeur to active participant, and rather than watching a routine about drug use and HIV transmission, it is as though they too are at the chemsex party with Bougie, watching her do the drugs, hearing of someone contracting HIV, and thus increasing the empathic response to the routine.

This shift in diegesis is symptomatic of a prevalent oscillation within the performance between two interrelated phenomenological spaces: the space of the performance and the space of the chemsex party. At one moment Bougie is performing at The Glory, and another she is in some other location taking drugs. Such shifts have important repercussions for the audience. The performance becomes a kind of metatext, which at the same time foregrounds itself as performance – being onstage, being in drag, larger-than-life, *Gestalt*, being, essentially, performative – but also foregrounding itself as intentionally documentary – taking audio from real-life lectures, using dialogue that is intended to be repeated in real-life settings etc. These two worlds interrelate on visual, aural, and thematic levels. On a visual level, there are several similarities with chemsex parties: the bondage harness Bougie is wearing in figure 24 could easily be repurposed as the accoutrements worn at chemsex parties; the red appliqués, more than being used as tourniquets, could be reimagined as bondage ties used during sex, especially when seen in conjunction with the

harness; and the presence of many different groups of people in the space, some watching, some getting a drink, some actively involved, could also very easily be the case at a chemsex gathering. On an aural level, there are also striking similarities: in one sense, it is not unlikely that there would be music playing at a chemsex party, potentially Robyn, and therefore the sonic backdrop is in one way similar; but the fact that Bougie chooses not to lip-sync to any of the spoken word sections, when she slips into the chemsex party plane, effects a radical diegesis in which suddenly the audience is plunged into the chemsex party proper. What is the audience hearing? Is it a memory? An imagining? A conversation happening next to Bougie? Such a moment of aural teleportation is crucial for the performance. Finally, on a thematic level, there is an incredibly poignant similarity: the red appliqués act as physical ties in the performance at *The Glory*, and as potential sites of transmission – blood ties – at the chemsex party.

These shifts set the performance in isomorphic relation to an actual chemsex party, one to which the audience, through diegetic shifts, is privy. The ambivalence here, married with the assumed horizons of knowledge, the greater potential for empathic relation, and the physical setting of the performances, draws the audience firmly into the emotional work of the performance. In the following two sections I will show how Bougie instrumentalises these features of the performance to create a powerful lip-sync that engages the audience and creates a community, a community that is at once highly individuated and highly collectivised, through both intergenerational connection and the double-turn of shame.

#### *VII.v – Lip-Syncing, Conduits, and Intergenerational Connection*

This routine is very close to Bougie’s heart, and indeed takes a strong emotional toll on her when she performs it, telling me that after each performance she “need[s] 10 minutes on [her] own just to like have a cigarette and be on [her] own”. However, as I have detailed, this routine is not directly biographical, and speaks rather to broader issues she sees within queer circles, those of community,

connection, and relationships, specifically within a chemsex context. Intriguingly, such a speaking for others, or speaking to a particular issue, is central to Bougie's understanding of lip-syncing as a performative medium. Indeed, the unique ability of lip-syncing to allow someone else's voice to be channelled through one's body, to allow oneself to be a conduit for someone else in order to promote their cause, is its most valuable asset:

I think there's something really powerful in lip-syncing about the ability of an artist to be able to lend their bodies to somebody else's voice. One of the key lip-syncs in my mind that I remember, when I was like becoming sort of a more fledged performance creature, was Maxi [another drag queen on the East London scene] lip-syncing. TS Madison [a famous trans porn star and LGBTQ+ public figure] put out a rant that was, like, 20-minutes long about using the word "tranny", or something, and Maxi cut it down to five minutes and lip-synced to the entire thing. And we had loads of conversations about it, about how she felt like she was lending her body to amplify somebody else's voice and somebody else's persona and worldview and to share somebody else's truth to a wider audience. And that's sort of what I like when I'm doing the more conceptual, intellectual lip-syncs, which I have a few of. And there are also times that I'm just lip-syncing Katy Perry and taking off my clothes. But when I'm doing more of the spoken-word, intellectual, arty lip-syncs, that's what I'm kind of focusing on is, is trying to use myself as a vehicle to amplify somebody else's point of view.

Bougie highlights an interesting reversal in how I have figured lip-syncing in the previous chapters. Rather than singers lending their voices to drag queens, offering up their powerful sonorities in order to help these queens speak what they can't in everyday life, here Bougie inverts such a relationship and understands lip-syncing as a way of using her own body in order to amplify the voice of another. "ChemSexxx" falls into the above category of lip-syncs, those "intellectual, arty lip-syncs", as Bougie describes them. Bougie sees herself as lending her body to amplify the voices of those who perhaps are less readily heard. By Bougie's understanding, her body, in this instance, becomes metonymic of the social body writ large, channelling issues of her community through her and to a wider audience.

Stephen Farrier, in his brief analysis of Bougie's performance, makes a similar point: rather than Bougie acting as a mouthpiece for current issues in her performance, Farrier suggests that she creates connections across history within her performance, becoming something of a temporal conduit. In Farrier's analysis, he understands Bougie as tapping into a queer collective memory of stigma and shame surrounding the HIV and AIDS crisis in the 1980s and using such collective memory and nostalgia to bind the audience and Bougie together with queer people who have gone before. Following this understanding, Farrier suggests that "the [red] ties become connections with history and implicate the audience in a process of stigmatisation; the ties become connections across time and between individuals that make communities".<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, while Bougie doesn't mention the past communities of the 1980s, she does read a certain nostalgia into her performance which may validate the premise of Farrier's claim. When reflecting on the performance, Bougie mentioned that it is imbued with an autobiographical nostalgia, one that is redolent with what could have been. For, a few years after Bougie was diagnosed with HIV, a new drug called PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) trialled, drastically reducing the chances of contracting HIV. Ruminating on this, Bougie said:

Knowing that if I were to have gone through this journey two years later, three years later, I would still be negative, probably, is a very... it's a bit of a brain fuck, isn't it? It's like a nostalgia for something you don't actually want and never actually had, in a sort of mournful way.

While Bougie's reflections relate to her own life rather than those before her, it is clear that the routine does hold within it the shadows of a nostalgia, a mournful remembrance, that doesn't necessarily imply yearning for lost potential, but rather the acquiescence of what has passed. Such nostalgia, melancholy, and mourning can certainly be read in Farrier's account.

