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Disemelo, Katlego

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

By

Katlego Disemelo

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21 May 2021

Supervisors: Professor Mehita Iqani (Wits Media Studies Department) and Professor Eileen Moyer (University of Amsterdam)

Honour Pledge

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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

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

The crowd erupts with joy when the saxophone crescendo blasts from the gigantic speakers. Arms waving high to the jazzy lyrics weaving into the up-tempo house music beat. Glasses clink beneath the neon green, yellow, and blue lights pouring from the ceiling onto the checkered dancefloor. The clock has just passed midnight. Not a single announcement had been made about tonight's beauty pageant. Then suddenly the music stops. The gyrating bodies come to a complete halt. The smoke machines start billowing beneath the DJ booth. The neon lights stop spinning, and the house-lights cover the entire nightclub in a deep, velvet red. An elusive figure slowly emerges from the far-left corner of the narrow stage. The crowd transcends into collective ecstasy. They are clearly in love with her. The tall vixen with curled, auburn tresses sashays to the middle of the stage holding a microphone. She moves behind a thick pall of smoke. I still cannot see her properly. The crowd continues to roar. She stops and faces her supplicants. She does not say a word. She only smiles – basking in their adulation. The smoke begins to clear, and I can vaguely see her face. After almost thirty seconds of her decidedly long pause, she lifts the mic towards her rouged lips. She looks knowingly across the small nightclub toward her adoring, pious fans. She is the omnipotent shepherdess, and we are her besotted lambs. Slowly, she lifts the mic towards her rouged lips: "Good evening, ladies and

gentlemen. My name is Madame Zelda Chanel-Diamond. And welcome to Miss Club Indigo 2017." By this time, the crowd has become savage with rapture.

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

This was clearly was a queer space. More importantly, it was a space that catered to Black and Coloured queer people. Thhis combination of queer sociality and glamour were significant in the light of events that occurred at the Johannesburg Pride march in the previous year. On 6 October 2012, several members of the One in Nine Campaign activist group disrupted the pride parade as it snaked its way through the affluent suburb of

Rosebank. In efforts to "re-politicize" the event, members of the South African feminist activist group, the One in Nine Campaign, staged a "die-in." They strategically laid their bodies on the tarmac road in remembrance of the countless Black and Coloured victims of homo- and transphobic hate-crimes throughout South Africa. The disruption of the pride parade precipitated in a physically and emotionally violent altercation between the predominantly white gay male organizers of the event, the mostly Black lesbian One In Nine campaigners. Racist slurs were hurled at the campaigners whereupon the white pride marchers shouted at the campaigners: "Go back to your townships! This is *my* parade. This is *my* route." Unsurprisingly, the police were called, and even more violence was inflicted upon the campaigners.

This marked a watershed moment since the first gay pride march on the African continent was organized in Johannesburg, 1990. From that day onwards, the LGBTQIA+ pride marches have been splintered into several race and class-specific events throughout the city. With little to no state or commercial funding, these smaller, pride marches have mushroomed in various townships of the city. Soweto Pride, Kwa-Tema Pride, Ekhuruleni Pride, and Vaal Pride are some of the grassroots pride marches that have been organized by various Non-Governmental Organizations and community outreach programmes.

Exactly one year later in 2013, an organizing committee of about thirty individuals from LGBTQIA+ and feminist activist groups organized the Johannesburg People's Pride March. In sharp contrast to the white and commercially-owned Joburg Pride parade, these activists vehemently stressed that theirs was a political *march* – and not just a parade for the entertainment of a, elite, privileged few. They emphasized the political and civic dimensions of visibilizing queer bodies and desire by marching through the streets of downtown

Johannesburg. Equally important, were their vociferous demands for erotic justice, freedom from all forms of sexual violence and discrimination, equitable redistribution of land, and universal, quality education for all citizens (Hengeveld & Tallie, 2012).

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

After the march, my friends and I discussed best place to go celebrate what had been a hugely successful march. Perched on the topmost tower at Constitution Hill, we watched the sun set over the northern, leafy-green suburbs of Houghton and Parktown. We bounced around a few ideas. None of us wanted to settle on the rather predictable and nearby Kitchener's – the oldest and most popular bar-cum-nightclub in Johannesburg. We all wanted to be in a space that was loudly, proudly, and comfortably queer.

“Why don’t we go to Club Indigo,” a friend asked. “They are hosting Miss Club Indigo tonight, so it’s gonna be very fun.”

The suggestion was genius and no one objected. Although I had heard about it, I had never been to Club Indigo before. I did not anticipate that my friend’s humble suggestion would culminate in my discovery of a subcultural community who were so fundamental to the research objectives of this study.

Club Indigo: A long-standing institution of LGBTQIA+ nightlife

Club Indigo was one of the longest-running queer club in the modern history of Johannesburg. Having opened in 2003, the nightclub eventually closed in October 2019. New bars and nightclubs catering specifically to LGBTQIA+ clientele often close within a few years of operating. Similarly, over the last decade, there has been a global wave of historically LGBTQIA+ spaces of entertainment closing down for good (Shiriatmadari 2019). So, the longevity of Club Indigo remains a significant feat in terms of the fragmented and palimpsestic nature of Johannesburg’s queer nightlife and entertainment landscape (Khan 2018).

The demographic landscapes of LGBTQIA+ entertainment throughout South Africa have been well-documented in cities such as Cape Town, Bloemfontein, and Johannesburg (Gevisser 1995; Visser 2001; 2003; Tucker 2009; Reid 2010; Matebeni 2011; Livermon 2014). But Club Indigo stands as an historical institution of queer entertainment, sociality, and visibility in post-apartheid Johannesburg. Another significant fact about its historical trajectory is that the nightclub changed locations throughout the inner city no less than four

times. After trekking throughout various parts of the inner city, the owners eventually settled on a cheaper venue in industrial area on the periphery of Johannesburg's city centre. During fieldwork for this study, the nightclub moved one last time to a more spacious dance venue right next door. However, this ethnography is less about the geographical movements of this particular nightclub, and more about identities, desires, and practices of the people who moved along *with* it over the course of its tenure. This study, therefore, explores the lives and world-making practices of variously-identified queer people who constructed the subcultural context of Club Indigo.

1.2 Research Aims and Research Questions

Apart from questions of its longevity and peculiar movements throughout various parts of the inner city, I was particularly interested in the intersections between class, race, sexuality, and gender at Club Indigo. I was interested in finding out how various subjects' positionalities coalesced between these nexus points as well as how they were configured in such a way as to create a subcultural context. It was clear that Club Indigo had its own distinctive character in that it stood apart from other queer entertainment spaces in Johannesburg's northern, suburban enclaves. This was a distinction marked by more than the drag beauty pageants and performances which were hosted on a regular basis at the nightclub. Countless drag beauty pageants for lesbian, gay, and trans-identified contestants have existed (since the mid-1990s) in different parts of the city and its surrounding townships (Reid 2010; GALA 2016). This study, therefore, aimed to investigate how the drag

pageants and performances at Club Indigo threw into relief the racial and class dynamics of queer spatiality in post-apartheid Johannesburg.

The mutually reinforcing striations of race and class also made Club Indigo a noteworthy field site for ethnographic research. This is because Club Indigo was a patently working and lower-middle class context wherein various individuals had different stakes. As such, one of the key areas for investigation was the ways in which queer people of colour constructed a subcultural context that foregrounded different articulations of gender non-conformity through the consumer practices of drag and beauty pageantry. Moreover, I was also interested with the questions of consumer citizenship and public visibility among these gender non-conforming subjects. Of particular concern here were the interrelationships between the politics of queer visibility in post-apartheid South Africa, self-representation, and my interlocutors' constructions of their respective drag personae. I also sought to interrogate how my Black and Coloured interlocutors negotiated and *reclaimed* broader public visibility for themselves beyond walls at Club Indigo. In the light of this, this study aimed to analyze how they used different social media platforms to construct publicly visible gender-non-conforming consumer identities and drag personae.

Research Questions

1. The drag beauty pageants and performances at Club Indigo have given the nightclub its distinctive subcultural character Johannesburg's queer entertainment and consumer landscape. How do these subcultural practices relate to the broader LGBTQIA+ politics of gender non-conformity and consumer citizenship in post-apartheid Johannesburg?

2. Johannesburg continues to be a highly fragmented city wherein racial and class-specific stratifications influence queer spatiality and public visibility. How are the practices, identities, and social hierarchies at Club Indigo constructed in relation to various race, class, sexuality and, gender identities?

3. Drag artistry has developed into a mainstream, commodified, and very lucrative cultural phenomenon in various Global North contexts. What are the transnational interconnections between these Global North representations of drag and those which are constructed within Club Indigo?

<u>Overview of chapters</u>

This introductory chapter maps the landscape of scholarly examinations and debates pertaining to LGBTQIA+ consumer identities and popular cultures. As an entry point, it outlines a brief history of the city Johannesburg as an inherently consumerist space of sociality and subjectivation. By so doing, this chapter provides historical context underlying

Johannesburg's contemporary landscape of LGBTQIA+ consumer cultures and nightlife. A key intervention in this chapter, therefore, is to draw the reader's attention to the significance of drag and beauty pageantry as embodied performances of consumption, aspiration, as well as critical claims to public visibility and agency.

Chapter 2 segues into an exploration of the key theoretical and conceptual models which frame the arguments made throughout this study. This chapter situates this study within the related fields of critical feminist, queer of colour critiques, as well as critical performance, and ethnographic studies. Similarly, a discussion of how each of these debates overlap in this study is also provided. This chapter therefore pays keen attention to the significance of queer social actors' embodied performances of intersecting identities – race, class, sex, gender, geopolitical citizenship – through drag and beauty pageantry. This theoretical focus, it is argued, is enlivened through examining key conceptual models and interventions in socio-historical *context*.

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

Chapters 4 introduces my key research participants (hereafter referred to as interlocutors – See Chapter 3) in this study. The subcultural structures and hierarchies of power are also outlined in this chapter. These structures are analyzed as systems of kinship which are framed in relation to the broader hegemonic society outside of the House of Indigo.

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

Dovetailing from this focus on material culture, Chapter 6 pays critical attention to the ways in which gender was performed and policed at the House Indigo. A key technology in the structuring and policing of a specific iteration of gender at the nightclub (what I theorize as cosmopolitan and aspirational femininity) was through the performance of drag and beauty pageantry. The ethnographic material provided in this chapter demonstrates how this form of gender policing was done both on and off stage at the House of Indigo. Another critical intervention made in this chapter, is the examination of how this system of gender policing rewarded and penalized various subcultural members' performances of this ideal aspirational and cosmopolitan femininity.

Chapter 7 foregrounds the significance of drag performance as an aspirational thoroughfare by which subcultural members were able to both imagine and embody a queer and utopic futurity. However, the adequate performances of drag and beauty had real-world

implications and incentives for the drag divas at the House of Indigo. This chapter therefore, eschews any assumptions about drag and pageantry as frivolous merry-making. This chapter highlights the extent to which the performance of drag enabled subcultural members to simultaneously imagine "a better life" for themselves while aesthetically branding themselves as openly queer, empowered, aspirational, and upwardly mobile consumer-citizens. I argue that social media platforms provided the drag divas with the relevant technologies to construct their idealized drag personae as brands, and (more importantly), to commodify and monetize these.

Chapter 8 highlights the concept of "fabulousness" as both a human right as well as an agentive reclaiming of space and public visibility. This chapter also highlights the importance of paying critical focus to the heterogeneity of queer identities in post-apartheid South Africa. This chapter also outlines the theoretical and ethnographic contributions and limitations of this study.

1.3 Drag and Beauty Pageants in the City of Gold: Interrogating Johannesburg's LGBTQIA+ consumer landscape, and drag subcultures

This section discusses the interrelationship between sexuality and urban space in the articulation of identities. By de-stabilizing essentialist notions of "global gay" identities, this section highlights the significance of analyzing gendered and sexual subjectivity in context. In providing a brief outline of the emergence of the city of Johannesburg, this section describes how LGBTQIA+ identities are negotiated in contemporary Johannesburg.

Exploring LGBTQIA+ spatiality and "community" in post-apartheid Johannesburg

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

Martin IV Manalansan (2006: 64) has foregrounded "the fissures of race and other forms of difference that shape the contours of gay spaces in New York City." In so doing, he attempts to map the desires, practices, and imaginations of diasporic gay Filipino men within the complexities of global city such as New York. Similarly, Valentine (2007: 72) observes that "rather than a pre-existing community, there are a variety of dispersed places [practices and identities] which are brought together by 'transgender' into an idea of community" in New York. Samuel Delany (1999) also highlights the ways in which the identity categories race and class coalesce with the sexual and gender identities of his New York research participants, and how this contributes to their access to and/or exclusion from different spaces in the city. Marlon M. Bailey's (2013) ethnographic study investigates the subcultural drag balls and houses created and maintained by marginalized Black and Latinx youth in Detroit. He observes that "Black LGBT people stand apart from their White counterparts

socially, politically, and in many cases, economically" (Bailey, 2013: 14). These scholars have aptly complicated popular cultural histories that rely upon homogenizing narratives about gay "ghettos" or communities in urban cities. More significantly, they have highlighted the intersections of racial, class, gender, and sexual identification in their discussions of queer spatiality and visibility in urban public and/or subcultural spaces.

The intersection between space and sexuality warrants a discussion about whom, exactly, is allowed access to certain places and who is not. Sarah Ahmed (2006) reminds us that spaces are oriented towards certain bodies. A corollary to this assertion is that bodies become "sexualized through *how* they inhabit space." (Ahmed 2006: 67, emphasis my own). Several scholars have critiqued the ways in which advertising and broadcast media representations have been historically centered around the lives, practices and desires of cisgender gay white men (Binnie & Valentine 1995; Rushbrook 2002; Han 2007; Snorton 2017; Blair 2017). They argue for the importance of paying critical attention to the ways in which sexual and gender identity politics are always imbricated within the constitution and demarcation of social space (Gregson & Rose 2000; Binnie & Skeggs 2004; Johnson 2005). In a deeply-divided city such as Johannesburg, the boundaries between access and exclusion are still clearly demarcated along the lines of race and class. These divisions, however, are not eternally fixed. By paying close attention to sexuality and gender, it is possible to complicate common ideas about belonging, access, and exclusion of different bodies in different places. This may, ultimately, assist in more nuanced analyses of ideas around various LGBTQIA+ identities, spaces of safety and visibility, as well as consumer culture.

The present study neither presumes nor posits some uniformity between Johannesburg and world-class cities like New York. Likewise, it would be naïve to assume that the politics of

LGBTQIA+ identity and public visibility are the same throughout various transnational and geopolitical contexts. Following Dennis Altman (1997), scholars have argued that not only is the notion of a "global gay identity" an unhelpful essentialism, but that it is also a Westocentric one (Jackson 2000; Oswin 2007; Benedicto 2014). Others, still, have critically riled against the academic tendency of treating non-Western sexual identities, practices and cultural phenomena merely as empirical data which serve to reify theoretical models and categories from the global north (Grewal and Kaplan 2001; Epprecht 2004; Hoad 2007; Ekine & Abbas 2013; Clark 2013; Nyanzi 2014; Deumert & Mabandla 2017; Milani & Lazar 2017).

It seems, therefore, that the locally specific configurations of race, class, sexuality, and gender should be the starting point for investigating LGBTQIA+ politics and identities in global south contexts. Equally important, is the focus on the complexities of language, ethnicity, regional and inter-cultural politics, and generational disparities in locally specific conceptions of gender and sexuality, as well as citizenship (Tamale, 2011: 12). In the light of this, it is very difficult to ignore those specific and contextual historical processes and structures which give discussions about sexuality and gender on the African continent their specific register and semiotic import. Matebeni, Monro & Reddy (2018: 2) similarly emphasize the heterogeneity and complexity of sex and gender identity categories on the African continent, as well as the specific socio-political milieux within which they accrue meaning. Paying critical attention to these different historical, economic, political and cultural dynamics allows one to better understand the fragmented nature of LGBTQIA+ visibility and consumer culture in contemporary Johannesburg; far more so than some

homogenizing concept of an LGBTQIA+ "community" – which has never really existed in the first place (Oswin 2007).

Some interesting similarities can be (cautiously) delineated between the Johannesburg and New York – especially in terms of its built form. From the first, Johannesburg's urban landscape was intended to echo the modern ideals and imperial visions of the British colonial settlers who formally established it as a city in 1886. This was reflected in the Victorian and Edwardian architecture of its buildings, its city planning policies, as well as the monuments resurrected in honour of the colonial triumphalist ideals upon which the city was founded (Murray 2011). These aesthetic influences upon its built form took on a different register from the 1930's onwards. From the late nineteenth century, Johannesburg was built and marketed as a future-oriented and modern megalopolis whose skyscrapers were imagined to rival those in developed metropoles in the Northern hemisphere. Mbembe (2004: 376) posits that no other modern African city has demonstrated this capacity for mimesis (of Western modernity), to the extent that has bestowed unto the city an "*aura* of its own, its uniqueness" (emphasis in original). This mimetic heterotopia was, therefore, historically developed as a shining beacon of Western modernity on the African continent (Murray 2011: 31). During the intermediate, post- WWI years, the economic changes in real estate capitalism and city planners' aesthetic orientations meant that Johannesburg's cityscape was modelled on or flagrantly plagiarized from the verticality of the New York, Chicago, and London skylines (Murray 2011; Matshikiza 2008).

