

https://dspace.org/

The House of Indigo: an ethnographic study of drag performance, beauty pageantry, and cosmopolitan femininity in Johannesburg

Disemelo, Katlego

2021
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/32105

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

Abstract

This ethnographic study explores the subcultural world of drag performance and beauty pageantry at one of Johannesburg's landmark gay nightclubs – Club Indigo. It examines how the participants' consumer identities, material culture, and kinship systems were constructed within and beyond the subculture. This study investigates how this community, located at the longest-running queer institution of its kind, was shaped by the contextual politics and realities of race, class, queerness, and gender identity. This mixed qualitative study incorporates various research materials such as interview and archival data, ethnographic fieldnotes, as well as digital and online social media content. By providing critical discourse and social semiotic analyses, this study argues that these aspirational performances of consumption (and towards cosmopolitanism) were at once liberating and constraining for the various subcultural members. The empirical chapters provided in this study critically analyze the different ways in which queer kinship, beauty pageantry, drag performance, and online practices of self-stylization simultaneously empowered and limited the subcultural members' claims towards belonging and queer citizenship. This interdisciplinary study contributes to the scholarship on drag and beauty pageantry by paying specific attention to the members' practices of consumption and the collective construction of material cultures within this subcultural context. This ethnographic study interrogates how the intersections of race, class, gender, and queer subjectivity were performed through the world-making practices of drag and beauty pageantry at the House of Indigo. Moreover, this study provides an ethnographic snapshot into one of Johannesburg's most premier queer subcultural institutions during its final days. By so

doing, it also demonstrates how this queer landmark institution contributed to the city's queer entertainment landscape. Moreover, it shows how this particular subcultural community enabled its members to make discursive claims about public visibility, upward mobility, and queer citizenship through drag performances and beauty pageantry.

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