I agree with Farrier that this performance does tap into notions of collective queer memory, and I believe that lip-syncing is a uniquely powerful medium through which to express this. As Bougie explains, lip-syncing opens up one's body in order to "amplify somebody else's point of view", and

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen Farrier, "Re-membering AIDS, Dis-membering Form", p. 167.

yet there are more unique qualities of lip-syncing that allow for the queen to speak more broadly, for a full community and across time. Firstly, the temporal discontinuities inherent to lip-syncing – the *préférence* of Chapter 1, the essential pastness of rhizophonic dislocation in Chapter 4, the proleptic envisioning of new utopias in Chapter 3 etc. – make lip-syncing a particularly apposite mode of performance for such intergenerational communication. Secondly, the drag queen’s *Gestalt* proportions, greater than the sum of her own parts, surpassing the form of any single human in her Imaginary raiments, make of her body one that can hold the stories of many, becoming, as I said before, a metonym for the queer community more broadly. And thirdly, as evidenced in the preceding chapter, lip-syncing’s inherent distributed agency across a broad assemblage of actors makes it particularly useful in allowing others to speak through the queen. In this section, therefore, I wish to further Farrier’s claim that Bougie engages in an intergenerational dialogue with the audience. By employing Lisa Blackman and David Halperin, I hope to show that Bougie creates a powerful intergenerational connection as well as a vibrant exultation of the queer community.

Further to Farrier, Lisa Blackman’s work is instructive for an understanding of “ChemSexxx” as engaging in an intergenerational dialogue between queer people. Such a dialogue is mentioned by Blackman in her fascinating discussion of the intergenerational in queer performance. She argues that “performance (which might include drama, ritual, show and spectacle) [can be understood as] ways of ‘knowing’ the past and therefore intervening in the future through enacting different versions of the present”.<sup>17</sup> Performance, in this context, is a way of touching the “unrepresentable and unknowable”, of forming ties with one’s own community across time, and ways of inflecting the future by virtue of knowing one’s past.<sup>18</sup> Crucially, “the performer is not simply expressing their own ‘symptoms’ but is connected to a shared history or counter-memory that exists inter-generationally and is felt inter-corporeally”.<sup>19</sup> Blackman’s theorisation generates a performative space in which

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<sup>17</sup> Lisa Blackman, “Affect, Performance and Queer Subjectivities”, in *Cultural Studies*, Volume 25, Number 2 (March 2011), p. 186.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 187.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p. 195.

affective encounters take place between bodies and across disparate temporalities. While Blackman is most concerned with the performer in what I have quoted above, I see no reason why such affective encounters could not extend to audiences, especially given Bougie's active engagement of the audience through her red ribbons.

There is, undoubtedly, a shared collective memory amongst queer people of the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s.<sup>20</sup> And this memory works as both a cultural tie of community and as a regulatory marker of shame. As a gay man not born till the 1990s, I still feel both the intense sadness of the loss of queer siblings in the 1980s as well as the fear of contracting the disease, despite its entirely manageable diagnosis today, a fear that is undoubtedly steeped in inherited gay shame surrounding the moral panic of the AIDS crisis. Indeed, recent theatrical works, namely Mathew Lopez's heart-achingly beautiful *The Inheritance*, deal precisely with the effects of memory and the intergenerational communities fostered through AIDS and HIV within the queer community. Such memories are in the air when Bougie performs, for how could they not be? An HIV-focused performance at an LGBTQ+ Mental Health Awareness evening; a performance at World AIDS Day; and a slot in *The Chemsex Cabaret*. There is an assumed common ground of cultural knowledge in these spaces, entered into as they are by queer people to discuss queer issues. Bougie's performance engages such a history, and endeavours to incite an empathic response through its employment.

While the performance draws upon this history thematically, Bougie harnesses it and its empathic potential masterfully in her decision of when to lip-sync. As I have detailed above, Bougie only lip-syncs to Robyn's voice, and allows the spoken-word interactions to be left floating. This decision has two important consequences. The first is that these moments effect a radical diegesis, as I have explained. In these moments Robyn's song is no longer a lip-sync track, but the electro dance underscoring of a chemsex party, and the pieces of dialogue, if they are not Bougie's voice, waiver towards the audience – if they are not addressing Bougie, are they addressing us? The blurred

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<sup>20</sup> And, to be sure, a potential collective memory that goes wider than simply queer circles.

subject-positions of these moments implicate the audience as active participants in the drama, and move along a different phenomenological axis, resulting in a greater empathic relationship with the routine. The second is that concomitant with the shift in diegesis is also a shift in temporality. If Bougie slips out of the performative realm, it is that she slips into another time, a different temporal level. As such, perhaps these spoken-word sections are memories, imaginings, pre-echoes, or warnings. Michel Chion describes the acousmatic voice as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent (indeed, David Stuart's voice does seem to hold a certain messianic quality as it bookends the piece).<sup>21</sup> Perhaps these spoken-word, acousmatic moments are statements that sit outside of the temporality of performance. These shifts in phenomenological and temporal plane therefore heighten the effect of intergenerational dialogue. The routine invites different times and places to come together against a blurred set of subject-positions, all of which is surely highly effective for creating such intergenerational affect.

Another moment in the performance that I find particularly crucial for such an intergenerational reading is after the HIV diagnosis and bridge, just before the last chorus. Here, as the music amps up in anticipation of the drop, Bougie is sat, visibly pained, with her arm raised above her head having just intravenously injected crystal meth and the ribbons are stretched across the room, held taut by six people in the audience. At the drop, Bougie throws herself around the stage in shocking violence, often actually hurting herself. She pushes over chairs, falls directly to the floor, ricochets off walls, spins and drops; and as she does the elasticated ribbons stretch and strain, with some inevitably being released, their previous red tension now hanging limp. I find Ryan Conrad and Alexis Shotwell's invocation of queer embodiment and queer rage to be particularly useful in analysing this moment. In their article, "'This Is My Body': Historical Trauma, Activist Performance, and Embodied Rage", Conrad and Shotwell describe a performative turn from "living with" AIDS to "*being livid with AIDS*" [emphasis in original].<sup>22</sup> They speak of a queer rage being channelled into

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<sup>21</sup> Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> Ryan Conrad & Alexis Shotwell, "'This Is My Body': Historical Trauma, Activist Performance, and Embodied Rage", in *a/b: Auto-Biography Studies*, Volume 33, Number 2 (2018), p. 450.

performance, and harnessed to respond to the moral pathologising of the AIDS epidemic, questioning the ways in which, through the “queer joy in embodiment” one is able to “collectively and personally embody the histories we inherit from activists living and dead”.<sup>23</sup> In this moment in “ChemSexxx”, therefore, one can understand Bougie as channelling the rage, the state of being livid, of living in the memory of AIDS, into this violent act of queer masochism: there is a cathartic release in this intense affectivity. Indeed, Bougie says that in performance, this is a particularly intense moment:

When I perform it, like, just doing it will produce some emotion in my body, I think. [...] It takes some time for me to, not only catch my breath and physically calm down because I’ve just pung [sic] myself around the staged for thirty seconds and my knee is bleeding and I twisted my ankle – but also just to come down emotionally from it all, it takes just some time to get back to normal life.