Some parallels can be drawn between LGBTQIA+ spatiality, consumption and public visibility in New York and Johannesburg. In *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*, Martin IV Manalansan (2006) shows how race and class play an important role in determining which

spaces of consumption and leisure Filipino men frequent in New York City. These identity categories play a vital role in forging relationships of diasporic solidarity and support among Filipino gay men in the city. Malanansan (2006) paints a picture of a global, dynamic, cosmopolitan city in which LGBTQIA+ spaces are highly fragmented according to the fault-lines of race, class, sexual orientation, and other vectors of identity. Similarly, LGBTQIA+ spaces in Johannesburg are divided along the coeval structures of race, class, sexuality, and ability. Race and class are still the primary factors in determining the spaces of leisurely consumption and the relationships of political solidarity, kinship, or intimacy forged among its variously identified LGBTQIA+ residents. One need only refer to the previously mentioned Joburg 2012 Pride Parade and the precipitant emotional and physical violence by way of evidence.

In what follows I provide a brief exegesis of Johannesburg's emergence and metropolitanism; or what Nuttall and Mbembe (2008: 15) have described as its modern African *city-ness*. This account will also serve as the contextual and historicized basis upon which to discuss LGBTQIA+ consumption and spatiality in the "city of gold," as it is colloquially known.

Queer spatiality and consumption in the aspirational City of Gold

Johannesburg is a migrant city that was founded upon get-rich-quick entrepreneurialism and the pursuit of material wealth (Nuttall and Mbembe 2008). From its very humble beginnings as a ramshackle collection of mining camps, Johannesburg has always been characterized by its precarity and palimpsestic discontinuities. Nothing and no one were

meant to last for a long time in this city – not even its built form (Simone, 2008). Within less than three decades, the entire city was completely razed to the ground and rebuilt no less than five times for various reasons related to population control and public health policies (Nuttall & Mbembe 2008; Murray 2011; Mitshikiza 2008).

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

John Matshikiza (2008: 221) puts forward the claim that "there must have been something…where Johannesburg stands, before the gold rush." So, it would be disingenuous (if not blatantly anachronistic) to suggest that the city's history *proper* begins with the discovery of gold by a few European colonial settler white men. Between the 11th and 13th centuries, the indigenous Iron Age community of Mapungubwe – located between the borders of present-day South African and Zimbabwe (in the Limpopo Province) – mined

and traded gold with Islamic and Chinese merchants (Huffman 2000; Miller et al. 2000). This epicentre of gold mining and trade generated enormous wealth, and has thus been understood as the precursor to the civilization of Great Zimbabwe. The materiality of gold, therefore, suggests its indexicality as a metaphor for aspiration, consumer capitalism, wealth, and upward mobility in Johannesburg. The centrality of this commodity, in terms of the city's history and common imaginaries about it, thus lends credence to its nickname: *eGoli – The City of Gold*.

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

Beginning in the 17th century, the Western European logics of capitalism, commodity culture, and consumerism were vital ingredients in bolstering the trans-Atlantic slave trade as well as the various colonial projects in sub-Saharan Africa (wa Thiong'o 1987; McClintock 1995; Magubane 2004). An historical effect of this have been the mutually reinforcing, modernist, projects of racialization and consumer culture as we understand them today (Taylor 2004; 2016; Wynter 1979; 2003). Deborah Posel's (2010: 162) notion of racialized consumption is thus helpful at this point. It allows one to theorize how "the dynamics of race are as thoroughly insinuated into local and global histories of consumption as those of class, status and gender." The critical point here is that inasmuch as social spaces are

configured according to the categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality, these identity markers integral to the historical and contemporary articulations of consumer capitalism.

LGBTQIA+ consumer culture, citizenship, and the racialization of urban space

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

Starting from the mid-1990s, LGBTQIA+ consumption has been critiqued for its very basis as a particular kind of market segmentation. The economist and media constructions of a lucrative LGBTQIA+ consumer market have been critiqued as being both dubious and elitist (Binnie 1995; Penñaloza 1996; Escoffier 1997; Gluckman & Reed 1997; Haslop et al 1998; Bell & Binnie 2000; Chasin 2000; Hennessy 2000; Kates & Belk 2001; Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan 2002; Kates 2002; Pallegrini 2002; Sender 2003). A broad consensus among scholars is that the highly glamourized Double-Income-NO-Kids (DINKS) market sector is nothing more than a collusive construction by marketing and public relations, and advertising companies. The bottom line, therefore, was to attract advertising and consumer

revenue. A corollary of these marketing constructions is the nebulous idea of a "Pink Economy." This is a specific kind of marketing ploy that is primarily aimed at affluent, cisgender, white, gay males, who supposedly wield the financial wherewithal to buy and consume any commodity at will (Bell & Binnie 2000; Manalansan 2005; Teunis 2007; Han 2007; Roy 2012). These media constructions have elided the fact that "sexuality is cross-cut by class, race and gender in complex ways, which the prevailing myths of the affluent gay consumer in the pink economy invisibilize." (Bell & Binnie 2000: 100) In effect, they have resulted in the propagation of a neoliberal ideology of hyper-consumerism which, ultimately, serves the homonormative and homonationalist agendas of various transnational corporations and nation-states (Kates 1999; Bérubé 2001; Duggan 2003; Puar 2006; 2007; Oswin 2007; Agathangelou et al 2008; Brown 2009; LeMaster 2015; Ritchie 2015; David 2017).

On the one hand, LGBTQIA+ consumer identities and practices are undeniable in their expressive claims to citizenship and empowerment. If it is the case that empowerment can be embodied through consumption (Iqani 2012: 5), then the pink economy legitimates a specific kind of assimilative citizenship. Ann Pallegrini (2002: 135) alerts us to "the relationship between legal and social rights, on the one hand, and economic recognition and [consumer] opportunities, on the other." It is, therefore, important to be attentive to the claims to basic human rights and citizenship which undergird the tenuous domain of LGBTQIA+ consumer culture (Hennessy 2000). This is because the entire discursive terrain of consumer culture expresses a wide range of claims regarding social identity, class, status, distinction, taste, and so forth (Bourdieu 1984; Miller 1987; Miller 2012; Sender 2001). Another *important* dimension within the discursive realm of consumption pertains to

human rights claims and citizenship (Cancalini 2001; Couldry 2004; Duggan 1995; 2003; Iqani 2016)

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

According to the latest Statistics South Africa report, the majority of its Black population lives in varying degrees of poverty (Stats SA 2017). This means that 55,5 percent (30,4 million) of the country's population lives below the bread line (Wilkinson 2018). What does consumer-citizenship mean for the majority of the Black population who are systemically

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

The present study contributes to the afore-mentioned scholarship on LGBTQIA+ consumption in two significant ways. First, it provides an ethnographic account of how consumer identities, desires, and practices were constructed in the subcultural context of Club Indigo. The above-discussed body of scholarship has tended to focus on media, marketing, and advertising texts. By so doing, they have provided (much-needed) textual and discourse analyses of the construction of the pink economy. The present study, then, puts forward an argument about how global south LGBTQIA+ consumer-citizens created and

shared various meanings about their identities and practices of consumption through drag and beauty pageantry.

Second, this study gives an ethnographic account of LGBTQIA+ consumer identities and practices from a distinctly global south perspective. The mainstream constructions of the pink economy and LGBTQIA+ market segmentation have predominantly focused on media, practices, and consumers from the global north – specifically Western cities such as New York, San Francisco, Montreal, London, Amsterdam, Melbourne, and so on. The present study departs from this tendency by showing how Black and Coloured LGBTQIA+ consumers created a meaningful subcultural space of visibility and kinship *on the margins* of this pink economy in Johannesburg. This is not to suggest that there are no affluent, upwardly-mobile LGBTQIA+ consumers in the city who "buy into" the idea of the pink economy. Neither am I suggesting that they are all white, gay, cisgender males. My own partial contribution, then, is to paint ethnographic portraits about the aspirations of subcultural participants who did not the privileged access to it.

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

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

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

The city's queer consumer cultural and entertainment landscape, however, is not without its historical precedents. With the global export of gold and iron ore in the mid-20th century,

came an exponential boom in South Africa's apartheid economy in the interim years between the World Wars. This resulted in an enormous rise in the living standards and expendable household incomes of the white minority population. In effect, the leisure industries also underwent exponential growth, and thus "clubbing, always costlier than nipping off to the pub for a drink, became the vogue." (Gevisser 1995: 38) From the late 1960's, the inner-city became home to scores of different nightclubs, bars, cabarets, and bookstores catering to a (not-so-clandestine) LGBTQIA+ consumer market. In fact, the main streets of Hillbrow – a former suburb for European immigrants on the eastern perimeter of the city – were littered with many such entertainment venues. Some examples of these were the Skyline Bar, the Dungeon nightclub, and Mrs. Henderson's Restaurant and Cabaret Lounge. With the advent of democracy during the early 1990s, came the subsequent corporate and residential "white flight" to the northern suburbs. During these early years, many of the entertainment venues catering to a distinctly LGBTQIA+ clientele either shut down, or petered out into the surrounding suburbs.

In the early 2000s, monthly or bi-annual commercially-sponsored parties targeting an upwardly-mobile, cisgender, gay, male clientele gained popularity throughout the city. But they fizzled out as soon as this rather fickle market lost interest in them. This short life-span of gay bars and nightclubs in Johannesburg was evidenced very early during my fieldwork. Upon my arrival back in Johannesburg September 2016, I noticed posters announcing the grand opening of a new gay club named Industry. The opening was welcomed with much fanfare when it was featured in the entertainment and lifestyle website, *Mambaonline.com*. Industry was an enormous, refurbished warehouse located in the gentrified Maboneng Precinct. Despite its policy of openness and inclusivity for all LGBTQIA+ patrons, it shut

down less than seven months later. One of the owners of the Club Indigo stated in a *Mambaonline.com* article:

> People don't seem to be so into gay spaces anymore…The Born Frees [Youth born in the post-apartheid years after 1994] are demanding their space in the heterosexual community and are not so interested in their own space.
>
> (Iqual 2007)

The above conjecture highlights the generational difference in terms of the desires and tastes of Johannesburg's middle- and upper-class LGBTQIA+ consumers. Similarly, it attests to the changing conceptions of consumer practices, aspiration, and the public visibility of this particular market sector.

1.4 Studying Beauty Pageants: Contesting race, nationality and gender

This study investigates the drag beauty pageants hosted at Club Indigo as a set of ritualized subcultural performances. In the light of this, it is important to contextualize contemporary representations of beauty contestants and pageants as well as academic scholarship about these kinds of performance. Beauty contestants occupy an ambivalent space within our modern popular cultural lexicon. Their ubiquity has turned them into easily recognizable, figures in our everyday lives. However, beauty contestants are rather complex figures insofar as they are constructed as simultaneously exceptional yet ordinary. Mainstream media have bolstered this paradoxical image of the exceptional beauty queen or king – who stands out *in spite* of their quotidian characteristics. It is, therefore, difficult to dismiss the

beauty contestants outright as figures who uphold the values of an archaic, sexist, and heteropatriarchal order.

Take, for example, an article in the *Princeton Alumni Review* about the academic achievements of one Cara McCollum – a Miss America beauty contestant and Princeton undergraduate student – whose life's passions comprise of distributing books to children on their birthdays (Friedman 2017). This mediated narrative paints a picture of this blond and blue-eyed woman as the loveable princess with the proverbial "heart of gold."

Another newspaper article (Suhay 2015) describes the "grace," "dignity," and "kindness" of Miss Philippines, Pia Wurtzbach, at the Miss Universe 2015 beauty pageant when the competition's host mistakenly announced Miss Colombia, as the winner. Wurtzbach is described as having displayed exceptional humility, as she later her embraced her Colombian runner-up – who was the actual winner of the pageant. In a similar attempt to both humanize beauty contestants, a *New Statesman* article (Woolf 2014) goes to great lengths to describe the political ambitions of numerous American beauty pageant contestants and winners who have blazed their trails from the pageant stage to congress and senate houses. Yet another media example describes a Miss America contestant, Madeline Collins, whose response during the question-and-answer section was that "Donald Trump is the biggest issue our country faces," and that "he has caused a lot of division in [the USA]" (Reliford 2018). Collins even continued to tell the judges that NFL players have the right to kneel during the national anthem in protest against police brutality in the USA. More recently still, several contestants at the Miss Universe 2021 pageant made bold political statements in the national costume competition. Contestants wore costumes adorned with statements such as "Depose Duterte" (Miss Philippines), "Stop Asian Hate,"

(Miss Singapore), and “Pray for Myanmar” (Miss Myanmar). These media representations evidence that the modern beauty queen embodies and thus performs the values of an ideal citizen – who is both morally upstanding and politically “savvy.”

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

When Vanessa Williams was crowned as the first African-American “Miss America” in 1983, she solidified her place in late modern US history. But she did more than this. She stood as a sign for the imagined ideals of democratic, civil, and inclusive progressiveness. Collectivist ideals, mind you, which are not unrelated to the constructions of the neoliberal capitalist American Dream. But her crown and title were rescinded soon after her nude photographs for a *Playboy* shoot were leaked to several different tabloid publications. Her scandalized fall from grace served to highlight the spectacular ways in which the American nation (in particular) chooses to represent its collective memory through performance of a specific

kind of “proper” and acceptable femininity. Moreover, the case of Vanessa Williams exemplifies the extent to which the bodies of beauty queens serve as sites upon which the politics, tensions, and contestations about “proper” gendered subjectivity are negotiated (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003).

From the earliest decades of the 20th century, the Western model of the competitive beauty pageant has permeated throughout different transnational contexts (Latham 1995; Ballerino-Cohen et al. 1996). However, this model of the Western beauty pageant has been significantly altered to reflect the local cultural throughout different geo-political contexts (Johnson 1996; Schackt 2005; Thomas 2006; Crawford 2008). Take, for example, the “Mr and Ms Albinism East Africa” pageant which was organized by the Albinism Society of Kenya. The pageant aimed to “demystify the condition of people living with albinism and affirm their inherent dignity while challenging myths, misconceptions and negative beliefs around the disorder” (Tato 2018). While the pageant followed the usual pattern of modelling and stylized beautification, its ideological impetus was altered to raise public awareness against the killings of people living with albinism throughout different parts of sub-Saharan Africa.

When Jacqui Mofokeng was crowned the first Black “Miss South Africa” in 1993, this moment was about more than the performance and estimation of a Black woman’s physical beauty. This historic moment also heralded the apotheosis of “Rainbow Nation” idealism. This was a particular kind of narrative which the South African national body politic chose to construct for itself and the world in the capricious moments leading up to the first democratic elections. Ballerino Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje (1996: 2 - 3) point out that:

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

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

Beauty pageants as spectacles

The beauty pageant can also be conceived as a kind of spectacle in the Barthesian sense (1991 [1957]). Much like the spectacular drama of wrestling in his famous essay, "The World of Wrestling," the beauty pageant follows a specific and predictable script. The discursive import of the beauty pageant lies in its spectacularism, its propensity for exaggerated glamour, and its grandiloquence. Barthes (1991: 16) posits that:

> It is obvious that at such a pitch, it no longer matters whether the passion is genuine or not. What the public wants is the image of the passion, not the passion itself.

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

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

A number of feminist scholars from various ideological camps have critiqued the commodification of women's bodies in beauty pageants (hooks 1992; Wolf 2002). They problematize the ownership, organization, and control of these events as processes which further the interest of the heteropatriarchal status quo. Alternatively, there are some

scholars who interrogate some forms of beauty pageantry as countercultural performances around which different communities adhere and find solidarity (Leeds-Craig 2002; Lavenda 1996). This latter strand of scholarship views beauty pageants as sites of political organizing by marginalized communities in response to state-sanctioned, racist exclusion and discrimination. From this latter perspective, beauty pageants are posited as having transformative potential. They are explored in the ways they embody the contestations of around beauty, identity, gender, and sexuality beyond hegemonic, Western norms (Ribane 2006). The present study demonstrates how beauty pageants are inflected by an assemblage of mediated images and transnational imaginaries that permeate geo-political borders beyond global north-south binaries. This study demostrates how the Club Indigo pageants were connected to multiple, transnational contexts and representations through practices of consumer culture and performances of beauty ideals.

The following section provides a critical overview of the current scholarship on beauty pageants as a specific kind of subcultural performance and negotiation of LGBTQIA+ identities. It also situates the present study firmly within this body of scholarship.

1.5 LGBTQIA+ Beauty Pageants: Glamorizing subcultural counterpublics

Beauty pageants across various LGBTQIA+ subcultural contexts constitute performances of what Michael Warner (2002) has theorized as a counterpublic. Warner (2002, 423 – 424) posits that "a counterpublic maintains, at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status." Beauty pageants created and marketed to LGBTQIA+ communities are often premised upon the discourses of civil and human rights, empowerment, and public

visibility for gender non-conforming subjects. However, this does not make them any less spectacular in their scripted predictability. Much like other subaltern or subcultural beauty pageants, they rely upon the glamorization and performance of group-sanctioned discourses, values, and ideals.