These emotions are felt “in [her] body” in an act of queer affective rage, and the intense physicality of this moment takes time to recover from. In watching such intensity, resulting in actual pain, the audience surely has an empathic response, if not also an active response of worry.

The visual metaphor of the ribbons must also be emphasised. Bougie describes the red ribbons as “blood ties”, a particularly salient metaphor considering the nature of HIV infection and transmission. Indeed, the symbolism was clear to certain members of the audience. Erica, for example, explained them as follows:

It’s kind of like a link to someone else, another person, links you’re leaving as you live your life and attend different things and meet new people. But again, those links could be seen in a positive or negative way, like, it could be the spread of STIs. Obviously when we talk about chemsex, everyone talks about HIV, so obviously including HIV. [...] I think maybe because they were red as well, it made me think it was something a bit more traumatic.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 452.

Here Erica gets to the heart of Bougie's conceit: that these ties express both interpersonal connection and epidemiological link. If blood ties the familial unit together, here blood as potential pathogen rather than as life-giver connects the queers in the room. Erica's acknowledgement of their ambivalence, of their potential to be positive and negative, is important. Indeed, Bougie describes the moments when she is giving out these ties as intense acts of gift-giving:

Where I'm giving somebody a tie, and they get, you know, they get half a verse just to them, they get a really intense personal moment.

These potential moments of transmission are also intense moments of interpersonal connection, and critically of care. These connections aren't *de facto* negative, and when she hands each audience member a ribbon, she stares into their eyes lovingly and hands the ribbon as a gift. Indeed, having received one from Bougie in performance, these moments are incredibly touching, and even with the overt metaphor of these ties being symbols of HIV transmission, the overwhelming feeling is of a gift. Therefore, when Bougie throws herself around the stage, and these blood ties are strained, sometimes beyond what they can take, how does this frame an intergenerational collective memory surrounding HIV and AIDS? Yes, these ties can be read as ties of stigma and shame, as Farrier notes, holding her down, pulling her back. But it is as though these ties, while fearful, to be sure, don't hold her down or oppress her, but, if anything, they help keep her grounded as she lashes out. The consistent touch of queer memory helps keep in step her understandable affective rage.

Such acts of care, such desirous close relationships with HIV connection as expressed through the passing of the ribbons, call to mind the work of David Halperin, in his work *What Do Gay Men Want?* In this essay, Halperin assesses the ideas of shame, HIV transmission, and gay male subjectivity, coming to, via Jean Genet, a theory of abjection that is of critical importance here. Speaking of unsafe gay sexual practices more generally, namely sex without the use of condoms, he argues that the *inclusion* of risk is of vital importance:

Unsafe sex, in other words, might be tempting some HIV-negative men by offering them a way of expressing a sense of social and cultural solidarity with their HIV-positive comrades – an all-

too-rare instance of such solidarity, to be sure, and not the most constructive more, but solidarity nonetheless.<sup>24</sup>

Here Halperin, much like Blackman, is arguing for a way of performatively experiencing the subject-position of another in one's cultural group, though here there is much more at stake. Unsafe sex, rather than a nihilistic endeavour, becomes a way of sharing in the lived experiences and the cultural memory of the LGBTQ+ community. In "ChemSexxx", the performance becomes a way of performatively touching risk, not for Bougie, but for the audience. If Bougie has already lived such risk, here she offers a connection to the audience. Where Halperin discusses HIV and AIDS as supplying a link, a kinship, between queer people, Bougie's performance visualises such a link. There is a sense in which these ties supply a vicarious connection to risk, to the memory of those who have gone before, and to subject-positions other than the audience's own.

There is another striking instance in which Halperin's essay, connections through stigma, and the joy of potential transmission coalesce in Bougie's performance. I am thinking particularly of the end of Bougie's performance, during which she removes the belt with the ribbons, raises it above her head, and drops it, all to the backdrop of the track saying how important sex is for intimate relations between human beings. It is as though Bougie is freed from the shackles of shame here, that there is some sort of exultant endpoint to the narrative. This moment speaks to Halperin's theory of saintly abjection. Halperin gets to his theory through a discussion of Jean Genet's writings, saying that Genet aspired "to a sainthood that took the opposite route from the conventional one, a sainthood that consisted not in an ascent to heaven but in the 'abjection' of being driven down into the darkness of crime and perversion – a degradation in the literal, etymological sense of the word. Even in this degraded form, however, sainthood achieves the same effect as conventional holiness".<sup>25</sup> Halperin remarks on a theme in Genet's writings in which, through the ultimate debasement, one can achieve a sense of martyrdom and sainthood. Critically, I don't think Halperin

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<sup>24</sup> David Halperin, *"What Do Gay Men Want?" An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity* (United States: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), p. 45.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p. 73.

wishes to suggest that somehow degradation comes full circle to meet sainthood, but rather that the two are not diametrically opposed, much in the same way, as I have noted before, that Judith/Jack Halberstam, in their notion of the queer art of failure, does not see failure and success as opposites, or transfiguring failure into success, but notes the relations between them. Indeed, Halperin notes:

Abjection does not specifically manifest a death wish or death drive, a lack of self-respect, a pleasure in suffering, or a belief that one does not deserve to survive. Nor, on the contrary, does it simply express a sense of pride in one's pleasure and in one's right to have it, a sense of pride sufficiently strong to enable one to afford and to withstand the humiliations that are pleasure's price – or even, sometimes, pleasure's necessary precondition. Rather, abjection describes a particular attitude to both suffering and pleasure, to both shame and pride, to both humility and grandiosity, by which those terms can be brought into relation.<sup>26</sup>

At the end of this performance, I believe the audience sees such an experience brought into relation. Bougie seems to have reached a state of exultancy within both the shame associated with queer sex and HIV transmission as well as the pride of being part of such a community. There is an element of subjectivity-formation through abjection and through shame that seems to bind her intergenerationally with those who went before. It is fitting that David Stuart's acousmatic voice returns at this moment, prophesying the importance of sex and human interaction. Bougie takes the painful history and reality of HIV and finds exultancy through abjection, raising up herself and the audience – who are still holding the ribbons, lest we forget.

In the following section I wish to interrogate shame more fully. Shame is a consistent spectre throughout "ChemSexxx" and its inclusion is important. I will first question why Bougie foregrounds shame, when seemingly she sees much good in chems and sex. What will become clear is that shame is used as a uniquely queer form of identity formation, one that binds audience and Bougie together, and one that works on a sonic plane.

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p. 87.

*VII.vi – Shame, a Precursor*

Shame is undoubtedly a structuring element of “ChemSexxx”: the shame of drugs, the shame of sex, and the spectres of shame surrounding queerness in general all haunt the piece. For Bougie, shame is, perhaps, inevitable; she says:

Inevitably, I feel like there’s a sort of shame that people feel when they’re engaged in chemsex that maybe they don’t want to portray to their – quote-unquote – “real-life” friends, you know? These ephemeral connections that one makes on Grindr at 4am, there’s a freedom in that relationship and freedom not necessarily in the sort of like “we can do whatever we want together”, but freedom in the “I can smoke as much crystal meth as I want and go under on G, but it doesn’t really matter because you’ll never see me again”.

Shame here operates as an incentive to hide and to divorce one’s self from one’s support networks. Instead of seeking out more solid forms of friendship, shame binds itself to the ephemeral and disposable connections of chemsex relations.

As I say, shame figures in several ways in the performance, about which I will speak below. But, why shame? Indeed, the charge could be levelled at Bougie as to whether she offers the most balanced view of chemsex, perhaps stressing its negative connotations. This may seem a contentious claim, given her close connection to the issue and that the performance is influenced, at least indirectly if not taken autobiographically, by her own experiences; however, while it is undoubtedly true that chems and sex have produced particularly noxious and outright deleterious effects for many gay men and queer people, several scholars now argue that perhaps the panic surrounding chemsex is in no small part linked to a homophobic and homonormative moral panic surrounding drugs, pleasure, and homosexuality. Jamie Hakim, for example, who works significantly on chemsex practices, argues that, while the leading theory in public consciousness is that gay men fall into chemsex as some self-sabotaging descent into gay shame, that in fact “chemsex is a way for some, largely migrant, gay and bisexual men to experience a sense of collectivity not only in [London] where the collective physical spaces they have historically gathered are closing down due to neoliberal

approaches to town-planning, [...] but also in a wider culture in which neoliberalism has been hegemonic and that in multiple ways alienates them from experiencing the possibility of collectivity at all”.<sup>27</sup> Rather, then, than understanding chemsex as the masochistic endpoint to queer teleological drive of Thanatos, chemsex is reframed as an active queer antidote to the stealthily ubiquitous destruction of collectivity via neoliberalism.<sup>28</sup>

Hakim’s reading rings true with Bougie’s own experiences in many ways. She says that when she first moved to London, she “had no family. I had no connections to anyone. And so I was just seeking out, constantly seeking out, connections and constantly seeking out these people that I wanted, or these, you know, just friends. I was trying to find my tribe”. Much in the same way as Hakim describes, chemsex became a way of finding any intimacy in a new and impenetrable city; in answer to this, Hakim argues, “chemsex, organised through hook-up apps and fuelled by cheap recreational drugs which foster an intense sense of togetherness, becomes a way of mitigating the alienation experienced moving into this city”.<sup>29</sup> Of course, Hakim does not suggest that these parties are totally without their detrimental elements; yet, he argues through empirical research that while his informants did present some negative reactions to chemsex parties, “it would be partial and distorting to conclude that these [sad affects] were more significant than other affects [namely ‘joyful’] described”.<sup>30</sup> In this way, it could be argued that Bougie’s focus on shame underplays the powerful anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist collectivities that can be produced by chemsex interactions.

Yet, let us be clear, Bougie does not think that sex is the problem. Indeed, she bookends her performance with the powerful words that “sex and intimate connections between one person and

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<sup>27</sup> Jamie Hakim, “The Rise of Chemsex”, p. 253.

<sup>28</sup> It is worth mentioning, though, that Hakim’s view on chemsex is similarly only one piece of a much larger puzzle – one cannot disparage Bougie’s performance for presenting a total image and then claim that Hakim’s is correct. Indeed, for fascinating discussions into the queer death drive (as maligned as they often are in contemporary queer academia), one can look to Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips’s *intimacies* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> Jamie Hakim, “The Rise of Chemsex”, p. 263.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p. 262.

another is one of the most amazing things we have as a species, and we should be using it". Are, therefore, drugs the issue? Again, for Bougie, it would seem not. In a wonderful moment of reminiscence, Bougie said in interview:

When I look back on it in retrospect, it [when she moved to London] was around the time when Sink the Pink [a drag mega-collective of which she is a part] was all kind of starting. So, if I had just taken mephedrone with the *right* people I could have had a really lovely time! But instead, I was taking mephedrone with, like, muscly faggots in Lambeth trying to fit into this "masc" thing.

Drugs, therefore, become, at least partially, site-specific in their positive and negative affects. Mephedrone with her friends is a lovely time, just not with the muscly faggots. Such a use of drugs speaks to much of Kane Race's enlightening work, who notes that "drugs have been a significant part of [...] gay practices of transformation and self-care".<sup>31</sup> While public consensus may see drug-taking, specifically in a queer context, as "a pathological response to the ingrained violence of homophobia and social alienation", what Race and Hakim both attest, as does Bougie indirectly, is the power that drugs have to form a sense of collectivity and community outside of neoliberal ideals.<sup>32</sup> Speaking specifically of the queer dance party, Race questions:

What if we were to understand the dance party not as the transparent radiation of community, but as a mediated event through which a sense of community was hallucinated? The massed bodies, decorations, lights, drugs, costumes, and music combined to produce a powerful and widely accessed perception of presence, belonging, shared circumstance, and vitality at a time when the image of the gay man, dying alone, ostracised from family, was the publicly proffered alternative.<sup>33</sup>

In contradistinction to chemsex happenings, Race here describes another environment of intoxicated, partially naked gay men forming a community of belonging and togetherness, that is in no small way effected and mediated through pleasure-inducing drugs.

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<sup>31</sup> Kane Race, *Pleasure Consuming Medicine: The Queer Politics of Drugs* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 20.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p. 20.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 22.

It seems, therefore, that drugs and sex are not the issues, for neither Bougie nor, if Race and Hakim are to be believed, large swathes of the gay population. Indeed, in Bougie's own discussion, she clearly states that it is the "masc" thing that is the issue, perhaps proving once and for all that gender really is the most dangerous thing in the world. While that is, most likely, an issue for another time, here it is important to question why Bougie has chosen to shine light on this particular side of chemsex. When I spoke to Bougie, she often qualified sentences with conscientious statements such as: "for me personally, obviously, my experience is my experience"; or, "I don't want to make any broad sweeping statements" regarding chemsex. Moreover, as much as she craved intimate connections, she also is very much aware that "the connection that somebody makes with somebody while they're fucked on drugs [is] true, or real, or valid [...]. The connection exists for that time. [It] does exist in that time and it is real". Clearly Bougie is aware of the problem of speaking for others and does not want to cement a univocal chemsex narrative.

Why, then, this narrative? What is evident in Bougie's description and both Race and Hakim's research is that chemsex interactions and drug collectivities hold a delicate relation between the highly individuated and the intensely collective. This is why shame is so instrumental in "ChemSexxx". It is through shame that Bougie manages to generate both this sense of the individual and the collective through shame's unique double-turn. In the following section, I will interrogate the use of shame in the routine, arguing for its thematic, empathic and sonic qualities, and underscoring its critical importance in the success of this routine.