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

In the case of South Africa, beauty pageants for variously identified LGBTQIA+ groups have a very long and rich history – dating back to the mid-1950s. Dhiannaraj Chetty's (1995) study provides a rich historical account of the elaborate drag beauty pageants housed at the famous Madame Costello's in District Six, Cape Town. Later examples within this body of research include Matthew Bettar's (2012) analysis of the media representations of the "Mr Gay SA" beauty pageant. He argues that "both the [Mr Gay SA] pageant and the surrounding media content are symbolic of an assimilationist approach to LGBTI issues, ultimately perpetuating a Westernised, homonormative, monolithic identity." Arguing from an antithetical perspective, Jennifer Spruill (2004: 95) claims that "some drag is pointedly political." In a similar vein, Olivia Bronson (2013: 75) theorizes the Miss Gay Western Cape

pageant as "both archive and an act of resistance, in which participants enact a fragmented freedom and declare their existence in South Africa." Bryce Lease (2017) sees the Miss Gay Western Cape pageant as a spatially-bounded performance which offers participants, organizers and audiences "an alternative mode of living" (2017: 139). These varying perspectives notwithstanding, it can be conceded that the LGBTQIA+ beauty pageant constitute a particular (mainstream or subcultural) counterpublic to the extent that "a hierarchy of stigma is the assumed background of practice" (Warner 2002: 424).

An overarching tendency within this scholarship on LGBTQIA+ beauty pageants is the critical focus on cisgender males and drag contestants. Besides Zethu Matebeni's (2016) insightful contribution, there seems to be a paucity of research on lesbian identities and sexualities as relates to beauty pageants in South Africa. Another observation about these studies of local LGBTQIA+ beauty pageants is the general presumption of stable sexual identity categories. The above-mentioned scholars have (rightly) focused on the human and sexual rights politics which undergird these spectacular and glamorous practices. However, critiques about the constructions and performativity of sexual and gender identities have tended to recede into the background of their analyses. In his ethnographic study of the Miss Gay Queenstown pageant, Graeme Reid (2003: 9) observes that:

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

The empirical approach of examining beauty pageants as having an educational and community-building function seems plausible. But the identity categories of "gay" and

"men" are asserted as *a priori*. The above-mentioned studies correctly examine these beauty pageants as bearing and a specific set of semiotic as well as political significance in terms of LGBTQIA+ public visibility. Building on this, the present study contributes to this scholarship by problematizing the discourses of sexual and gender identity categories. This study demonstrates how these categories were constructed, negotiated, performed, and thus given a specific set of subcultural meanings within and outside of Club Indigo. Furthermore, as will be seen in Chapters 4 and 5, I show how bonds of kinship are created and maintained within this subcultural context through the fluid interplay between consumption and sexual identity.

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

This section maps out both the historical and current scholarship on drag performance. By highlighting the definitional open-endedness of this artform, this section shows how drag can be interpreted as a discourse that eschews interpretive conceptual fixity. The trajectory of cross-dressing and drag subcultures in South Africa will also be outlined herein. I will do this by historicizing and placing them in historical and geo-political context. The intersections between drag cultures and racial identities will also be critically examined. The discussions in this section suggests that the performance of drag delineates more than glamourized transgressions or parodies of gender and sexuality. Lastly, this section examines drag as a highly mediated discourse in within contemporary popular culture. It outlines the current debates around drag performance and its contemporary assimilation within neoliberal consumer and popular cultures.

Due to the circulation of transnational media representations, contemporary ideas around drag performance and artistry are ever-changing. From as early as the European medieval ages until the middle of the twentieth century, public discourses about drag performers (mostly male) framed them as clownish freaks and/or moral aberrations. But their contemporary incarnations in late capitalist modernity are now becoming highly mediated and commodified. The drag queen is now fast becoming an iconoclastic figure in popular cultural imaginaries throughout the globe.

In terms of a definitional exegesis, the term "drag" is contentious because of the varying perspectives from which it has been approached. Dating back to the 17th Century Elizabethan period, "drag" has been commonly understood as an English dramaturgical shorthand for "dressed as a girl." Other commentator's, however, posit that "by the 1800s, it was in common use, referring to the swish or 'drag' of a woman's dress on the ground" (Richardson in Chermayeff, David & Richardson. 1995). Taylor and Rupp (220: 115) posit that "drag queens…are gay men who dress and perform as, but do not want to be, women or have women's bodies." However, it is important to distinguish the drag queen from the female impersonator. Roger Baker (1994: 17) suggests that a female impersonator is "an all-embracing term describing any male who entertains by dressing as a woman." Using a number of etymonic and dictionary explanations, Baker reserves the term drag for full-time, professional male theatrical or stage entertainers who dress in women's clothes. This distinction is important because, as will be shown in Chapter 4, it is malleable and contextual. In this study, it functions primarily as a conceptual fissure by which my interlocutors' own self-conceptions and world-views. Esther Newtown (1972), however, prioritizes the term "female impersonator' in her ethnographic and definitional accounts.

From these and other (Bishop et al. 2014) points of view, it would appear that the drag queen or female impersonators are biological males who entertain audiences dressed (specifically) as women, and thus perform, parody, reify and/or contest the latter gender role.

Critical interventions have been made to divest analyses and theories of drag from their latter androcentric orientations (Halberstam, 1997) Scholarly examinations the drag king have centered on male, female, transgender, butch or femme who makes a pointed performance of masculinity. This turns the original definition of drag on its head in that it broadens the discursive terrain for wide variety of bodies and performances which may constitute drag artistry. Borrowing from Halberstam's (1993) seminal theory of *female masculinity*, as an agentive and performative challenge to normative masculinity, other scholars have analyzed drag king performances as transgressive subcultural practices (Ayoup & Podmore 2003; Hubman 2003; Noble 2003; Pauliny 2003; Taylor, Rupp & Shapiro 2010). These studies have made important contributions within the study of drag by destabilizing the naturalized categories of masculinity. They have also made the warranted contribution of introducing lesbian and transgender identities, performances, and politics within the cultural lexicon of drag.

Steven P. Schacht (2002; 2003) is loath to fix drag artistry to a specific set of definitions, performance typologies, or aesthetic norms. He conjectures that "defining who and what a drag king is, is probably a far more complicated enterprise than just the simple terms 'he' and 'she' suggest." Devitt (2006: 30) decries the tendency to pin down the definition of drag to a particular binary as counterintuitive. This is because it is the intention of drag to explode and open up, rather than fix, these rigid gender boundaries. This definitional open-

endedness demonstrates that drag is a social practice that melds wide variety of discourses regarding sexual and gender performativity. Therefore, there seems to be more to drag artistry and performance than just the act of cross-dressing. Be that as it may, cross-dressing has been theorized as a particularly subversive act against state and social regulation. As such, it warrants a brief discussion of the literature on the history and socio-cultural meanings which it instantiates. The following section outlines some important scholarly contributions about cross-dressing and transgression.

Cross dressing: Transgressing Social Hierarchies and disrupting the social order

Clothing and fashion have historically been regimes of social control and regulation. Medieval and early modern Western European authorities were especially concerned with various codes of dress among the populace. These codes were highly regulated and structured according to strict social hierarchies. Nationality, citizenship, sex and gender categories, and (more especially) social rank were so heavily policed because they were constructed as legible through fashion and dress (Howard, 1988). The blurring of these social boundaries through clothing was to make one's social rank illegible, and to therefore disrupt the established social order (Miller, 2009). Crossing these clearly demarcated boundaries of social rank constituted what feminist historians such as Marjorie Garber (1992) and Ann McClintock (1995) theorize as "cross-dressing" as a social act which transgresses social mores which were (and still are) thought to be providentially ordained. Dressing above or below one's station in this society was to commit an act of reprehensible sartorial impunity. Although cross-dressing is commonly thought to exist strictly within a

gender, lesbian, gay, and transgender studies, as well as queer theoretical frameworks, the aforementioned scholars show how this phenomenon has historically been a function of crossing presumably self-evident social categories, boundaries, and hierarchies.

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

Debating the Politics of Drag Performance: Gender Transgression, Stereotypes, and Stigmatization

The social construction of gender and the ways it is mapped onto and experienced within the material body have been theorized from various critical perspectives. The deconstruction of these gendering processes has taken many forms throughout various historical and cultural contexts. As demonstrated above, one form of transgressing or destabilizing the social category of gender is through cross-dressing and the performance of

drag. The performance of drag is a discursive practice whose historical trajectory has engendered diverse analyses and theoretical debates. Below, I discuss overarching debates about drag as a gendering, ergo politicizing, discourse. These debates concern the tension between its subversion or reification of hegemonic and culturally accepted gender binaries, and norms.

Sociologists, ethnographers, and critical feminist philosophers alike, have theorized drag as a subversive and disruptive instance of countercultural performance. They suggest that drag performance destabilizes the supposedly fixed gender and sexual categories. Some have argued that drag artistry and performance can be viewed as a critique and possible disruption of the heteronormative female/male binary gender system (Taylor 2012; Taylor, Rupp & Shapiro 2010; Balfour & Crawl 2012). Others, still, claim that drag artists conscientiously challenge the sex/gender binary by pointedly making ironic, humorous and/or over-the-top references to their biological sex while parodying the gender role they are playing (Sullivan-Blum 2004). Berkowitz, Belgrave, and Halberstein (2007) suggest that drag artistry not only reveals, but also takes the sex/gender binary system to its discursive extreme in terms of gender-bending. These scholars have taken Judith Butler's (1990; 1993) notion of performativity as a theoretical starting point (An exegesis of Butler's theory of performativity will be given later in this chapter.) Simply put, they have relied on Butler's premise that drag performance disrupts the sex/gender binary system by showing the gender identities are performed within a specific set of discursive constraints and regimes. In the light of this, they have used Butler's model as a conceptual basis for their insistence that drag is inherently subversive, transgressive, and thus an emancipatory social practice (Halberstam 1997; Taylor & Rupp 2004; 2005; Mann 2011). As I will show later in this

chapter, these scholars have relied too heavily on their collective insistence that drag is, *a priori*, a subversive genre of performance. I will also carefully outline Butler's (1993) later elucidation about drag performance in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. I will do this in order to suggest that drag performance constitutes a complex assemblage of social semiotics as well as contextual interpretations.

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

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

Impersonators in America. Herein, Newton (1972: 25) observes that female impersonators "are consistently placed on the low end of the continuum of stigmatization." This is because, in the context of state and socio-cultural repression against gender "deviance," female impersonators were considered too obvious in their gender non-conformity. Some contemporary scholars still follow this line of thinking by positioning the drag king or queen as a marginalized, almost freakish, figure within various LGBTQIA+ communities (Tewksbury 1993; Piontek 2003; Bishop 2014).

More recently, the drag queen story hour phenomenon (where drag queens read storybooks aloud to children in public libraries) has come under legislative fire from conservative right-wing Christian groups and lawmakers in the US. While legal ordinances have been passed to legislate drag queen story hour in different cities like Houston, San Francisco, and even Lafayette Louisiana, the fact that these cases had to be brought before the law in the first place adds some weight to the notion that the drag queen or king is still somewhat constructed as stigmatized figure. However, a cautionary caveat is necessary when it comes to the issue of "stigmatization." In point of fact, not all societies or communities have apprehended the drag queen as a freak or aberration. Scholars have provided cogent historical accounts of the ways in which drag queens and social gatherings known as "drags" formed an integral part of the District Six Coloured community during the 1950s in Cape Town (Jeppie 1990; Chetty 1995; Pacey 2014). Famous "moffies" (as they were commonly known then) such Yvonne De Carlo often led the annual Kaapse Klopse carnival around the city of Cape Town in glamorous women's garb and in full view of the reveling general public. Brett Pacey (2014: 114) puts forward the claim that "moffies were accepted as a fact of life in the community, if not approved of, in the same way as the

presence of gangsters was as an unavoidable fact of life in the community." Popular gender non-conforming moffies such as Madame Costello and Kewpie Doll still feature as significant figures in the collective memories and reminiscences of the socio-cultural milieu of District Six.

On the farthest extreme of critiques against drag performance have been those which liken the genre to a kind of blackface or minstrelsy. Kelly Kleiman (2000) is adamant that drag performance and blackface minstrelsy function in the same way insofar as they both aim to "ease the minds of an audience threatened by change…by presenting the agents of that change as ridiculous rather than frightening." (Kleiman 2000: 673) Similarly, Zine Magubane (2002: 235) has described famous Black men in drag such as Dennis Rodman and RuPaul as "white [men] in a black mask" championing minstrelsy in Hollywood through the simultaneous demarcation and blurring of racial boundaries. In a similar vein, filmmaker and poet, Marlon Riggs (1991: 391 - 392) sees the mainstream media (Hollywood) renditions of drag and/or female impersonation by cisgender male actors as inherently disempowering:

> For Black Gay Men, this burden of (mis)representation is compounded. We are saddled by historic caricatures of the Black Male, now fused with newer of the Negro Faggot. The resultant dehumanization is multilayered, and profound.

Whether they are interpreted as harsh or apposite, these critiques highlight the contestations around drag as genre of performance which encompasses more than the performance of sexual and gendered discourses. These critiques, then, shore up the

variously imbricated performances of racial and classed identity categories that are embodied through drag.

Drag, Race, Class and Intersections of identity categories

If drag is to be conceptualized as a particular kind of consumer practice, then it begs the question as to what kinds of consumer discourses and identities it thereby engenders. Ragan Rhyne (2004: 184) posits that "the performance of gender is also the performance of racialized codes of gender, and, indeed, of race itself." The above-mentioned comparisons between drag and blackface or minstrelsy point directly to the performative dimensions of drag as a racialized discourse. In the light of the foregoing premises, drag performance can be understood as particular kind of subcultural and racialized form of consumption. This study places special emphasis on the importance of space, place, and race, in the meaning-making discourses which undergird the consumer practices of drag and beauty pageantry at Club Indigo. At the chosen field site, race, class, sexuality, and gender were interpreted as interrelated nodes of identity which melded together in various drag performances both on and offstage.

Jeffrey McCune (2008: 155) asks a fecund question: "How does race inform drag performances?" The complexity of this question lies in the various assumptions and essentialisms it appears to disrupt. Moreman and McIntosh (2010: 122) observe that "drag queens are always performing the race of their chosen diva." Whether these performances can be taken as a form of subversion, homage, parody, or stereotype, race and class appear

to be unassailable components in the performance of drag. Scholars of drag have pointed to its reproduction of whiteness and North American universalism (McIntyre and Riggs 2017; Swarr 2004). In her vitriolic reading of the cult film classic documentary, *Paris is Burning*, bell hooks (1992:148) argues that "within the world of black gay drag ball culture…the idea of womanness and femininity is totally personified by [upper-class] whiteness." Similarly, Bruce (2016: 169) argues that the symbolic use of drag figures and female impersonators in mainstream American cinema centers white cisgender heteropatriarchy. While such analyses are far from redeeming, they point to the often-overlooked elements of drag performance as the simultaneous effect and conduit of postmodern racializing discourses.

Halberstam (1997) and Matebeni (2016) proffer redemptive readings of Black lesbian drag king performances. They foreground the subversive potential of these performances in that that they exemplify and celebrate the performance of female masculinity. Moreover, according to both scholars, Black lesbian drag performances foster a sense of pride, in-group camaraderie, public visibility, and kinship among Black lesbians and transgender men – whose bodies and lives are often negotiated under the constant threat of psychic, emotional, mental and physical violence. Such performances of female masculinity through Black drag king performances shore up the ever-important questions about agency among marginalized groups. Kobena Mercer (1994: 194) put it thusly:

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

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

In the case of South Africa, Matebeni (2016: 24) correctly notes that drag beauty pageants have a longer historical trajectory in Cape Town than they do in Johannesburg. The archival research undertaken for this study at the GALA Queer Archives attests to this. A huge amount of colour photographs, memorabilia, hand-written notes, judges' questions score sheets and video footage was made freely available to me in order to historicize lesbian and gay beauty pageants which took place at the famous Dungeon nightclub and the Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church (HUMCC) in downtown Johannesburg during the mid-1990s (see Chapter 2). These beauty contests were highly gendered and racialized; the Dungeon pageants catered to mostly white contestants and audience, while the HUMCC pageants were organized for a Black LGBTQIA+ members (Reid 2010).

This study provides thick ethnographic descriptions about *how* exactly sex/gender identities, consumer desires and aspiration are constructed and contested within the subcultural context of the House of Indigo. Moreover, this study further complicates the current assumptions about LGBTQIA+ community, cosmopolitanism, and marginality by drawing attention to the subcultural meanings and values imbued through drag performance and beauty pageantry. By so doing, it provides a vivid, ethnographic snapshot of the socio-cultural significance of drag and beauty pageantry in contemporary post-apartheid Johannesburg. Through the descriptions and analyses of the constructions of identities, desires, aspirations and subcultural mores, this study contributes to the scholarship on LGBTQIA+ drag beauty contests from a specific global south context. It also builds upon

ethnographic studies about LGBTQIA+ identities beauty contests, public visibilities and empowerment (Tucker 2009; Matebeni 2011; Bettar 2012; Reid 2003; 2013; Lease 2017). The present study demonstrates how the performances of drag and normative beauty ideals within this subcultural community were inflected by the discourses of race and class in post-apartheid Johannesburg.