#### *VII.vii – Shame in Practice*

Bougie described the feeling in the room during this performance as an "unctuous, [...] indescribable emotion". The adjective "unctuous" is perfectly applicable here. Unctuousness suggests an oily, greasy connectivity. An unctuous emotion might seem to spread over disparate and discrete parts, connecting them whilst they maintain their structural integrity. Oil, for example, binds, but also

wraps, and does not disperse or homogenise in the same way as dissolution. I don't think it is too far to suggest, given the nature of the performance, that "unctuous" also contains a seminal quality. Where the ribbons bind the audience and Bougie in blood ties and ties of transmission, semen as carrier not only of life-creating DNA but also of life-threatening pathogen certainly relates to a sticky unctuousness. Moreover, unctuous, from "unguere" meaning "to anoint" recalls Jean Genet's exaltation through abjection, the recalibration of shame to a plane of transcendence: anointed with an unholy liquid in a sacrilegious act. And finally, if one takes Anahid Kassabian's theory of affect-as-accretion, a sticky residue, then an unctuous emotion connotes one that sticks, attaches itself, marks a body with its trace.<sup>34</sup> Bougie's description of the room's emotion during her performance as "unctuous" is certainly an extremely apposite and rich assertion. I believe this unctuous quality works in tandem with the structuring use of shame in the performance. Across the following section I wish to interrogate this claim, drawing upon the relevant shame literatures, and argue that this unctuous shame works sonically both to highly individuate and collectivise the audience. Rather than shame as negative affect, shame binds the audience as community.

Shame operates in a peculiar double turn, at one time absolutely individuating and highly relational. For example, Douglas Crimp states that "I feel alone with my shame, singular in my susceptibility to being shamed for this stigma that has now become mine and mine alone"; this, I believe, is presumably a well-known feeling to most, the isolation felt in shame, where one is cast aside completely from everything else in a moment of radical alterity, or indeed a moment of abjection in the Kristevan sense.<sup>35</sup> Contradictorily, however, shame has the dichotomous effect of being able to unite in shame, due to the close relationship it shares with identification. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick gives much space to shame in her work and explains how shame is first experienced due to a failure in the identificatory circuit between mother and infant, a break in the extended mirror stage. She writes that "the moment the adult face fails or refuses to play its part in the continuation of

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<sup>34</sup> Anahid Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening*, p. 26.

<sup>35</sup> Douglas Crimp, "Mario Montez, For Shame", in *Gay Shame*, eds. David M. Halperin & Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 71.

mutual gaze; when, for any one of many reasons, it fails to be recognizable to, or recognizing of, the infant who has been, so to speak, 'giving face' based on a faith in the continuity of the circuit", the protoaffect of shame first appears.<sup>36</sup> Shame, therefore, is an effect of a break or failure in the processes of identification that make up subjectivity, as explained in Chapter 3. And yet, what is most interesting about this is that shame also, in its failure of identification, "makes identity", in Sedgwick's words:

But in interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity. In fact, shame and identity remain in very dynamic relation to one another, at once deconstituting and foundational, because shame is both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating. One of the strangest features of shame, but perhaps also the one that offers the most conceptual leverage for political projects, is the way bad treatment of someone else, bad treatment *by* someone else, someone else's embarrassment, stigma, debility, bad smell, or strange behaviour, seemingly having nothing to do with me, can so readily flood me – assuming I'm a shame-prone person – with this sensation whose very suffusiveness seems to delineate my precise, individual outlines in the most isolating way imaginable [emphasis in original].<sup>37</sup>

Such a dialectical makeup should perhaps not be surprising in its similarity with identity. Again, as posited in Chapter 3, it is taken as axiomatic here that identity is always contingent, always predicated by a sense of loss, a psychoanalytical *objet petit a*, that places the self with radical alterity. Shame seems to function in a similar way. It at once isolates the individual totally, but also, in beholding someone else's shame, "floods" one so entirely, to use Sedgwick's turn of phrase, filling one so that the very boundaries of oneself are bound up in the shame of another, that is also so totally one's own at the same time. "That's the double movement shame makes: toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality".<sup>38</sup> Such feelings of being alone and together is something that Bougie mentioned with respect to chemsex parties. She said that "I recall feeling

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<sup>36</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 36.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p. 36.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* p. 37.

quite alone and isolated in them and I'm, you know, surrounded by a group of people but actually [I'm] really alone". Here Bougie's own reminiscences on the chemsex scene reflect the double-turn of shame.

Indeed, Sedgwick goes further to suggest that shame has a crucial relation to the creation of queer identity in particular.<sup>39</sup> Douglas Crimp describes this move well, explaining that "schematically, Sedgwick suggests that shame is what makes us queer, both in the sense of having a queer identity and in the sense that queerness is in a volatile relation to identity, destabilizing it even as it makes it".<sup>40</sup> It is this structural sameness (ironically) between shame and queerness that I wish to employ now, arguing that shame functions in "ChemSexxx" to create a community *through* shame, one that at the same time allows for collectivity and heightened individuation, moving beyond an understanding of the audience only as counterpublic.

In general, it is true that queer communities, in opposition to "the family-based models of community so popular in mainstream gay rhetoric these days, [...] are thus predicated on the impossibility of stability and sameness".<sup>41</sup> Such an understanding is reflective of Judith/Jack Halberstam's instructive work into queer temporalities, arguing against a structuration according to heteronormative doxa.<sup>42</sup> Already, such a remark suggests that a community could be fostered through shame, shame relying as it does on a similar disavowal of stability and sameness. However, what gives rise to community in shame, and what gives Bougie's performance such a powerful reading, is, according to David Caron, *memory*. Caron asserts that shame, in "its Proustian suddenness and sense of immediacy, suggests that I am in contact, in touch, with a self that I no longer and yet still am", going on to state that communities of the shamed are "constituted by people who, in a sense, are not even similar to themselves".<sup>43</sup> Caron's insertion of temporality into

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p. 64.

<sup>40</sup> Douglas Crimp, "Mario Montez, For Shame", p. 70.

<sup>41</sup> David Caron, "Shame on Me: Or the Naked Truth About Me and Marlene Dietrich", in *Gay Shame*, eds. David M. Halperin & Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 129.