The mediated constructions of drag performance in mainstream popular culture

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

Famous drag queens such as Divine, Julian Eltinge, and Dame Edna Everage have garnered considerable fame and material success through their performances of drag in the Western

cinematic and televisual industries (Chermayeff, David & Richardson 1995). From a local point of view, the famous female impersonator and satirist, Pieter Dirk Uys, has gained international success, countless awards, as well as honorary doctoral degrees for the performance his drag stage persona, Evita Bezuidenhout. Evita has featured prominently on numerous television programs syndicated on the national broadcaster, thus becoming a household name. The mainstream media representations and commodification of drag performance have served to ameliorate its stigmatization and/or marginality within hegemonic public discourse.

In what he describes as the "great drag queen hype" during the early 1990's, Balzar (2005) posits that mainstream media representations of drag queens have bolstered transnational visibility of gender non-conforming performances in the public sphere. During the 1970s, drag artistry was largely relegated to punk, glam rock and disco subcultures. The emergence and success of MTV and drag festivals such as Wigstock in the 1980s "later resulted in the enormous success in New York's mainstream and the international media hype" (Balzar 2005: 116). In the 1990s, more drag queens and camp aesthetics were frequently featured in music videos and television programmes (Riggs 1991). Hollywood also began maximizing on the lucrative potential of drag queens and aesthetics by centralizing them as protagonists in films such as "The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert" (Elliot 1994) and "To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! – Julie Newmar" (Kidron 1995). Similarly, drag artists and female impersonators (of varying sexual orientations and gender identities) featured in mainstream films as supportive driving forces who focalized different semiotic viewpoints (Bruce 2016). It should be noted that that the political and socio-cultural process which led to the great drag queen hype of the 1990s was based upon assimilationist imperatives

which were fostered by a corporatized media landscape. In the final analysis, the great drag queen media hype was "achieved by the neoliberal privatization of the affective as well as economic and public life" (Duggan 2003: 66).

Any discussion about media representations of drag performance and pageantry would be incomplete without referring to the cult documentary classic, *Paris Burning* (1991). This is because of the film's enormous, transnational success as a referential media text in (mostly) Western drag subcultural contexts. The assimilation of different drag subcultural styles, aesthetics, and vernacular codes into mainstream popular culture have mostly arisen from the representations in the film (Collins 2017). Besides using *Paris is Burning* as a textual basis upon which to extrapolate her famous theory of performativity, Judith Butler (1993) posits that "such films are functional in providing a ritualistic release for a heterosexual economy that must constantly police its own boundaries against the invasion of queerness." Butler is here suggesting that heteronormative discourse becomes legitimated and normalized through the delineation of that which it is not. By providing an ethnographic, white gaze into the subcultural world drag balls and houses in 1980s New York, Livington's (1991) film provided a scopophilic glimpse into the practices, desires, and aspirations of marginalized Black and Latinx LGBTQIA+ people who were marginalized from the heteronormative and hegemonic mainstream. Harper (1994: 98) argues that the film's "objective is to render intelligible in the larger social sphere discursive practices that do not partake of its terms in normative modes." These seem to be Foucauldian analyses insofar as they describe what he has famously theorized as an "incitement to discourse." From the 18th Century, various Western discourses about power sex, and gender functioned ideological apparatuses "for producing an even greater quantity of discourse about sex,

capable of functioning and taking effects in its very economy" (Foucault 1978: 23). All this points to the fact that *Paris is Burning* has become canonized in the history of Western drag cultures through its incitement of a particular viewpoint of drag ball cultures into hegemonic public discourse. This argument can also be extended to the films canonization in terms of subcultural styles, dissident gender systems, and representations of LGBTQIA+ performativity.

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

No other public figure embodies the commercialization of drag than RuPaul. The self-proclaimed "super-model of the world," is undoubtedly the most popular and successful living drag queen of our times. The television show*, RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR),* has made an indelible mark on the entire representational landscape of drag artistry. The Emmy

Award-winning show has upturned the political economy of drag artistry, transforming this discursive field from its hitherto marginal status into an easily recognizable media form in mainstream, global popular culture (Brennan & Gudelunas 2017). Its groundbreaking success is not only a function of its popular reception among different audiences, but it is also attributable to its world-wide circulation as a media product. Joshua Gamson (1998) argues that drag queens were constructed as ingredients in a pre-packaged stew of freakdom which made up day-time talk shows during the 1990s. During what has heretofore been described as the "great drag queen hype" (Balzar 2005), drag queens were paraded on talk show stages alongside other social misfits and sexual dissidents in order to "provoke distress and desire, fascination and censure" (Gamson 1998: 143). This argument seems to build on the drag-queens-as-stigmatized school of the thought outlined above. But in the context of postmodern neoliberal free-market capitalism, most images are up for sale – including those of subcultures. In this context, the identities and aesthetic styles of drag performers who were have previously been relegated to the margins of society have now become easily commodifiable.

André RuPaul Charles and his show, *RPDR*, have maximized on this strategy of commercialization by hypervisibilizing and exploiting drag on his own terms and for his own material gains. Of particular significance for this discussion is the show's ability to captivate the attention of critics, scholars, audiences, and (more importantly) advertisers. When this pageant-style reality show premiered on 2 February 2009, it aired on LOGO which still remains a somewhat niche cable television network targeting LGBTQIA+ viewers. The show has now been acquired by the ViacomCBS conglomerate, and thus by the VH1 network – which is an enormous and lucrative television network catering to an even larger audience.

Entertainment writer, Kevin O'Keefe (2017) observes that the move "not only gives it a bigger platform, but it keeps the show safe if LOGO disappears." Another unsurprising aspect of the show's success are its several Emmy Award wins. These prestegious awards evidence a veritable nod from Hollywood's top brass as well as international audiences.

The assimilation of *RPDR* into mainstream popular culture and capitalist media markets is not without its critics. Eir- Anne Edgar (2011: 136) suggests that *RPDR* "arguably produces a more normalizing view of drag performance." This critique aligns with what Lisa Duggan (2003: 50) has famously described as the homonormative shift away from radical political LGBTQIA+ activism and praxis, towards a depoliticized neoliberal ideology anchored in the discourses of individualism and hyper-consumerism. LeMaster (2015) problematizes the shows' uninhibited promotion of neoliberal ideologies – such as competitive individualism – arguing that what RuPaul and the show's contestants ultimately seek is assimilation into the heteronormative mainstream. If this is the case, then *RPDR* has succeeded exponentially in its efforts toward mainstream media assimilation. Its commodification as a media product – one that can be traded and acquired according to the dictates of the highest broadcast bidder and its advertisers – makes it a groundbreaking example of the neoliberal, capitalist ideologies of privatization and individual profit maximization.

One may argue that *RPDR* advances an insidiously post-feminist ideological viewpoint. In her analyses of post-feminist media cultures, Rosalind Gill (2007: 11) suggests that these are characterized by "the almost total evacuation of politics and cultural influence," and that "every aspect of life is refracted through the ideas of personal choice and self-determination." True to form, *RPDR* promotes (through various practices of self-styling and consumption) the transformation of each neophyte drag contestant into possibly winning

the coveted crown as "America's Next Drag Superstar" (Yudelman 2017). The trope of transformation through various techniques and strategies of consumption is a general thematic which gives *RPDR* its neoliberal impetus. It is, therefore, quite difficult to ascertain whether this show is really about the celebration of drag cultures or the advancement of various individuals' career paths and material gain (Brennan & Gudelunas 2017: 5).

What is clear, however, is the shows' unabashed promotion of the RuPaul brand (Brennan 2017: 30). The dynamics of class, race, ethnicity, and nationality have also been explored in relation to this show, highlighting the problematic ways in which various contestants have been represented (Goldmark 2015; Jenkins 2017; McIntyre & Riggs 2017). Overall, one can glean that there need not be any fixed either/or conclusions about *RPDR* as media text. Just as there aren't any fixed definitions and interpretations about drag artistry and performance. Stuart Hall (1994: 466) posits that "popular culture is one of the sites where [the] struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged." A mainstream and popular cultural text like *RPDG* thus draws our attention to the coalescence between the discourses of power, the politics of neoliberal consumer culture, as well as the subversive potentiality of sexuality and gender performativity.

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

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

Chapter 2: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical frameworks and concepts which will be deployed in this study. I will herein set out a clear map of the theoretical points of view that will be taken up as well as those which will be problematized in this study. This section also outlines the definitions and motivations for the use of specific theoretical concepts in the empirical chapters and analyses to follow.

2.1 'Disturbing the Order of Things': Queer Theory, African Perspectives and Utopic Futurity

Queer theory outlines a conceptual landscape of varying and vexed ideological perspectives. While some scholars have berated its academic and alabaster white, middle-class elitism (Johnson 2001; Barnard 2004; Cohen 2005; Dudley 2013), others have been quick to presage its premature death before it could take foothold as a critical theory of identity (Nyong'o 2005; Ruffolo 2009). Much ink has been spilt about queer theory's anti-normative ideological stance with regards to sexual desire, practices, gender categories, modes of identification and embodiment (Ferguson 2000; Walcott 2005; Tucker 2009; Taylor 2010; LeMaster 2015). Its vehement refutation of normative identity categories, and its lack of any fixed identitarian and analytical referent, have also been well documented (Dilley 1999; Brown 2009; Milani 2013). Its anti-normative stance has thus resulted in its critical allure as well as its political efficacy (Berlant & Freeman 1992). Using it as a model of theoretical enquiry, queer theorists have eschewed (either wholesale or partially) claims about the

immanence, stability, or naturalness of identity categories. Borrowing from Post-structural and Deconstructionist social theories such as those advanced by Foucault (1978), Kosofksy-Sedgwick (1990), and Butler (1990), scholars within this highly contested field have taken up an overall postmodern social-constructionist position regarding the interrelationship between human subjectivity, sexuality, and power. Generally, they have advanced a model of human subjectivation and identity as always-already in continual flux. An overwhelming consensus within this scholarly field has been that "normalizing the queer, would be, after all, its sad finish." (Butler 1994: 24). In turn, the ambiguity, definitional open-endedness, and multidimensionality of queer theory have rendered it a model of critical social theory enquiry that is itself fluid and flexible (Samuels 1999; Silverchanz 2009).

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

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

It is quite difficult dispute the veracity of Warner's above statement. This radical conceptualization challenges not only the extant heteronormative institutions, but also the concomitant regimes of knowledge and power by which they have been normalized and

legitimated. However, the above polemic, and other such queer theoretical and activist claims, tend to elide the multi-faceted and intersectional modalities by which heteronormative discourses and institutions take hegemonic form. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991: 1283) has famously stated that "an intersectional analysis argues that racial and sexual subordination are mutually reinforcing." Broadening this framework, I posit that the contemporary embodiments of class, ethnicity, ability, nationality, citizenship, and migratory (refugee) status are equally integral to such intersectional analyses of heteronormative domination and subordination (Hill-Collins 1998; Puar 2007). Single-struggle or myopic conceptions of heteronormativity are as unhelpful as they are counterintuitive (Lorde 1984: 102). An intersectional queer political praxis and theory, therefore, must be keenly aware of the fact that "heteronormativity is not simply articulated through inert-gender relations but also through the racialized [and classed] body" (Ferguson 2000: 420). This intersectional approach to queer praxis, theory, and analysis is thus helpful because it remains vigilant and sympathetic to other modes of difference and subordination which are often systemically constituted to work in tandem with sexuality and gender (Eng, Halberstam & Muñoz 2005). Following Cathy Cohen's (2005) and David Rufollo's (2009) suggestions, this study problematizes the simplistic binary opposition between the supposedly queer and the heteronormative.

In the *Queer Art of Failure* (2011: 3), Judith Halberstam posits that "failure is something queer do and have always done exceptionally well." Queer failure, she suggests, can have both stylistic and redemptive qualities for individual subjects and groups who do not fit neatly into the heteronormative codes by which society is organized. Such queer failure can be seen as a refusal and, more especially, a form of utopian critique against the

heteronormative imperatives and constraints of a society that is so thoroughly saturated by the transnational logics of neoliberal capitalist heteropatriarchy (Dean 2009; Eng 2010).

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

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

queer orientations suggests the conscientious and agentive enactments of future possibilities beyond those which are available in the heteronormative present. In other words, queer political and/or cultural praxis is oriented toward a utopian futurity, wherein aspirations, desires, and imagination transcend the boundaries of the heteropatriachal and capitalist imperatives. I posit that one such subcultural space wherein these enactments of queer utopic possibilities are continually imagined, constructed, and continually negotiated is Club Indigo. This study frames Club Indigo as a subcultural site wherein alternative possibilities, beyond the classed and racialized strictures of hetero- and homonormative exclusion are imagined and enacted through the spectacular rituals of drag and beauty pageantry. The following empirical chapters examine the extent to which "queerness" takes shape at Club Indigo, and the ways in which such embodied imaginings and practices of utopic futurity are constructed, policed, and negotiated through collective reformulations of subcultural queer kinship.

One of the organizing themes in study is the examination of how a subcultural space that is distinctly characterized and marketed as distinctly queer can be permeated by assimilationist, hetero- or homonormative discourses (see Chapter 4). Reddy, Munro, and Matebeni (2018: 1), posit that "local non-heterosexual and/or gender-variant identities can themselves be contested and under debate." In this regard, I build on emergent critical queer African critique that takes local, historical, and political economic specificity into critical account when theorizing African sexualities, desires, and practices (Tamale 2011; Abbas & Ekine 2013; Currier & Migraine-George 2016). This study, therefore, unsettles the easy assumptions regarding the application of theoretical models from the global north such as "queer" (Nyanzi 2014). I am not suggesting that queer theory should be rejected outright

because it is not autochthonous to African ontological conceptions of subjectivity, sexualities, and modes of identification. In fact, there are numerous historical instantiations and archival evidence of non-heterosexual relations between peoples which may suggest a "queer" ontology (Epprecht 2004; Hoad 2007; Clarke 2013). In the light of this, the present study aims to show that LGBTQIA+ subjectivities, people, practices, and their desires do not always map onto theoretical assumptions about that which is "queer." Similarly, the following empirical chapters explore how such practices and desires may sometimes evidence the reification hetero and/or homonormative discourses. The point here is *not* to dismiss queer theory *tout court* because of its Westocentric preoccupations, but to inflect this body of scholarship with African (and other Global South) perspectives in ways that will develop transnational linkages and "cross-fertilization" of theoretical frameworks (Grewal & Kaplan 2001; Milani & Lazar 2017).

2.2 Queer Subcultures

The following section provides a conceptual account of the term "subculture." A theoretical account about subcultures, and exactly what makes them "queer," will herein be given. The following section, therefore, outlines the bases for conceptualizing Club Indigo as a specific, global south and queer subcultural site. By so doing, I will demonstrate what distinguishes this field site from other LGBTQIA+ spaces of leisure and consumption in post-apartheid Johannesburg.

Cultural studies scholars have generally tended to emphasize the distinction between dominant or "parent" culture and subcultures. Hall and Ferguson (1976) highlight the

distinctiveness of post-war English youth subcultures from their "parent" cultures – or the wider, socio-cultural and class-specific groupings from which they derive their marked difference. According to these scholars, youth subcultural difference exists in dialectical interrelationship with the social mores, material conditions, and class structure of the "parent" culture, and the broader dominant culture. While "subcultures…take shape around distinctive activities and 'focal concerns'" (Hall & Ferguson 1976: 14), they are still linked to the "parent" and dominant cultures through biological kinship ties, socio-geographical proximity, as well as their socio-economic status. In *Subculture: the meaning of style,* Dick Hebdige (1979) extends this conceptual model by focusing on the material symbols and signs of British youth subcultures, and how these stylistic objects structure these relations between sub- and parent cultures. Hebdige (1979) also pays attention to media representations and how they tend to assimilate and commodify youth subcultures. He argues that "much of what finds itself encoded in subculture has already been subjected to a certain amount of prior handling by the media (Hebdige 1979: 85). What is clear from both these perspectives on subcultures is that despite their deviance and resistance, youth subcultures do not exist entirely apart from the socio-cultural and economic conditions of their 'parent' or dominant cultures.

Over and above their spectacularism, Ken Gelder (2007: 14) suggests that subcultures are well-structured sociological formations with their idiosyncratic organizational hierarchies, rules, and protocols. Furthermore, he suggests that queer subcultures can be conceived and analyzed as utopian sites of queer self-fashioning and world-making. In the previous section, I have discussed the utopian potential of queer political, cultural as well as analytical praxis.

Although queer subcultures tend to "offer other-worldly environments in which to escape" (Thornton 1995: 21), they are neither self-contained nor autonomous from the dominant socio-cultural miliuex within which they occur. Muñoz (2009: 103) aptly reminds is of "the way queer and punk subcultures have been informing and haunting the world of mainstream fashion for quite a while." In the light of the foregoing, it is important to highlight that the utopian potentialities of queer subcultural sites and performances do not foreclose them from the socio-political and economic structures of dominant, heteronormative mainstream (or parent) cultures.