<sup>42</sup> Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> David Caron, "Shame on Me", p. 127.

the experience of shame is an instructive turn; shame always inheres temporality, in that it places before the subject the past of themselves, a not-them, which they must behold. Through this, Caron then goes on to argue that “what produces community in shame, then, is not shame per se – an affect that, like trauma, cannot be articulated in language and therefore cannot articulate social relations. What produces community in shame is memory – always a collective process”.<sup>44</sup> For “ChemSexxx”, this is a move of vital importance. In asserting that communities of shame are brought together through collective memory, Bougie’s performance weaves together current experiences of shame in the queer community with those over-arching memories of shame and trauma felt collectively within the queer community, alongside her own mournful nostalgia. As such, Bougie’s performance also has the ability to cause each person to feel individually, to be isolated totally in beholding the shame of Bougie onstage which also thereby becomes their shame, and to connect this shame to a broader intergenerational history. And, much in the same way as David Halperin discusses shame and abjection in his essay, this experience of shame need not be negative, but rather be held in relation to ideas of pride etc. in order to create a sense of community that is reflective of the queer experience.

But how does this community of shame *sound*? How is this community fostered *through* lip-syncing? Sedgwick describes shame as flooding the individual, a turn of phrase that is referenced considerably when discussing shame, and one that is crucial in understanding the sonic dimensions of shame in this performance. The first way in which flooding aurally maps shame onto the performance is through the phenomenological shifts. These moments might better be understood as diegetic floods, in which the performance space is suddenly suffused with identity of a chemsex party; the setting is overtaken, through aural transportation, and becomes something other than it is. This point should be clear by now, though, and there is a second, more critical way in which shame aurally floods this performance. The second is the literal flooding of audience’s ear canals with loud sound. If Bougie says that there is an unctuous quality of emotion, what about the unctuous quality

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p. 128.

of loud sound? In Chapter 5, I discuss the intense volumes necessary for lip-syncing, with sound so loud that it envelops the queen. Such haptic qualities of sound are surely at play here. The thick, unctuous sound touches, envelops, and therefore individuates each member of the audience through, as I argue in Chapter 5, Nancy's dialectic of touch. Yet, such an unctuous sound must also bind, for touching joins whilst proving in this relation the impossibility of complete connection. Coupled with the ambiguity of subject-positions created through not lip-syncing and the diegetic flooding, this process of aural flooding acts in a structurally similar way to the processes of shame at play. If identity and queer community are structurally similar to shame, then so is touch, and the haptic qualities of loud sound here serve to bind and individuate each member of the audience (though, pragmatically, affecting those closer to the speakers more effectively).

I am struck here by a comment made by Lisa Blackman in her article mentioned throughout this chapter. In this article, Blackman advocates use of the term "queer performancing" over queer performance, opting for the gerund in order to "capture the movement of affect" inherent within it, much in the same way as I have chosen to use "lip-syncing" throughout this thesis to emphasise its process-based nature, as explained in the thesis's Chapter 0.<sup>45</sup>

Thus forms of queer performancing, and particularly those that enact autobiography marked by trauma and shame, might be re-framed as forms of "subjectivity-as-encounter" [referencing the work of Bracha Ettinger]. In this sense the unconscious and in this context the queer unconscious that is being enacted is always partial, plural, shared and co-emerges between subjects.<sup>46</sup>

I have, throughout this thesis, sought to understand lip-syncing as relational between the performer and the singer on the track, constructing a voice out of discrete entities and identifying with that voice in order to advance a process of becoming and subjectification that benefits the performing queen. Here, however, Blackman, via Ettinger, draws the audience firmly into this discussion. The "queer unconscious", as Blackman states, the queer collective memory, the queer shame, the queer

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<sup>45</sup> Lisa Blackman, "Affect, Performance, and Queer Subjectivities", p. 195.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* p. 195.

trauma, is enacted in its plurality, is spread in its unctuousness between Bougie, the audience as a whole, and each member of the audience in the individuating nature of shame, creating not only an emergence of Bougie as subject but an emergence of *subjects* united in – anointed by – the dichotomy of shame.

#### *VII.viii – Conclusion*

Over the course of this chapter, I hope to have illustrated how powerful Bougie’s performance is. As I say, I found watching it an incredibly emotionally affective experience when I first encountered it, and upon each rewatching I find I am struck by the same emotions. I suppose that is shame at work, for each time it floods you it is felt anew, always achieving a newness in its alterity.

Certain ideas have been ever-present, yet perhaps spectrally so, that I wish to draw together here, namely: responsibility, risk, and chance. In these concluding remarks, this triptych will become of vital importance. Responsibility befalls both Bougie and the audience in “ChemSexxx”. Bougie has a responsibility to present the facts of chemsex accurately to the audience and to the wider (counter)publics, having to navigate the ethical issues incumbent upon anyone who finds themselves in the position of speaking for others; and the audience have to deal with their responsibility in holding onto the ribbons that Bougie gives them, which may seem a small undertaking, but representative as they are of interpersonal connections and affective AIDS memory, such responsibilities of caring for one’s community are centrally important. Risk presents itself most obviously in terms of HIV transmission, in which risky behaviours, as Halperin notes, toe the line between life and death (somewhat dramatically), and imbue the performance, thanks to the ambiguity of Bougie’s subject-position, with precarious narrative drives; and, for the audience, there is the risk, again, that the ties may fall, for even if they try to keep hold of them, in the melee of Bougie rolling around, one cannot be sure that their grip will hold. Finally, chance. Chance is found in the performance in the same ways as risk, but chance seems to remove agency from the equation.

Risk occurs by taking risk, by assessing the situation and making an informed decision on the basis of several factors. Chance, however, comes out of nowhere. Sometimes the issues performed in “ChemSexxx” befall individuals through chance alone.

The confluence of these three elements generates a certain aleatoric edge to the performance. In the ambiguous subject-positions, who can say with any certainty how the piece ends? How will the actions and knowledges of the audience affect the piece’s outcome? While the routine may be left up to chance, what one can confirm is that the audience will have an important role in the piece’s denouement. Will they hold on to the ribbons, or let go? Will they understand the references in such a personal way as to be flooded by shame, thus creating a sense of community? It is certainly true that an audience will always affect the outcome of a performance to some degree, though here it is more pronounced. Bougie invites the audience to be actors in her assemblage, matrixing a distributed agency across the room, made visible by these red ties. Such a distributed agency, perhaps even a distributed subjectivity, to pursue further Blackman’s conception mentioned above, is a decidedly queer act: destabilising a central and monolithic agency, opting for plurality, playing with chance.

This is why I find it imperative that this is a lip-sync performance, for this distribution, this generation of subjectivities across a broad assemblage of actors, is reflected in the structural makeup of lip-syncing. Not only does lip-syncing allow for Bougie’s body to become a conduit for collective memory, but lip-syncing flies in the face of a singular conception of subjectivity. It, at base, requires the bisection of body and voice, reperforming the inherent rupture at the core of subjectivity; but beyond this it extends across a vast assemblage of different actors, human and non-human, across different temporal registers. Moreover, lip-syncing, much in the same way as shame and the formation of queer identity, is volatile. It gets as close as possible in inserting the voice of the Other into the self, and yet must always fail – its joy, no doubt, founded upon such failure. And, much like shame, it binds the body with the voice of the Other whilst marking out the voice’s essential alterity, enveloping the body in a bath of sound, an embrace that in its contiguity also

highlights its inevitable separation. Lip-syncing is the medium *par excellence* for Bougie to express these ideas. Any other medium simply wouldn't be able to hold quite so much in it.