Halberstam (2006:10) puts forward the claim that "queer subcultures oppose not only the hegemony of dominant culture but also the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian culture." However, I take this claim to be more of an ideal presupposition than an empirical fact. First, such a claim reifies the queer/heteronormative binary which has already been theoretically dispensed with (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 1990; Cohen 1995; Nyongo 2008) – and thus does not bear repeating here. Second, I would concur with Ahmed's (2006: 106) contention that "it is important that we do not idealize queer worlds or simply place them in an alternative space." While queer spaces, cultures, and politics may be analyzed as being oriented towards utopic futurity, this seems a theoretical idealism at best. The lived and embodied reality of subcultural practices in the global south may not be so conveniently mapped onto such purely theoretical claims. It stands to reason therefore, that a global south subcultural space like Club Indigo can provide insightful empirical material against which to analyze these assumptions about the utopic and/or subversive potentiality of queer subcultural praxis.

Analyzing Queer Subcultures: Disidentification and ballroom/drag houses

One lens through which to investigate of queer subcultural praxis is José Esteban Muñoz's (1999) analytical concept of disidentification. Muñoz (1999: 12) posits that:

> Disidentification is [a way] of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.

This is an analytical model which neither idealizes the utopic and/or subversive potential of queer subcultures nor rejects such a possibility outright. I have emphasized the significance of queer space in shaping LGBTQIA+ politics and visibility in contemporary Johannesburg. By extension, I concur with Matebeni (2011) and Milani's (2012) arguments that the lives, desires, aspirations, and social practices of LGBTQIA+ sexual minorities in Johannesburg are intimately connected to the spaces that they inhabit as well as those from which they are systemically excluded. Queer subcultural spaces, therefore, are integral in shaping their participants' imagination and aspirations towards a utopian, anti-homo and transphobic futurity. Similarly, queer subcultural spaces can delimit the socio-economic and conceptual boundaries of such utopic imaginings. In the same way that "queer" is not a necessary nor sufficient conceptual antithesis to that which is "normative," queer subcultural spaces do not always constitute a complete rejection or subversive challenge to hetero-or homonormative discourses. Insofar as queer subcultural spaces and practices are closely imbricated in the construction of subjectivity, it stands to reason that queer practices do not always stand in clear opposition to dominant, hetero- and homonormative ideologies. It is,

therefore, perfectly plausible that these domains of sexuality and subjectivation can be interlinked in highly complex and befuddling ways.

The analytical concept of disidentification allows the researcher to glean the dynamic ways in which subcultural participants and groups are able to co-construct and negotiate "strategies of resistance within the flux of discourses and power" (Muñoz 1999: 19). The model of disidentification starts from the Foucauldian (1976) premise that the discourses of sexuality (and power, more generally) are widely dispersed and thus generative of various ideological effects. We are reminded here that the discourses of power not exactly repressive, but are distributed "along a scale, around a norm, hierarchize individuals in relation to one another and, if necessary, disqualify and invalidate." (Foucault 1994: 212) Queer subcultural discourses are disidentificatory insofar as they simultaneously work *within and against* the discourses of power in late modern neoliberal capitalist heteropatriarchy. Therefore, a space like Club Indigo offers a key ethnographic site to investigate and critique such disidentificatory practices and subcultural world-making. Johannesburg is a highly classist, unequal, racially compartmentalized, and blatantly heteronormative city. These fault lines along racial and class-specific exclusions are further complicated by the examination of gender and sexuality within the social semiotics and hierarchies of this urban social landscape. Muñoz's (1999) concept of disidentification, therefore, engenders a critically engaged account of the subcultural space and practices within Club Indigo. Furthermore, the model of disidentification allows us to analyze how Black and Coloured working class drag and beauty queens have forged a subcultural space that prioritizes their embodied and material conditions and aspirations, but is at the same time, one that is not exactly self-contained. Using the concept of disidentification, this study

analyzes how these variously identified LGBTQIA+ individuals constructed a subcultural community that exists in relation (and not opposition) to the broader heteronormative society beyond the walls of the nightclub.

E. Patrick Johnson (2001: 5) builds upon the concept of disidentification by proclaiming that "queer theory has often failed to address the material realities of gays and lesbians of color." While acknowledging queer theory's Poststructuralist deconstruction of sexual identity categories, Johnson decries its abstractions, elitism, and classist exclusions. In critical response to these Johnson (2001: 9) formulates a conceptual model which he describes as "quare" theory – thus performing a linguistic homage to his grandmother's Southern African-American drawl when enunciation of the word "queer." Quare theory, according to Johnson (2001), is rooted in social theories about the materiality of the racialized flesh. It pays critical attention queer bodies of colour – their movements, performances, and the various ways in which these are mediated in popular culture and the academy. A quare theoretical lens decenters the primacy of white bodies and epistemologies by (purposely) re-orienting its focus upon the racialized body and its performances. Moreover, this quare lens gives analytical credence to the material and historical social forces, structures and processes of racialization – in specific relation to queer flesh. In the light of this, a quare perspective is specifically focused upon the disidentificatory performances of racialized bodies, and the extent to which the processes, styles, and performances of subjectivation take material from through the flesh. Arguing from a performance studies point of view, Johnson (2001) eschews the ivory tower elitism of queer theory by focusing on the racialized queer body and the consequences of that racialization in the context of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Johnson's (2001) disidentificatory model of "quare" theory thus echoes Roderick Ferguson's (2004) formulation of queer of colour critique. Both these critical perspectives are unabashed in their challenge to the simultaneous invisibilazation and prioritization of white queer bodies and epistemologies in media representations, consumer landscapes, and political praxis. Borrowing from Historical Materialism and Woman of Colour Feminisms, a queer of colour critique delimits various aporia within liberal theory, and thereby highlights how it "occludes the intersecting saliency of race, gender, sexuality, and class in forming social practice" (Ferguson 2004: 4). Queer of colour analyses, therefore, engage in strategic disidentificatory maneuvers, highlighting the blind-spots within queer studies in order to develop their post-structural and liberal agenda. The frameworks of disidentification and queer of color analyses aptly remind us that "critical hermeneutics and political projects that are not sufficiently intersectional are grossly inadequate to the project of mapping and analyzing the social" (Muñoz 1999: 167). The present study builds upon these conceptual frameworks in the analyses of the drag performances and beauty pageants hosted at Club Indigo. Likewise, the following empirical chapters respectively borrow from these concepts in order to analyze the hierarchies, peer-group solidarities, and kinship systems that are formed within the subcultural context of Club Indigo. Furthermore, I will heretofore engage in disidentificatory analyses by borrowing from these North American theories and perspectives on queerness, while preserving a distinctly global south orientation in my following ethnographic interpretations. Such analytical performances, I hope, will engender more theoretically sound "cross-fertilizations" (Milani and Lazar 2017) as well as transnational linkages (2001) between global south and north queer studies.

Drag and ballroom houses: Some conceptual distinctions between space and subcultural practice

The analysis of contemporary drag subcultures requires contextual historicizing. In the light of this, it seems appropriate to distinguish between the drag and ballroom houses – as subcultural practices and kinship systems – from the physical spaces in which they are forged. Properly speaking, ballroom and/or drag houses are diasporic, subcultural queer communities. They often take sociological shape as family-like kinship structures. These subcultural formations can be historically traced back to the Harlem Renaissance (1920 – 1935) with the emergence of what is now dubbed "the jazz age" (Garber 1989). It would, however, be anachronistic to claim that ballroom culture and houses began during this era. Garber (1989) suggests that the emergence of Black gender non-conforming collectivities and subcultures took sporadic, clandestine form during time. Ballroom houses and subcultural performances became popular (particularly in New York City) in the late 1970s when event organizers began hosting beauty pageants and performances among femme drag queens and transgender women. A key aspect of these subcultural practices and kinship structures was the coalescence of racial identity (read Black and Latinx), class, sexuality, and gender bending. From their earliest stages, ballroom culture and houses were patently created by and for Black and Latinx LGBTQIA+ individuals. They did this in efforts of forging queer spaces and communities of colour that stood apart from the predominantly racist and/or heteronormative hegemonic mainstream (Livingston 1990). Moreover, the structures of kinship that characterize ballroom houses are created through cross-generational, social (as opposed to biological) relationships (Jackson 2002). The latter

assertion does not suggest, however, that these queer kinship systems or families are any less real than reproductive, heteronormative, biological families (Walcott 2016).

Marlon Bailey (2013: 5) observes that ballroom houses do not necessarily signify a physical brick-and-mortar building, but "represent the ways in which [their] members, who mostly live in various locations, interact with each other as a family unit." The discussion about drag and ballroom houses is pertinent to this study for two reasons. First is the importation of the diasporic concept of the subcultural "house." That the members of the House of Indigo would call it as such is unremarkable, since there are several vogue and drag performance "houses" throughout different cities in South Africa. Such a phenomenon can be attributed to the transnational circulation of mainstream media, popular trends, and consumer cultures. The interesting point here is that very few of these "houses" are located in a centralized venue such as a nightclub. This is precisely what made Club Indigo such an historically significant space of queer sociality, performance, and consumption. It was distinguished as a queer subcultural institution because it was the physical location (or home) wherein ritualized, subcultural practices of drag performance and pageantry could take place. Second, it is important to outline the conceptual distinction between the actual nightclub (Club Indigo) and the subcultural formation (the House of Indigo). In this study, "Club Indigo" denotes the physical space or nightclub wherein primary fieldwork was conducted. The House of Indigo, however, signifies the subcultural, family-like structure (as well as its related social practices) under investigation.

2.3 Performativity and Performance: Clarifying Analytical Distinctions

The concept of performativity is often used in theorizing gendered subjectivities, as well as in different studies of drag artistry. Following suit, this section provides an account of how and why this theoretical concept is useful for this study. I will also discuss how this study contributes to theories of performativity – from a specifically global south perspective. This section will also discuss the significance of performance as an ethnographic mode of enquiry. In so doing, I will clearly outline the analytical distinctions between the terms, "performativity" and "performance."

Judith Butler's (1990; 1993) famous concept of performativity has often been used within critical scholarship on drag artistry. More generally, it has been one of the foundational frameworks within Post-structural, critical feminist, and queer studies. The model of performativity has generally been extolled for its deconstruction of gender and sex as discursive categories by which subjects are simultaneously legitimated and interpellated within the broader networks of power. Butler (1990: 25) has famously argued that gender is neither an immanent nor fixed category of subjectivity, but a constant *doing*. This simple, yet explosive, thesis disentangles the common assumptions regarding ahistorical and "natural" assumptions about gender and sex categories; simultaneously placing them within a post-structural and social constructionist lens through human subjectivity can be interrogated. In explaining the *doing* of gender, Butler (1990: 33) puts it thusly:

> Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.

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

Butler (1990; 1993) uses drag as an example to demonstrate the stylized and imitative dimensions of gender performativity. She argues that drag is, in fact, a parodic send up of the originary pretensions of gender categories. By imitating gender categories, drag can potentially expose them for the fictitious social constructions that they are. Such a theoretical move is premised upon the idea that inasmuch as drag to be viewed as a "copy" of some or other gender identity, this performative act of mimesis demonstrates the simulacral aspects of gender as *copies of other copies*. Therefore, drag imitates "the myth of originality itself" (Butler 1990: 138). This formulation of drag as a parody has been appropriated by some scholars of drag who have aimed to posit the subversive underpinnings of drag artistry and performance (Pauliny 2003; Taylor & Rupp 2004; Berkowitz & Belgrave 2010; Taylor 2010; Rupp et al. 2010; Balfour & Evans 2012). However, Butler (1990: 139) has clearly stated that: "Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must

be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and articulated as instruments of cultural hegemony." In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler (1993: 125) further stresses that "there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion," and that drag can also be coopted in the service of reifying heterosexist and patriarchal stereotypes and normative iterations of gender binaries. She argues that it is important to interrogate drag performance not as a set of radically subversive social practices, but as an unstable and nuance negotiation between the insurrectional reformulation of established sex/gender norms as well as their contextual reification.

Taking Butler's (1990; 1993) important caveat as a starting point, the present study does not presume that drag artistry is an inherently subversive cultural phenomenon. To assume that drag always already transgresses or subverts the normative binaries of male/female gendered categories is a conceptual sleight of hand which only further reifies the fixity (or naturalness) of those very categories. The assumption that drag is inherently subversive is a theoretical contradiction to the extent that it aims to disprove the stability of the male/female gender binary – which it takes for granted in the first place.

Social geographers have highlighted the significance of space, place, and context in the reiterative performativity of gender (Nelson 1999; Gregson & Rose 2000). Building on these developments, I posit that the concept of performativity is helpful only insofar as it is analyzed in relation to the local and contextual specificity. The ways in which bodies inhabit space are inextricably connected to the discourses and structures of gendering, sexualization, and racialization (Ahmed 2006). The performativity of gender occurs in actual, lived space and not in some autonomous domain of disembodied discursivity. In the light of

this, it is important to pay critical attention to socio-cultural and geopolitically specific iterations of gender and sexual categories (Tamale 2011). Only thereafter, can one operationalize performativity as a theoretically and methodologically fruitful concept. African and other "Third World" radical feminists of colour have long dispensed with the idea that gendered categories are universal (Moraga & Anzaldúa 1983; Amadiume 1987; Anzaldúa 1987; Oyêwùmí 1997;1999; Mohanty 2003). So, if gender does not designate a universal category, then the gender performativity cannot be taken as a universal concept either.

Researchers of sexuality and gender from the global south cannot afford to uncritically appropriate Butler's theory of gender performativity from the Euro-American academic context within which it was originally formulated. This is because such clearly forced attempts at theoretical application tend to blatantly ignore the extent to which the colonial and post-colonial "subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous." (Spivak 1988: 284) The attempt to universalize this theoretical model in different social, cultural, economic, and political contexts, is to therefore homogenize a wide range of interpretations and articulations of sexuality and gender. Furthermore, such uni-directional impositions of Western theoretical models upon global south sociocultural phenomena inevitably reinforce the asymmetrical and colonial power relations – in which Western or global north knowledge systems continue to occupy the imperialist and epistemological center (Said 2003; Commaroff & Commaroff 2012; Mignolo 2014). One has to first provide a thoroughgoing account of the specific spatio-temporal contexts within which the social category of gender may (or may not) be articulated in ways that may possibly confound the Western male/female binary logic through which it has hitherto been normalized. If the

social category of gender as well as its performative embodiments can take on myriad interpretations in different socio-cultural contexts, then it is equally possible to analyze the transgression of those categorical boundaries in conceptually alternative ways. While taking Butler's (1990; 1993) theory of performativity very seriously, the present study uses the empirical material gathered during fieldwork to "test" the salience and applicability of this theoretical framework. In the light of this, I concur with Currier and Migraine-George's (2016: 291) that "queer African subjects require new modes of reading and interpretation."

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

"Performance" is a highly contested term as well as an interdisciplinary body of scholarship in the social sciences. This study specifically locates the performance act as both a textual utterance or act and a method of ethnographic enquiry (Conquergood 1992: 82). I hereby distinguish between the sociolinguistic and critical feminist analytical concept of the "performative" and the interdisciplinary "performance." I have highlighted the extent to which Western gender binaries can be analyzed in terms of their performativity. In what follows, I draw the reader's attention to embodied performance as a paradigm of social world-making praxis, as well as a mode of enquiry (Madison 2005). As contested and wide-

ranging as the term may be, performance studies incorporate a plethora of quotidian and staged enactments: “from plays and operas to circus acts, carnivals, religious services, poetry reading, weddings, funerals, graduations, concerts, toasts, jokes, and storytelling” (Madison 2005: 170). In conceiving it as a border, or even marginal discipline, Dwight Conquergood avers that (1995: 136 – 137) “performance privileges threshold-crossings, shape-shifting, and boundary-violating figures…who value the carnivalesque over the canonical, the transformative over the normative, the mobile over the monumental.” Seen from this critical perspective, then, performance is helpful in its coeval adherence of theory and practice.

Using Victor Turner’s (1982) dramaturgical model, anthropologists and other social scientists of religion have theorized ritual as a particular kind of performance. By contextualizing and historicizing *in situ*, scholars have generally agreed that “social life…even at its apparently quietest moments is characteristically ‘pregnant’ with social dramas.” (Turner 1982: 11). The emphasis on the temporal dimension of performance, therefore, has enabled social scientists from various disciplines to move away from structural and positivist analyses towards a focus on performances *as process* and praxis (Drewal 1991; Conquergood 1995). In this regard, performance does not index some autonomous domain of social life, but is constitutes part of the myriad epistemic ingredients by which social actors come to know themselves and the world. In her seminal ethnography of traditional Yoruba dance ritual, Margaret Drewal (1992) emphasis the processual and improvisational dimensions of performance. She also reminds us of “the relationships between spectators and spectacle are unstable,” and that “one always collapsing into the other.” (Drewal 1992: 15) This temporally plural, dialogic and multi-dimensional conception

of performance highlights its intertextuality in that it is a social text or utterance which always already refers to others. Drewal (1991: 12) has elsewhere argued that:

> To the extent that a text is 'an utterance' or 'a species of social action' situated in time and place, it is already by definition a performance." In the light of these dynamic conceptions, the present study places emphasis on the textual as well as ethnographically incisive potential of drag and beauty pageantry.