Bougie's performance speaks to an incredibly important issue in the queer community, and speaks about it in a decentred, distributed, and ultimately queer way. She utilises collective queer memory to relate empathically with the audience and capitalises on the structural make up of lip-syncing to make of herself a conduit for the voices of others. And she instrumentalises the double-turn of shame, a move that is structurally similar to both queer identity and lip-syncing, to implicate the audience radically in her narrative. Such moves, I believe, evidence a queer mode of voicing, one that attends to plurality, distribution, and collectivity. Bougie creates a beautiful piece of theatre, one rich with poignancy and heart, and one that uses lip-syncing for lip-syncing's unique structural qualities. In "ChemSexxx", lip-syncing's medium critically informs the message.



## Chapter Ø

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*Elle est silencieuse. On peut  
Lui confier tout ce qu'on veut;  
C'est une sûre confidente  
~ Georges Rodenbach<sup>1</sup>*

### Ø.i – Curtain

I asked at the beginning of this thesis what one might be able to learn from the drag queen's lip-syncing mouth. Over the course of the preceding seven chapters, I hope to have shown that lip-syncing, an art form that began out of the exigencies of frugality, exhibits a staggering fecundity. Lip-syncing, I contend, is a valid mode of voicing, one that in its unique specifications reveals the obfuscated structure of all voicing. Voices, to which subjects are so attached as inalienable parts of the self, exist away from their sources, their existence as sonic events founded on an essential bisection between body and voice, one that the drag queen explores in her silent song. Moreover, in lip-syncing, she reveals the impossibility of an absolutely present voice, similarly reperforming the *différance/préférence* of consciousness. Later in the thesis, I also sought to reinstate the body in this process of voicing, understanding the creation of voice as a chiasmic structure, with the voice generated through the intermodal relationship of aurality and touch, indeed, a haptic aurality. And where lip-syncing has its precedents in the ventriloquial practices of dummies and vents and the filmic traditions of dubbing and post-production, lip-syncing is an altogether different phenomenon. It chooses to revel in such play, not out of necessity but out of the realisation of the benefits of such

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<sup>1</sup> "It is silent. You can tell it anything you want; it is a trusty confidant", Alain Corbin, *A History of Silence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), p. 29.

a vocal exploration. For, while lip-syncing may reveal the multiple nature of all acts of voicing, lip-syncing certainly holds its own unique benefits.

Psychoanalytically speaking, lip-syncing serves to touch an unknowable Real, to suture and fill spaces in performance that must always be left lacking to some degree. In Chapter 2, I spoke of the extimacy of all acts of speech, an *objet petit a* that is performatively made present in the act of lip-syncing. Not only does such an act bring into the field of the Symbolic a sequestered part of the Real that must always remain at a distance, but it also serves to, as Artaud saw it, save the drag queen's speech from the *souffrance* of utterance. More than this, I later discussed how the identification with the voice of an Other sought not to fill the hole of the Real in the Symbolic, but to repair the split at the very core of subjectivity. The subject, forever caught between self and Other, is reinstated as an Imaginary whole through the visual and acoustic mirrors of lip-syncing. As such, armours of alienating identities serve to protect the drag queen. Here lip-syncing's divergences from quotidian speech have marvellously self-actualising consequences, offering new ways of identifying with *Gestalt* images of self-made perfection, identifications that carry forward with the queen into their day-to-day lives.

Such a carrying forward foregrounds the decidedly political aspects of lip-syncing. My interlocutors described to me the ways in which drag and lip-syncing afforded them the space and the confidence to do what is normally prohibited to them in hegemonic society. Whether it was ShayShay desiring to protect the sound of their voice in lip-syncing, Sue discovering her gender through drag, or Rodent gaining the confidence to explore parts of themselves more fully in performance, lip-syncing and drag offered new ways of being in the world for my five queens. At base, I assert that lip-syncing is in and of itself a political act: the renegotiations of the body in lip-syncing, its disarticulatory functionality, its queering of orifices of the body, its revelling in failure, all of this expresses a deeply queer politic. Moreover, the distributed nature of lip-syncing, creating of the body an assemblage of actors that all act in meaningful ways, moving away from an anthropocentrism and embracing a critically networked conception of the self, one that values both

the human and non-human, is radically political. Such primary political characteristics of lip-syncing allow for incredibly powerful identifications and performances: the confidence each of my queens espoused in Chapter 3, carrying their new-found confidence onstage to the streets, is one such example; the radical use of lip-syncing, technological mediation, and collective queer memory in Bougie's performance shows lip-syncing put to palpably political use; and Ruby, in her exploration of trauma and anxiety, capitalises upon the potential of lip-syncing to house so many voices in one body to create a performance whose content is carried masterfully by its form.

As is apparent from my explications and summations above, this thesis could have been written in abundantly different ways, and the connections I draw, while meaningful, are in no way exhaustive. For example, the queerness of synchrony that I discuss in Chapter 2 – in terms of erogenous zones, failure, and an essential asynchrony – could helpfully be positioned in an entirely different manner. Rather than the poignant placement it holds in Chapter 2, the queerness of synchrony was originally figured in a discussion of Sue Gives A Fuck's parody performance of Theresa May, in which Sue pretends to be Theresa May in Brexitland, a take on Alice in Wonderland. Without even introducing new case studies, however, the silence of lip-syncing in Chapters 1 and 2 could easily have been foiled with the loudness of synchrony in Chapter 5. Indeed, perhaps such a new formulation would have produced thought on the hapticity of silence. Or, perhaps the intertextual webs of signification and *signifiante* of Chapter 4 could have been helpfully set up against the assembled politics of Chapter 6, linking less in a Haraway/Bennett/Hayles assemblage, but rather in a Deleuzo-Guattarian assemblage. What I mean to say by pointing out these lines of connection, rather than seeming to open spaces of neglect in my research, is to open generative spaces of doubt and potential. As in all research, the productive lines throughout this thesis can and should be read in myriad ways. As I state in my introduction, I adopt a queer methodology, after Judith/Jack Halberstam, and perhaps a queer reading is to be encouraged also.