The latter discussion maps on rather neatly onto the concept disidentification in its "focus on embodied performance as critical praxis" (Johnson 2001: 6). This highlights not only compatibility of performance and disidentification in terms of the object of analysis, but also in terms of method. Muñoz (1999: 25) conjectures that: "For the critic, disidentification is the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field." By eschewing any positivist claims about the production of knowledge and/or "the Other," this conception of performance is thus helpful on two significant levels. First, at the semiotic level, performance simultaneously encapsulates and disseminates the symbolic meanings by which individuals and groups come to understand themselves and the world. After all, symbolic meaning is "generated by embodied action that produces a heightened moment of communication" (Madison 2005: 170). The conception of performance as processual and innovative text, utterance, or even gesture, is particularly illuminating within ethnographic fields of enquiry because human cultures are themselves mobile and highly intertextual (Clifford & Marcus 1986: 10). Second, the study of performance can enliven those aspects of human culture and sociality which surpass text-based interpretations. Social praxis is far more complicated and "messier" than the normative categories (like sex or gender) used to describe them. Following Zora Neale-Hurston (1981) and Edouard Glissant (1989), I suggest

that there are indeed some elements of human expression which cannot bear the essentialist containment within normative categories or even the written word. Conquergood (1992: 90) reminds us that "performance is the key to interpretive decodings of oppositional practices enacted even in the teeth of power." He elsewhere (Conquergood 2002) describes performance not just as a marginal discipline, but as a subjugated knowledge by which subaltern groups are able to reaffirm, express, and re-centre their own epistemologies and metaphysics. Through performances embodied through orality, movement, dance, and even protest, non-elite groups are thus given critical "voice" despite the textual bias, and Westocentric, middle-class elitism, which pervades academic discourse.

2.4 Performing Race and Class in Post-Apartheid Johannesburg

The following section provides an account for the significance and use of specific racial terms and class categories throughout this study. In keeping with the post-structural and deconstructionist orientation in the examination of identity and power, this section reasserts the truism that race is a social and discursive social category. The local, contextual, and historical significance of specific racial categories will herein be discussed. This section will also discuss the use of the terms "Black" and "Coloured" as racial markers for the various individuals involved in this study.

I have emphasized the significance of theorizing beauty pageantry, drag, and related concepts of queerness from an intersectional point of view. It provides a discussion about race as phenomenological concept which has sociological effects as it relates particularly to

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

The "post-" prefix in post-apartheid South Africa, in many ways, appears to be more of a conjectural and nationalist ideal; insofar as it does not reflect legitimate socio-economic enfranchisement and/or empowerment for the majority of the population. Significant political and constitutional gains have been made in terms of proffering the democratic voting rights to those populations who were categorized as "Black," "Coloured," "Khoisan," and "Indian." But these racial categories, indeed the entire systemic architecture of colonialism and apartheid, continue to undergird various communities' access to economic freedom. I shall hence bracket the debates about the obviously unjustifiable and unearned privileges of racialized whiteness throughout this entire study. That those groups who were previously racialized, and continue to think of themselves, as "white" still reap the socio-economic benefits of colonial and apartheid exploitation, collusion, and corruption is an incontrovertible fact in contemporary South Africa. It therefore falls beyond the analytical and theoretical scope of this study to rehearse such obvious facts. Of particular interest for our purposes here is the interrogation of how the Black and Coloured racial categories

circulate within the subcultural world-making discourses at Club Indigo. To be sure, this study pays critical attention to how the subcultural discourses drag artistry and beauty pageantry are inflected by the present-day realities of racialized subjectivity and race-thinking in contemporary South Africa.

It is important to first provide an exegesis of the discursive efficacy of race as a technology of power. This will be done from the perspective of critical race theory. Social and cultural theorists (Mills 1998; Wynter 2003; Hall 2017) agree that race is one of the primary organizing categories in modern history. Like gender, sexuality, class, and physical ability, the social categories of race still have an abiding significance in our everyday realities and experiences. Although the essentialist and biological claims upon which they were invented have been disproven, human subjects still continue to think of themselves, and the world around them, in racial terms. This is what Paul C. Taylor (2004) refers to as "race-thinking." He avers that "to talk about race, then, is to talk about events, conditions, and experiences" that are inflected by racialized interpretations of peoples' physiognomic and biological make up (Taylor 2004: 7). Race-thinking calls upon those epistemological, metaphysical, and affective dimensions of human existence which are given meaning in terms of racial discourses. While "'race-thinking' is a way of assigning generic meaning to human bodies and bloodlines," (Taylor 2004: 15) it extends far beyond the cognitive level of individual subjects. Race and race-thinking were integral to the structuring of modernity and colonialism throughout various parts of the globe. They are still fundamental structuring forces which underpin human actions and struggles today (Wynter 2003: 260). Moreover, race and race-thinking still function as the systemic frameworks in the transnational permutations of capital, natural resources, and human bodies in the context of late modern

neoliberal heteropatriarchy (hooks 1992; Klein 2007). Despite the dubious, pseudo-scientific claims upon which they were based having been dismissed in the social sciences, racial categories continue to operate in the quotidian lives and actions of those who have borne the historical and brute force of such oppressive regimes of knowledge production (Mills 1998: 48; Erasmus 2017).

Racial discourses are impossible to extricate from the transnational projects of modern Western colonialism. Homi. K. Bhabha (2004: 96) posits that "the construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of colonial power through discourse, demands an articulation of the forms of [racial] difference." Within the context of colonial violence, the construction of racial categories resulted in their simultaneous crystallization and legitimation, "and thus had an authenticating and reiterating function" (Mbembe 2015: 25). This perspective on colonial violence and subjectivity, therefore, suggests that racial discourses are as productive as they are performative (Tate 2009). The intelligibility of racial categories (much like those of sexuality and gender) depends upon social and systemic conditions which are reiterated over time such that they become crystallized and represented as normal. This study, therefore, does not presume that the racial categories – Black and Coloured – are self-evident or natural. These categories are foregrounded and given analytical centrality in order to examine how they were negotiated and/or performed alongside other vectors of identity.

According to Franz Fanon (1952), these discursive reiterations eventually take on the appearance of fixity around a racial category such as, for example, Blackness. These normalizing discourses, Fanon (1952) argues, take on an overdetermining role in terms of seeing, apprehending and representing Blackness. He avers: "I am overdetermined from

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

The racial term, "Coloured," will be used throughout this study for a number of reasons. But first, the categorical usage of this term warrants critical explication. The term "Coloured," in South Africa, is a racial classification that is intended to denote a person of mixed racial ancestry (Adhikari 2009). The etymological genealogy of this colonial racial category is as vexed as it is vague. However, it is attributable to the often-contradictory historical accounts from colonialist sailors, merchants, zoologists, and anthropologists. This term dates back to the period of Dutch colonialism in the Cape colony (Adhikari 2009: xi). In its most reductive sense, the racial category "Coloured" was invented to denote the progeny of Western European (German, Dutch, English and Portuguese) sailors and settlers, and indigenous African women (Wicomb 1998). This category included both formerly enslaved indigenous sub-groups such as the San, Khoi, Khoekhoen, and Griqua peoples. Added to the categorical mélange, were migrant groups of indentured labourers and their descendants, namely

those of Malaysian, Javanese (Indonesian), and East African heritage (Gqola 2010; Baderoon 2014). Subsequently, the taxonomic imperatives of apartheid classification "flattened South Africa's complex entanglement with Indian and South Atlantic Ocean histories" into this particularly hybridized racial category (Erasmus 2017: 6).

A significant aspect in the invention, historical trajectories, and continuing import of this term are its hybridity and resistance to categorical fixity. The colonial and apartheid states sought to restrict human subjects within specific geographical and culturally homogenous locations. They also sought to fix intercultural as well as interracial configurations into fixed categories, contexts, and spaces. According to Zimitri Erasmus (2017: 20), the categorical designation of "Colouredness" served a mainly *administrative* function. Elsewhere, Erasmus (2001: 14) writes that "being coloured [meant] being the privileged black and the 'not quite white' person." This political, economic, and socio-cultural position of in-betweenness constitutes what Mohamed Adhikari (2009: 14) has describes as an intermediary social status. Arguing from a social-constructionist point of view, he puts forward the claim that:

> The marginality of coloured people, their intermediate status in the racial hierarchy, negative racial stereotyping and assimilationist aspirations together with a range of other factors have shaped their identity and influenced their social experience and political consciousness. (Adhikari 2009: 14)

Erasmus (2001; 2017), however, suggests that while this racial category continues to serve various ideological as well as administrative functions, it is best conceived in terms of creolization. This latter perspective lends historical dynamism and creativity to conceptions of Colouredness, thus eschewing the correlative associations with shame (from miscegenation and rape), dispossession, and exclusion. Erasmus (2001: 23) is of the view

that while “Coloured identities were constructed out of fragmented cultural material available in the context of slavery, colonialism and cultural dispossession,” they continue to be “produced and re-produced in the place of the margin.”

Building on this latter conception of creolized hybridity, the racial category which designates Colouredness is not taken as fixed or self-evident in this study. Of particular concern are the performative dimensions of Coloured identity as it is negotiated and embodied in post-apartheid contexts. I am herein interested in the way Colouredness coalesces with, or rubs up against, other identity categories such as gender, sexuality, and class within the context of Haus of Indigo. First, I herein use the racial term Coloured to designate various interlocutors’ modes of self-identification. Second, the historical marginality of this racial category was evidently upturned within the research field site. The House of Indigo provided a space to perform Colouredness (both on and off stage) in ways that centralized and celebrated this historically contentious identity category (for example, see page 123).

The following empirical chapters interrogate how the racialized and working-class categories of Blackness and Colouredness are performed within this particular subcultural space. By focusing its ethnographic and theoretical purview upon these racialized and class LGBTQIA+ subjectivities and practices, this study moves away from perpetuating the myth of whiteness and Eurocentricity from scholarly investigations and critiques of queerness. This is not to render the processes of racialized “whiteness” and its concomitant privileges invisible, but to decenter the primacy white bodies and interests in the academic investigation of queer world-making projects.

Stuart Hall (2017:45) argues that race “operates like a language, like a sliding signifier.” In order to make “sense,” racial categories gather meaning within specific regulatory systems

and codes. These meanings cohere through everyday discursive practices that are both social and institutional (Erasmus 2017). Such meanings do not operate in the same ways nor do they have the same effects in all places at all times. For example, I have provided a detailed account of the colonial invention of the Coloured racial category in order to emphasize its historical trajectory and contextual specificity in South Africa. But the term "Coloured" designates various social practices of racialization across the globe. Its histories, meanings, and socio-political implications are not the same across different U.S., Caribbean and Sub-Saharan contexts. This perspective suggests, therefore, that racial categories are not phenomena "out there" to be discovered, analyzed, or objectified. But they are performatively constructed in obviously different ways by social actors and institutions.

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

Setting aside the obviously masculinist bias in Biko's polemic for the moment, it seems important to highlight "the politics of location and the politics of identity" (Gilroy 1991: 18) in various conceptions of Blackness. The analytical model of Black Consciousness shores up the political and economic content of this particular social category (Ratele 1998; 2003). The cultural and political contestations indexed by Black identity point to its performative dimensions. One cannot make simple reference to Blackness as though it denotes a fixed set of biological and/or physiognomic determinants. Blackness, or Black identity rather, constitutes an assemblage of performative referents with varying political, economic, as well as aesthetic implications (Tate 2009; Taylor 2016). Johnson (2003: 9) posits that "racial performativity informs the process by which we invest bodies with social meaning." I posit that such meanings are not fixed, but socio-historically contingent. These meanings accrue political and economic significance insofar as they are crystallized around particular bodies and discursive practices. In order to be rendered intelligible, racial categories require specific sets of discursive sign systems and citational performatives. For instance, the utterances, "Black is beautiful," or "I am Black and I am proud," operate as a set of linguistic performatives which denote specifically cultural and political interpretations of Black subjectivity, but also highlight the very *doing* of that particular racial category.

The organizing category of race has another analytical dimension in this study. The performativity of Black and Coloured racial categories are significant to this study because of the racialized political economy of queer consumer landscapes in post-apartheid South Africa. Tucker (2009) aptly problematizes the racialization and classist hierarchies in Cape Town's De Waterkant gay district. In so doing, he highlights the exclusion of poor and working-class Black and Coloured LGBTQIA+ bodies within this supposedly "queer space."

Gustav Visser (2003: 131) contends that the "historically defined processes [of apartheid geopolitics] have placed leisure facilities, and even more so gay leisure facilities, at considerable distance from different non-White neighbourhoods." These contemporary forms of exclusion from elitist, "White" spaces have thus resulted in subcultural expressions of identity by Black and Coloured LGBTQIA+ groups who have foregrounded their distinctive racialized and class-specific aesthetics. Marlon Bailey (2013: 13) notes the elitist whiteness of queer social space in Detroit, observing that many of his Black interlocutors were made to feel unwelcome. Similarly, Charles Klein (1999: 20) also highlights the racial and class hierarchies in the gay ghetto of Porto Alegre, Brazil. This does not mean that race and class categories are uniformly configured by the same oppressive systems of anti-Blackness across the globe. But, taken together, these ethnographic observations highlight the significance of paying attention to these inextricable hierarchies of race and class in scholarly investigations of LGBTQIA+ spaces and consumer culture.

Deborah Posel's (2010) concept of racialized consumption is helpful here. She argues that under apartheid, "blackness became an official judgement about being unworthy of certain modes and orders of consumption" (2010: 168). Race is a concept that continues to mark various practices and spaces of consumer culture in post-apartheid South Africa. Practices and communities of mainstream consumer culture are indexed by racial and class categories. Similarly, racial categories undergird (and often determine) the proximity to consumer access and privilege. While certain Black and Coloured communities were historically denied the wherewithal to consume at will, the intra-racial dynamics of class complicate notions about which individuals gained access to spaces of consumption, consumer goods, and upward mobility. Within a post-apartheid neoliberal capitalist

political economy, the complexities of class privilege (which cut across all racial groups) have furthered such forms of consumer access and exclusion. Iqani (2013: 9) argues that "neoliberal structures of post-colonial societies continue to cut out possibilities for equal participation and economic mobility. In the case of post-apartheid Johannesburg, the imbrications between race and class have had the socio-economic effects of demarcating clearly-defined differences of and boundaries to consumption. Moreover, these race and class-specific boundaries are evident in the geopolitics of LGBTQIA+ consumer space in this city (Tucker 2009). The young and upwardly mobile LGBTQIA+ tend to consume and socialize in racially homogenous spaces in the northern suburbs. Poor or working-class Black and Coloured LGBTQIA+ individuals and communities are still excluded from such spaces by the systemic impoverishment – which are inherited directly from colonial and apartheid systems. The point here is that, consumer spaces like Club Indigo (and the subcultural practices housed therein) exist in order to cater specifically to LGBTQIA+ individuals and groups who cannot afford to travel and consume in gay clubs located in the northern suburbs of Sandton, Illovo, or Melville.

The empirical chapters in this study provide critical analyses of these intersectional dynamics of race, class, sexuality, and gender within this subcultural space. As will be shown in the following empirical chapters, race and class continue to function as salient categories by which gendered cosmopolitanism is heavily policed – even *within* the subcultural context of Club Indigo. This chapter has mapped the theoretical and conceptual landscape of the scholarship upon which this study builds. In so doing, this study provides an ethnographic account of how subcultural performances of Black and Coloured queer identity are

constructed beyond the tree-lined barriers of suburban privilege in post-apartheid Johannesburg.

2.5 Performing queer kinship in the African context

This section discusses my interlocutors' practices of kinship within Club Indigo as well as their birth. I herein discuss the significance of such queer kinship bonds in relation to African concepts of the extended family

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

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

The sociocultural practice or performative doing of "family" are as complex as the societies within which they are studied (Carsten 2004; Morrison, Lynch & Reddy 2019). The structural practices and institutions by which they are given meaning are similarly just as variegated. Therefore, the notion of "family," and its related practices, cannot mean the same thing in all places and in all times. This is why the performative doing of family has to be investigated in contextual specificity; foregrounding the local knowledges, institutional practices and systems which infuse them with their specific sociocultural meanings. African feminist scholars have argued that the nuclear family is Westocentric and colonial institution (Amadiume 1987; 2005, Oyèwùmí 1997; 2000; 2005). While it is true that "the African family does not exist as a spatially bounded entity" (Oyèwùmí 2000: 1097), it is also important to note the changing dynamics and influences by which it is constituted.

From a historical perspective, the extended family has been a defining feature of traditional African society and personhood. This extended family includes, but is not limited to, unmarried siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins, adoptees, orphans, and other members of both maternal and paternal kin (Lesajane 2006: 175). The nuclear family and household in South

Africa – with the heterosexual, procreative couple as its legislative focal point – became an effect of colonial land dispossession, migrant labour, religious and legislative policies from the early twentieth century onward (Ramphele & Richter 2006; Mkhize 2006; Hunter 2010). The heterosexual couple and biological kinship, therefore, took precedence in colonial and apartheid legislation as representative of the modern South African family. But these representations and discursive techniques of governmentality did not necessarily reflect people's own understandings and local practices of family.

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

It stands to reason, therefore, that the idea of family is irreducible to biological and/or heteronormative nuclear households in the post-apartheid context. Morrison, Lynch & Reddy (2019: x) aver that "the 'ideal' heterosexual norm is less the norm than is often widely assumed or portrayed." The extended family is still very significant in the lives of the majority of post-apartheid South African citizens despite the prevalence of nuclear,

heteronormative couplings and kinship formations (Mkhize 2006; Amaoteng 2007). This is because the post-apartheid family continues to be constructed through various kinship bonds that extend beyond the boundaries of biological (heteronormative) affiliation and the nuclear household.

Following Weston's (1991) thesis about chosen family, Carsten (2004) argues against the notion of fictive kin. She dismisses the assumption that chosen families among queer people are any less "authentic" than those formed through heteronormative, biological procreation. She also stresses the importance of paying close attention to informants' explicit ideologies of kinship (Carsten 2004: 146). In the analyses to follow demonstrate how my own interlocutors' descriptions and practices of kinship were undergirded by a sense of acceptance and belonging among both their birth and chosen queer families. The sense of authenticity which they ascribed to their conceptions of family (birth and chosen) was based upon their belonging within both these contexts. Many of these individuals felt supported by their birth families with regards to their participation within the House of Indigo.

Chapter 3: Re-Entering Club Indigo: Methods, Queer Positionality, and Research Ethics

I step out of the silver-grey Toyota Corolla sedan and thank the driver. Maybe a few deep breathes might help calm my nerves. A post-apocalyptic silence hangs in the air. A naked bulb from inside the palisade gate spills out fluorescent light onto the pavement. The street is completely empty. My cellphone clock reads 20:54. This is ridiculously early by Club Indigo standards. Now that the Uber car has driven off, I am alone on the street. Undoubtedly, this makes me a sitting duck for a possible mugging. I cannot risk that inconvenience. The maroon gate is slightly open. I enter the large outdoor courtyard and parking lot. A family-sized Isuzu SUV stands alone under a protective awning made of corrugated iron. Three black iron pillars hold up the awning, making a ramshackle car port that can fit a maximum of four average-sized sedans. Three rain-catching gutters, painted pine green, run along the length of the pillars. The courtyard is empty except for the cars. The lead-heavy bass of house music throbs inside the club. A filthy, raggedy, red-brown carpet runs ahead of me toward the large blue iron doors. Two velvet ropes wobble lazily in the autumn breeze on either side of the carpet. The words "Club," and "Indigo" are stenciled horizontally in gold on each door – one of which stands wide open. The house music bangs louder as I near the doors.

I walk into the dark, cavernous hallway leading to the reception area. It is more of a counter-top and a standing table, really. The large bouncer is barely visible

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

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

"Fifty," his stern visage does not flinch.

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

This chapter describes the mixed qualitative research methods employed in this study. In the first section, a detailed account of the methods of data collection will be given. Each of the methods of data collection will be discussed in relation to the motivations which led to them. Following this discussion, this study will be positioned as an

interdisciplinary queer media ethnography. The time spent doing ethnographic fieldwork for this project will also be described, showing when, where, and with whom the research material was collected. The reader will thereafter be introduced to the key research participants from Club Indigo who were involved in this study. The second section of this chapter describes how I gained access to the field, and why I re-entered the nightclub as an academic researcher. In so doing, I will provide a discussion of my own reflexivity and insider-outsider positionality as the ethnographer "at home" in and around Johannesburg. I will then provide a discussion about the ethical implications of conducting such research, and how my own experiences and resources during fieldwork led to these mixed methods of data collection. The third section of this chapter will then describe the analytical methods undertaken throughout this study.

3.1 Data Collection: Participant Observation, Semi-Structured Interviews, Collaborative Research Methods, And Archival Research

This section will describe the various methods of data collection. Critical discussions about the choice of methods will also be given.

Participant observation

One of the key methods of data collection used in this study was through participation observation. This entailed visiting Club Indigo for an extended period of time in what Geertz (1998) has famously described as *deep hanging out*. When I first visited the nightclub, I was

seen as an infrequent patron who enjoyed the edgy, queer space on the periphery of the city center. I later returned as an ethnographer to conduct nine months of deep hanging out between September 2016 and June 2017. Upon my return, I was given permission by the owners of the nightclub, Lawrence and Darryl, to observe the performances and ordinary goings on inside the nightclub while taking field notes. The owners also introduced me to the main drag performer Zelda. These three individuals later became some of the key participants in this study.

The initial phase of participant observation required that I maintain a critical yet approachable distance while sitting at the bar taking fieldnotes. These were initially hand-written in a notebook. On the first day of fieldwork, described in the vignette above, the two young men working behind the bar exchanged befuddled looks as they shared a hookah pipe between themselves. They did not exactly admonish me for taking notes. They were more confused rather than incensed by this unusual behavior in an otherwise convivial space. One of them asked me whether I was a journalist. I sheepishly answered that I was a doctoral candidate who had come to conduct research on the drag subculture at Club Indigo. He teased me about being "one of the smart ones," and continued with his hookah-smoking.

Sarah Thornton (1995: 87) avers that "clubbing is the kind of activity that shuns official, parental, constabulary or even 'square' observation." As an academic researcher, my note-taking served to affirm my outsider status to everyone at the club. This made me more visible to *them* than they were to me. I did not experience any negative interactions during the course of participant observation at the nightclub. But I found that my hypervisibility as a researcher tended to place a disproportionate amount of attention on my presence at the

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

As time went on, this strategy proved less cumbersome and invasive than carrying a notebook in a nightclub. Casual conversations were also recorded and digitally stored in this manner. All of the members of the House of Indigo subculture were made aware of my role as a doctoral researcher. As the mistress of ceremonies, Zelda would often tell the audience about the specialness of Club Indigo since it was visited by an academic researcher such as myself. These handwritten and short-hand cellphone field notes were subsequently extended into more detailed, narrative texts and stored on my laptop and external hard drive. Moreover, notes were taken throughout various areas of Johannesburg as I traversed either alone or with my research participants. These experienced and impressions in the research field were also later expanded, stored and digitized accordingly. A total of fifty-five extended fieldnote texts were chosen for analysis and discussion in this study.

Semi-structured recorded interviews

After two consecutive weekends of participant observation, several beauty queens were approached for interviews. The first key participant who was approached for interviews was Phoenix – the reigning Miss Black Pride 2016 at the time.

“Of course,” she beamed with a wide smile, “who wouldn’t want to be included in research about drag queens.”

After reading the information sheet, we conducted the first of our interview in the queens’ tiny changing room backstage. But the blasting music was very disturbing to the both of us. So, we scheduled another day for the interview. We agreed that I would visit her home in in the Vaal Triangle.

Recorded interviews with the beauty queens (or the “divas,” as they affably referred to each other) were also vital to this study. This is because it was important to hear their perspectives about what it meant to be a part of the House of Indigo. This also required the careful negotiation of a high level of rapport and trust. Linda Tuhiwai-Smith (1999: 5) stressed a methodological framework that prioritizes the presence and voices of research participants. Merely observing and taking field notes was not enough. In order to avoid the clearly colonial strategy of sitting back, and watching “native” informants’ behaviours (Geertz 2005; Malinowski 1929; Turner 1969), the *voices* and *presence* are, therefore, central to this study. In the light of this, the term “interlocutor” herein takes precedence over “participant” insofar as it denotes the dialogic orientation of the methods chosen in this study (Allen 2011).

Generalizations and assumptions about observed phenomena in the field could only be disturbed by asking questions – no matter how astute or naïve these were. The representation of human subjects in this study, therefore, relies on giving their voices agency and primacy (Rosaldo 1986). This method was undertaken in order to gain a deeper understanding of each individual's viewpoints in terms of their participation in the House of Indigo drag and pageant subculture. This methodological choice was also motivated by the imperative to test Gelder's (2007: 62) assertion that the nightclub is central to drag queens' subcultures, and that this space is actually where they get to "become" queer. The individual semi-structured interviews enabled me to listen to each of my interlocutors' life stories. I was also able to understand how drag and beauty pageantry fit into their worldviews and aspirations. The guiding questions for these interviews were generally drafted around the topics of drag, style, beauty, music and performance. But our conversation often veered into extremely intimate conversations about aspiration, sexuality, and the quotidian navigating subjectivity in contemporary Johannesburg.

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

chose to conduct individual interviews in order to hear each individual's story, and thereby try to do justice to it in my later analyses and the writing process.

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

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

Collaborative research methods, the ethnographic gaze, and reflexivity

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

This suggestion yielded significant benefits in terms of develop collaborative research strategies during fieldwork. By so doing, I was able to collect a wealth of visual images and videos during fieldwork. In the first instance, I gained backstage access to the girls' tiny, stuffy changing rooms (a store room, really). We were able to engaged in rich conversations, share jokes and life stories, arrange interview dates and venues, or to just sit and chat while we got to know each other. The divas did not mind me hanging out backstage with them. They often chuckled while being photographed out of drag. They complained that they did not want the world to see them out of drag, complaining that they looked like boys. But their protestations were usually made in jest.

Volunteering as the in-house photographer at Club Indigo enabled me to gather a wealth of visual material. The divas were not the only people who reveled being in front of the camera. Most of the regular patrons enjoyed having their photos taken while they are dancing and socializing. After spending each Saturday taking photos, I would send these to Darryl on Sunday mornings. He would then upload them on Club Indigo's Facebook page or forward them to the gay lifestyle blog, *Mambaonline*. He did this to promote the club as well as to inform people about previous and upcoming events. The divas and other patrons would insist on having their photos taken in the full awareness that their best poses and memories would be uploaded archived on these public platforms on the World Wide Web. Thereafter, they were completely free to save these, and use them in whichever way they pleased. In the interests of safeguarding the identities and dignity of the members of the House of Club Indigo, I have not included these images in this study.

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

Rappaport (2008) emphasizes that collaborative methods revitalize traditional participant observation, while simultaneously extending the research endeavor (and material) beyond

the confines of academic enquiry. These mini-photoshoots with Phoenix and A'Deva became collaborative research projects. They were free to direct me as to which images and poses they preferred. The divas were free to use the visual material in order to build their modelling portfolios at no financial cost to themselves. In the light of this, the visual material gathered during fieldwork was extended beyond the specific aims of this research project. I was able to converse with them as we walked around their respective neighbourhoods – getting to know about their childhoods, their aspirations, and everyday lives. These mini photo-shoots, therefore, gave the visual data collection aspect of this study its collaborative bent (Lassiter 2005).

Sarah Pink (2003: 6) stresses that ethnography is only one "*aspect* of research and representation" (emphasis in original). It may draw from a number of varying research practices and methods such as the historical, statistical, archival, and the visual. As such, visual research methods can augment collaborative and interdisciplinary projects (Pink 2003: 179). As evidenced in the discussion above, the collection of visual research material resulted in various collaborative efforts between myself and the different people I encountered during fieldwork. I gained a significant level of access and trust during fieldwork precisely because of the decision to include visual research methods. At the same time, research participants were able to document the social experiences at the nightclub and/or potentially monetize their own images. The method of visual data collection was collaborative and beneficial for myself as well as my interlocutors during fieldwork. A total of 2,077 photographs were taken and digitally stored during the course of fieldwork.

Initially, visual data collection was intended for the purposes of documenting the various stages and developments in research during fieldwork. This method of data collection,

however, eventually culminated into “a heightened reflexivity” (Banks 2007: 73) on my own part. The co-production and distribution of digital photographs (between myself and various interlocutors) changed the discursive field under ethnographic investigation. While the above-mentioned field notebook made my presence and intentions hypervisible, the research camera provided an enormous privilege and access in the field.

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

I did not have to verbally elicit their participation in the production and collection of these visual images. Their participation and collaboration was voluntary and consensual to the extent that they initiated the taking of these photographs. They would also insist on

appraising their images on the camera's small LCD monitor; scoffing at the ones they did not like. Some would even instruct me to take another photograph that was more appealing, thus showing them in their best light. During one of the pageant rehearsals (to be discussed in chapter 4), Darryl also instructed the beauty contestants not to forget to smile for the camera while they were on stage. Therefore, I had to be cognizant of the photographs and the digital camera as both commodities and social objects (Barthes 1980; 1986; Frosh 2015; Iqani & Schroeder 2016; Schroeder 2002; Sontag 1977). Their use and distribution gave them lives and histories of their own – the effects of which had not been anticipated during the research design phase of this study.

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

The interrelationship between the divas' offline and online self-representations bore complex ethnographic implications for the present study. The research approach became

multi-sited as material was collected from both spheres. The online and offline data were thus given equal credence because of "how the virtual and the actual 'point' at each other in social practice." (Boellstorff 2012: 40) The inclusion of online and offline research material was important in this study because of the co-constitutive sociality within both these domains (Lindolf & Shatzer 1998; Horst & Miller 2012). These Instagram posts were thus collected and organized in order to make an account for the queens' everyday social practices of consumption and self-representation. A total of 88 Instagram and Facebook posts were screen grabbed and stored digitally. Although Instagram and Facebook are different digital applications with different functionalities, the visual social media material was collected and organized intertextually. This is because each diva would first upload their desired photograph on Instagram, and then use the "share on Facebook" option to forward their images onto the latter application. This, therefore, allowed for more engagement with the image among a wider audience. For the purposes of concision and clarity, two posts from each diva's social media pages were included for analysis.

Archival Research

Research at the Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (GALA) archives in Johannesburg was undertaken at the earliest stages of fieldwork for this study. This took approximately ten working days when the archives were open to researchers, students, and other members of the public.

Upon arrival at GALA, I was summarily furnished with a mammoth corpus of archival material from various nightclubs and beauty pageants that took place in the early to

mid-1990s. I discovered that LGBTQIA+ spaces like The Dungeon nightclub and the Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church (HUMCC) in Johannesburg hosted annual beauty pageants on an annual basis before Club Indigo opened its doors in 2003. I also had access to archival material ranging from printed colour photographs, flyers, posters, typed programmes, pageant application forms, judges' notes, score sheets, and even field notes from Graeme Reid's (1999) brilliant ethnographic research about the HUMMC.

The GALA archives also housed a huge amount of material from Club Indoigo's early days when it was first located in Braamfontein, central Johannesburg (2003 – 2009). Printed colour photographs of a younger Darryl and Lawrence, and other drag queens filled two medium-sized boxes from which I sifted to find contextual background about the nightclub's history and trajectory. The archives also housed a plethora of visual material such as old flyers and posters advertising various parties hosted at the nightclub. I also had access to digitized photographs and videos from previous pageants and random evenings at the nightclub. These digitized files comprised of 338 photographs from the Miss Black Pride 2010 pageant, 58 photographs from the Miss Club Indigo 2010 pageant, and 92 video clips from the Miss Gay Jozi 2013 pageant. I was also given access to the *Jozi Queens* (de Barros 2016) documentary featuring interviews with the owners of nightclub as well as the various beauty contestants who competed in the Miss Gay Jozi 2014 pageant. This latter pageant received considerable mainstream media coverage from the local and national press. Three magazine articles featuring that year's reigning queen – Miss T Menu – were also collected.

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

Timeframe and activities in the field

Approximately nine months were spent conducting ethnographic fieldwork around Johannesburg. Ethnographic fieldwork for this study was conducted between September 2016 and June 2017. This timeframe was specifically chosen to coincide with the three major beauty pageants organized and hosted by the nightclub's owners. Namely, these pageants are "Miss Black Pride," "Miss Club Indigo," and "Miss Gay Jozi." Although, they are in the same nightclub, these pageants are different in terms of the entry criteria, their processual structures, as well as the final rewards bestowed upon the respective title-holders. (More details on these pageants will be explicated in Chapter 4). It was important to conduct participant observation and visual data collection at these three events because, first, these were the highlight events the nightclub's annual calendar. Second, most of my interlocutors (the divas and organizers alike) expressed the significance of these pageants in relation to their aspirations and motivations as human subjects. An enormous amount of time, physical and emotional labour, as well as money went into the collective production of

these events. Therefore, conducting research during these events was integral for this study.

- Miss Black Pride 2016 – 1 October 2016
- Miss Club Indigo 2016 – 18 December 2016
- Miss Gay Jozi 2017 – 27 May 2017

Fieldwork was also conducted at the events leading up to each of these pageants. These included mid-week auditions and rehearsals which took place at Club Indigo. I was also present on the days and hours just before each pageant as the girls, organizers, staff ran around the nightclub in a frenzy. Tensions were high and nerves were shot on these days as everyone was determined to showcase the best they had to offer. I also thought it prudent to avail myself for helping with setting up the stage, cleaning, and other such technical logistics such as cleaning or carrying the bar supplies. But Lawrence vehemently declined my offers to help in this way. He insisted that I was a "special" guest at the nightclub, and that he paid his staff to do this work. I relented and opted to sit at the bar while taking fieldnotes. This gave me the chance to watch the rehearsal proceedings very closely, and to also chat with some of the hopeful contestants about their hopes for winning the crown.

Apart from these major pageant events, participant observation was also conducted every Saturday night at the nightclub. I would arrive roughly around 21h00 and stay until the club eventually closed at 6am on Sunday mornings. There was much less foot traffic in terms of patronage on these "ordinary" nights. But the regulars were always in attendance to chat, share news about their families, their latest love interests, or petty squabbles at the work place. Although these weekends were seemingly "ordinary" in comparison to the pageant nights, there was always a set programme for drag performances. Regardless of how full (or

empty) the nightclub was, drag performances by the various divas were an integral mainstay every Saturday night. The preparation and execution of these performances were a cause for intense drama, tensions, and hierarchical policing and solidarities among the different subcultural members at the House of Indigo. As such, the drag performances provided a huge amount of ethnographic material by way of participant observation and visual data collection – these are further explicated in Chapters Three and Four.