I hope, therefore, that I have supplied even a few answers to my opening question – *What can one learn from the drag queen's lip-syncing mouth?* – and gestured toward answers not within

this text. For, to be sure, much could, and ought, to be added to the study of lip-syncing. With regard to my own interlocutors, I regret not having enough space to analyse one of Rodent's performances, *HOMECOMING*, that takes lip-syncing to uncharted territory. This 30-minute immersive performance sees Rodent drag themselves across an abandoned car park floor, the audience huddled in the cold unsure of what to expect. As Rodent crawls and rolls forward, the audience notices their face muzzled, somewhere between Hannibal Lecter and an animal. When they reach the audience, Rodent turns to a set of model houses that stand in the car park, before swinging a bat and destroying them. All the while, Rodent performs to a noise track they composed themselves, which includes growls, snarls, inhumane vocalisations and glossolalia, to which Rodent eventually syncs as they free themselves from the mask. *HOMECOMING* is a violent performance, both in its destructive content and in the way it confronts the audience, and pairing it with Bougie's "ChemSexxx" would have shed fascinating light on each.

Beyond this, locales would have been worthy of more considered interrogation. I mention The Glory, Sink the Pink, and occasional other bars throughout this thesis, but certain places resonate strongly with specific queens. In particular, I would have appreciated the space to discuss Ruby Wednesday's drag home, The Black Cap in Camden. This venue, where Ruby was born and performed with her drag family, was sold off and shut down, causing huge community protests. Ruby even has The Black Cap tattooed on her leg, etching drag into her skin with a permanence that makeup alone does not afford. Place is important for lip-syncing. Where are these lip-syncs taking place? What is the importance of queer venues? Where are the lines between queer venues, gay venues, and straight venues? While space features somewhat heavily in my thesis, place is only mentioned tangentially, and a more geographically rigorous study in the future would be enlightening.

My study also, though including no men, also includes no AFAB<sup>2</sup> performers, whose importance for drag and lip-syncing ought not to go unnoticed. Since deepening my involvement in

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<sup>2</sup> Assigned female at birth.

East London, AFAB queens such as Georgie Bee, Tete Bang, Juni de Bump, and Victoria Sin have become personal queer idols. Their approach to lip-syncing and the ways in which this intersects with their gender identity is fascinating and deserves ample study. Victoria Sin's searing satirical drag performances, where they perform in high drag whilst making a sandwich, are brilliant commentaries on gender politics, for example, and ones that would add invaluable insights to any work on drag. Moreover, drag kings, the likes of Prinx Chiyo or Don One, in their heightened masculinities, are also fascinating case studies. Such inclusions would not simply bolster what I have set out here but would add critical nuance in their intersectionality.

Yet, the limitations of any piece of writing are unavoidable. My study has been delimited to focus solely on drag queens and their lip-syncing practices. I have sought to engage with the sounds and silences of lip-syncing and the voice, and to understand lip-syncing through a close critical analysis. Beyond this there are innumerable avenues of research open. If my introduction was Chapter 0, expressing the productive nothingness of lip-syncing, a generative space from which whole worlds might pour, then this conclusion is Chapter  $\emptyset$ , the zero set, the possibility of infinite zeroes, endless possibilities of understanding and considering the plenitude that is lip-syncing.

Throughout this thesis, lip-syncing has emerged as a vibrant and multifaceted performative medium, one whose relationship to drag has far exceeded its circumstantial beginnings. Lip-syncing offers new ways of being in the world, radical political potential for the queens who have mastered this craft, as well as inspiring self-affirmation and self-actualisation. Lip-syncing generates connections with queer icons, Hollywood heroines, and the queens' own queer siblings and audience members. It offers a space where drag queens can speak about subjects that are most important to them, affording them a unique form of corporeal and vocal protection, under which these drag queens take on greater-than personas. In short, lip-syncing allows the performer to become a queen.



## Appendix A

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Below is a list of all formal interviews conducted with both my five key drag interlocutors and one audience member. In addition to this, however, are innumerable performances and chance meetings over the past four years.

Date	Name	Location	Length
May 7 <sup>th</sup> , 2016	Ruby Wednesday	Skype	57 minutes
May 10 <sup>th</sup> , 2016	Rodent	Skype	52 minutes
May 15 <sup>th</sup> , 2016	ShayShay	Skype	42 minutes
August 10 <sup>th</sup> , 2017	Rodent	Rodent's apartment	28 minutes
August 18 <sup>th</sup> , 2017	Sue Gives A Fuck	Coffee shop, London	1 hour, 11 minutes
November 8 <sup>th</sup> , 2017	ShayShay	Coffee shop, London	40 minutes
January 15 <sup>th</sup> , 2018	Ruby Wednesday	Skype	42 minutes
June 5 <sup>th</sup> , 2018	Bougie	Skype	53 minutes
March 30 <sup>th</sup> , 2020	Bougie	Skype	53 minutes
April 2 <sup>nd</sup> , 2020	Erica	Skype	28 minutes
April 14 <sup>th</sup> , 2020	Sue Gives A Fuck	Telephone call	41 minutes

## Appendix B

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Below is a list of all figures and their respective copyright holders.

- Fig. 1: Rodent, photographed by and used with the permission of Phillip Prokopiou
- Fig. 2: Ruby, photographed by and used with the permission of Felipe Tozzato
- Fig. 3: ShayShay, photographed by and used with the permission of Corinne Cumming
- Fig. 4: Bourgeoisie, photographed by and used with the permission of Dan Govan
- Fig. 5: Sue, photographed by and used with the permission of Peter Fingleton
- Fig. 6: Rodent, photographed by and used with the permission of Farrukh Hyder
- Fig. 7: Ruby, photographed by and used with the permission of Connie Taylor
- Fig. 8: ShayShay, photographed by Léa L'Attentive, and used with the permission of Bar Wotever
- Fig. 9: Bourgeoisie, photographed by and used with the permission of Dan Govan
- Fig. 10: Ruby, photographed by Roxene Anderson, and used with the permission of BOiBOX
- Fig. 11: Ruby, photographed by Roxene Anderson, and used with the permission of BOiBOX
- Fig. 12: Bourgeoisie, used with the permission of Girl Power
- Fig. 13: ShayShay, screenshots from original video taken with the permission of Theo Knight
- Fig. 14: ShayShay, screenshots from original video taken with the permission of Theo Knight
- Fig. 15: ShayShay, screenshots from original video taken with the permission of Theo Knight
- Fig. 16: Rodent, used with the permission of Sink the Pink
- Fig. 17: Rodent, used with the permission of Sink the Pink
- Fig. 18: Sue, photographed by and used with the permission of Holly Revell
- Fig. 19: Ruby, photographed by and used with the permission of Dan Govan
- Fig. 20: List of sources used in Ruby's "Crazy"
- Fig. 21: Rodent, photographed by and used with the permission of Phillip Prokopiou
- Fig. 22: ShayShay, screenshots from original video taken with the permission of Theo Knight
- Fig. 23: ShayShay, screenshots from original video taken with the permission of Theo Knight
- Fig. 24: Bourgeoisie, photographed by the author
- Fig. 25: Bourgeoisie, photographed by the author

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