More ethnographic and visual material was collected while following Zelda during her drag performances in various spaces around Johannesburg. On Sunday 4 December, Madame Zelda was invited to take part in a theatrical production written and directed by a postgraduate Drama student from a local university. Partly improvisational and partly oratory, Zelda was chosen to "play" her stage persona and help to educate the audience about the lived experiences of being a trans-identified drag queen. Part of this performance entailed randomly selecting a cisgender male audience member for an improvisational date with a drag queen. In keeping with her usual flair and natural command of the stage, Zelda enthralled the intimate audience in the theatre at the university. Daylin, Lawrence, Darryl, and I attended the performance to show our support. Zelda was also invited for a special Valentine's Day cabaret performance at the D6 restaurant. Lawrence, Darryl, Kelly, and I attended the event to show support and to enjoy the Cape Malay cuisine – for which the establishment was well known. Yet again, Zelda captivated the small intimate audience with her lip-synch performances to songs by two of her favourite musical icons – Shirley Bassie and Gladys Knight.

The drag performances inside and beyond Club Indigo were integral for data collection and analysis in this study. "Performance," in the aesthetic and/or artistic sense of the term, was

an important thematic concern from the earliest conceptualization and research design phases of this study. An ethnography about drag artistry and beauty pageantry would be remiss were it not to pay critical attention to the intersecting dimensions of camp aesthetics and staged performance. Ethnographic and visual data were collected using fieldnotes and digital photographs. The research material on drag performance was included in this study because it opened space for creative methods of data collection, and thus providing this study with its interdisciplinary orientation (Conquergood 1992; Drewal 1992; Madison 2005; Elliot & Culhane 2017; Johnson 2003; 2016).

3.2. Data Analysis: Triangulation, Thick Descriptions, Critical Discourse Analysis

Triangulation

The mixed qualitative research methods for data collection have been discussed in detail above. These different research materials were organized and stored using the NVivo coding software programme. Thereafter, the research materials were triangulated and coded thematically. The analytical method of triangulation was chosen as most apposite because of the different kinds of research materials herein used. In keeping with the interdisciplinary orientation of this study, triangulation was chosen because it provided corroborative and comprehensive evidence from the various research materials (Salkind 2010). This method also enabled me to develop a coding system that was based on different themes gleaned from the research materials. The themes which emerged as most salient (and reoccurring) were titled under the headings: “Beauty,” “Consumption,” “Aspiration,”

"Empowerment," "Queerness," "Kinship," "Drag Performance," "Pageantry" and "Cosmopolitanism," and "Branding." Sometimes, the research materials fell into each of these themes, and sometimes across several at the same time. In the light of this, the research materials were read and analyzed intertextually. This process of organizing, coding, and thematising took about two months over June and July 2017.

Thick descriptions

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

Intertextuality and Critical Discourse Analysis

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

The textuality of the research materials evidenced their multimodality as forms of discourse. The analytical framework of CDA thus facilitated a thorough understanding of the research materials as mediating (and as being produced by) the ever-changing relations of power and social practice (Fairclough 2012: 457). CDA is analytical framework that places special emphasis on sociocultural context as semiotically and discursively constructed (Kress & Hodge 1988; Lazar 2007; Wodak 2008). The research materials (re)presented in this study are not analyzed as self-evident, innocuous, "objective" facts of history. Rather, they are critiqued in their imbrications within the power structures, social hierarchies, and processes of subjectivation that are a function of transnational neoliberal capitalist hegemony. In the

light of the foregoing, a CDA framework was chosen to analyze the intersections of power, representation, and the subcultural constructions of identity and social practice at Club Indigo.

3.3 Access and trust, queer positionality, and research ethics

The ethnographic vignette opening this chapter evidences many of personal anxieties upon returning to Club Indigo for research. Gaining physical access into the nightclub was not difficult. I could afford an Uber taxi to and from the nightclub, and I could also pay the R100 entrance fee as I had done before. Similarly, navigating the city was extremely easy since I was born and raised in Johannesburg. So, finding my way around the city was fairly simple for the entire duration of fieldwork. On the days when I visited my various interviewees homes, I would request general directions to the various townships where they lived. On such days, I would travel around the city in the fifteen-seater mini-bus taxis so ubiquitous around the city. At an average of R10 for a three-kilometer trip (or R15 for a twenty-kilometer drive to Soweto) these mini-bus taxis were an economically viable option during the day.

Johannesburg's public transport system, however, is very poorly subsidized and mismanaged by the municipality and local government. There are no buses or trains past eight o'clock at night, and even fewer taxis are available around the city past this hour. One's only options are to either use a private car, hire an expensive metered taxi, or use various app-based taxi services such as Uber or Taxify. Furthermore, walking to and from the designated spots where the few taxis might be available would be risky because of the

high level of crime throughout the city. This made travelling by taxi at night both dangerous and inconvenient. Since I did not have access to my own a car, I opted for the safer and frankly more convenient option of using the app-based Uber taxi service in order to get to and from Club Indigo during the late-night hours of fieldwork.

Although I had patronized the nightclub twice before, gaining access as an ethnographic researcher bore several implications and challenges during fieldwork. In the earliest stages of fieldwork, Jabu (the bouncer) was not familiar with me or my intentions at the nightclub. Unshakably stern (and somewhat forlorn), he would stand at his booth and demand the entrance fee just like any other regular customer was expected to. He was neither hostile nor affable. Like any other bouncer, he was simply doing his job by eliciting payment for entrance and maintaining peaceful social relations inside the nightclub. It was only after the first month of fieldwork – after I had visited the club for four consecutive Saturdays – that he began to warm up to me. On the night of the Miss Club Indigo pageant, he loosened the muscles on his well-chiseled face as I walked in. He maneuvered his lips into what I anticipated would be a smile when he recognized me with my camera in hand. I was reaching for my wallet when he casually shook his head and said:

“No, no. Don’t worry. It’s OK. Lawrence and Darryl already told me that you’ll be taking photos tonight. They said you’re our guest. So, you don’t have to pay.”

From then on, I did not have to pay for entrance at the nightclub.

Although I quickly gained convenient access into the nightclub and its drag pageant subculture, establishing rapport and trust with the various members took some time. As with any dynamic of human interaction, trust had to be earned over an extended period of

time. Similarly, establishing respect with my interlocutors required constant negotiation. The friendly rapport which I had established with the people I met at Club Indigo was based on mutual respect and, more importantly, the African philosophy and ethical code of *Ubuntu*. This is an ontological as well as moral imperative that enjoins the human subject to treat others with dignity, tolerance, and respect. *Ubuntu* is an African humanism. A philosophical worldview based on the idea that human subjectivity is characterized by perpetual motion, change (*becoming* rather than be-ing), and existential interdependence with other human subjects and groups (Ramose 1999; 2018). Moreover, *Ubuntu* is a worldview based on the ethical imperative to "affirm one's [own] humanity by recognizing the humanity of others, and, on that basis, establish human relations with them." (Ramose 2002: 272).

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

Madison (2005: 5) posits that critical ethnography "takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions." Before doing fieldwork, I had taken my self-identification as an open, cisgender, Black gay man as a given state of affairs. Where and how I occupied various spaces were a direct result of my racialized class privilege. My politics, as a critical feminist and queer scholar, were highly influential in the research design and methodological choices made in this

study. They also shaped how I negotiated trust during fieldwork as well as my analytical approaches to the research materials in this study. Madison (2005: 9) further avers that "doing fieldwork is a personal experience." This was true in my own case. When I began doing fieldwork proper, I had to *first* problematize those taken-for-granted assumptions about my subjectivity. The intersecting identity categories which I claimed as constitutive of my own subjectivity had to be examined in relation to how I occupied various spaces. The levels of trust I was proffered were thus related to my positionality as a Black queer academic researcher.

3.4 Insider/Outsider Status: positionality, reflexivity, and doing ethnography at home

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

Positionality, access, and reflexivity

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

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

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

My self-identification as an openly gay Black man enabled me to gain a significant level of privileged access and trust during fieldwork. Similarly, these intersecting identity categories made me privy to information, observations, and vernacular discourses which I otherwise would not have had access to. However, such access was not without its challenges and limitations. Much like other patrons at Club Indigo, I was initially welcomed as an avid fan of drag performance and beauty pageantry. Upon hearing about my research aims and methods various interlocutors became interested in this study. They were equally interested my personal and intellectual investments for engaging in academic enquiry about drag performance and beauty pageantry. Such an idea was simultaneously ambitious and preposterous to them - and they made sure to tell me as much. The mere notion of undertaking an extended academic study of their subcultural community and practices appeared to be more of a frivolous past-time than actual "work." In a society wherein 55.75% of the youth are mired in unemployment and economic dispossession, deep hanging out at a nightclub might appear to be more of a privileged hobby than a mode of critical, scholarly enquiry. This latter motivation had to be made explicit to various interlocutors during the earliest stages of fieldwork.

Having been raised a South African township throughout my childhood proved to be advantageous for several reasons during fieldwork. An often-unspoken affinity between myself and most of my interlocutors grew organically because of our shared racial and class backgrounds. This affinity opened several pathways to the gradual development of trust with my interlocutors. I did not have to ask what certain modes of behavior or tones in speech meant since I had a significant insider status – as a queer-identifying man. However, I had to take a critical stance in my analyses of their discursive import in the following

empirical chapters. To the extent that I was an outsider (being neither a drag artist nor a beauty contestant), I had to remain curious and attentive of a plethora of subcultural practices, codes, subcultural references about which I previously had no clue.

At the linguistic level, I understood their slang, syntactic tonality, as well as their onomatopoeic inflections without having these explained to me in any explicit way. Because of our shared vernacular and indigenous languages (seSotho, Tswana, isiZulu, isiXhosa, and Xitsonga[1]), I was able to converse openly with most of my interlocutors – with the exception of those who were Afrikaans speakers. Being able to exchange ideas, knowledge, advice, and personal stories with my interlocutors in their respective languages was equally fruitful. I was thereby able to ask critical questions in vernacular ways that were both respectful and critically engaged. My knowledge of these local languages added much-needed complexity and criticality to my observations, interview questions, as well the subsequent interpretation of my interlocutors' responses. Similarly, my familiarity with queer cultural references and signs allowed me to code switch between various casual conversations such as to make my interlocutors comfortable with myself as a person and a scholarly researcher.

Soyini D. Madsion (2012) describes reflexivity as a mode of intellectual labour whereby the researcher contemplates how they interpret events, responses, and behaviour in the field. This implies critical (and careful) attention to the knowledge systems, conceptual frameworks, as well as vocabularies undertaken in the researcher's interpretations and analyses. While the empirical research material presented in this study are infused with a significant amount of insider knowledge, the interpretation of such material remains embedded within indigenous knowledge systems, contextual specificity, and critical social

[1] These are some of South Africa's eleven official languages. I am a native speaker of all five of them.

theory. The empirical chapters to follow are thus framed within this reflexive and methodological paradigm. It stands to reason that such a reflexive approach in analytical methods would follow from the collaborative and decolonial methods of data collection based on social justice, equity, and *Ubuntu*.

3.5 The Ethics of De-Colonial Representation and Anonymity

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

(2007), and Mignolo (2009), I have made a concerted effort de-colonize my own ethnographic gaze, as well as the textual and visual representations of the people involved in this study.

I have discussed the wealth of research material gathered during the nine months of fieldwork. All these materials were organized and coded using the NVivo software programme. The verbal, textual, visual and digital research materials gathered during fieldwork were thus triangulated as the most appropriate analytical strategy for the multi-sited and mixed ethnographic methods described above. This material was later analyzed intertextually in order to provide thick ethnographic descriptions and arguments in the empirical chapters to follow. Iqani (2012: 49) argues that "texts exist in the plural and hold many relationships with one another," and that "textual analysis should thus be rooted in an awareness of the intertextual nature of social mediation." This intertextual approach, therefore, guided the critical discourse analyses in the following empirical chapters. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) "sets out to make…connections between properties of texts and social processes and relations (ideologies, power relations) which are generally not obvious to people who produce and interpret those texts" (Fairclough, 2010: 131). The CDA method thus can provided me with the analytical tools to interrogate the ideological preoccupations and the broader power relations which brought my research materials to bear.

It is important to note the interpretive and partial nature of the analyses in the following chapters. The now well-established "reflexive turn" within various fields of ethnographic enquiry has long dispensed with the positivist, objectivist, and clearly

androcentric ideals of any reality that is “out there” (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Crapanzano 1986; Rabinow 1986; Abu-Lughord 1990; Conquergood 1992; Smith 1999; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughord & Larkin 2002; Madison 2005). Therefore, the ethnographic observations, interpretations and analyses in the chapters to follow are admittedly provisional since they are advanced by a researcher with his own set of situated and contextual ideological perspectives (Crang 2008).

My chief philosophical outlook has been to approach and represent my interlocutors in as dignified a manner as possible (Smith 1999; Stein 1999). As an academic researcher, I was cordially invited into a subcultural context within which I would not have had such intimate access, and to the extent that I did. Such intimate access made me privy to conversations, confessions, and other non-verbal research material which would have remained enigmatic otherwise. In other words, the people with whom I collaborated in this project trusted me with stories and visual images about themselves and their subcultural world of drag and beauty pageantry. It behoves me, therefore, to render a critically engaged account which gives voice to the people who so benevolently invited me into their space. This liminal insider-outsider position compels me, therefore, to paint thick descriptions (Geertz 1973; Hurston 1981; Abu-Lughord 1997).

Lila Abu-Lughord (1990) aptly outlines a set of critical questions regarding the ethical potential of a feminist ethnographic approach. She also suggests that this approach compels the researcher to:

> write in a non-dominating way…to write about individuals bound up in relationships with others…to write with care and attachment rather than distance, to participate rather than remove [themselves].
>
> (Abu-Lughord 1990: 22)

While I am fully convinced as to the ethical potential of feminist ethnographic methods, my own fieldwork posed many challenges in this regard. The ethical and epistemological implications about representations of the "Other" have been outlined in the previous section. However, the broader (and rather vexed) tensions regarding ethnographic representation and anonymity require further exegesis. Abu-Lughord's (1990) excerpted statement above highlights the importance of thick ethnographic descriptions; ones that eschew all pretentions and claims about the researcher's "objectivity." Her statement also highlights the significance of ethnographic participatory and collaborative research methods which continually strive to ameliorate the power imbalances inherently attendant to *any* ethnographic endeavour. It must be remembered that no ethnographic project can legitimately make any claims as to the equality between the researcher and the researched. After all, ethnographic methods of enquiry are historically imbricated within the asymmetrical processes and structures of Western European, white supremacist, imperialist and colonialism (Turner 1977; Said 1979; Amadiume 1987; Abu-Lughord 1990). For this study, in particular, the topic of anonymity becomes vexed insofar as the questions of ethnographic detail in terms of thick descriptions and visual representation are concerned. How does the ethnographic researcher give ethical credence, voice, authority, and authenticity to the research collaborators while still anonymizing their identities in subsequent reports? How can the researcher avoid distancing themselves from their

interlocutors if they hold fast to the ethnographic principle of anonymity? How do are the relationships and rapport so steadfastly built with my interlocutors complicated by the ethical imperative to anonymize their identities?

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

These tensions and complexities have influenced my decision to completely anonymize all the names and identities of my interlocutors. This also includes anonymizing the name of

the nightclub – which was my primary field site. This decision was also made in a concerted effort to safeguard (and to honour) the relationships between myself and my research collaborators which were built on a foundation of trust and camaraderie. The people with whom I the research for this study entrusted me with their stories and life histories. Likewise, I ensured them that I would protect their identities and personal safety throughout every stage of this study – from data collection to the final analyses presented here. These interpersonal connections were further solidified through the ethical process of gaining informed consent from every individual I met at the nightclub. As will be demonstrated in the following chapter, my interlocutors did not conceive themselves as completely marginal subjects. In fact, they saw themselves as carrying an incredible amount of creativity, intelligence, and resourcefulness. However, the very real dangers of hate-crimes are still part and parcel of their strategies of navigating a complex and violent city like Johannesburg. Although my research collaborators and interlocutors may not see themselves as abject and marginal subject, their gender non-conforming identities render them vulnerable to a wide range of emotional and physical hate-crimes. My positionality as a researcher, therefore, behoves me to protect their safety and right to privacy as best a manner as I can. All of these considerations are further complicated by fact that many of them are hypervisible as drag and beauty queens on social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook. Several of them have made appearances on national and cable television programmes, sexual health advocacy panels as well as newspaper articles – advocating for the importance of drag beauty contests as well as the protection of human rights for gender non-conforming people. But their hypervisibility across various media platforms does not render them any less vulnerable to emotional and physical risk. Moreover, the personal stories they shared with me – about themselves, their families, and each other – was shared

under the common understandings of confidentiality. In the light of this, I have therefore anonymized the identities of all my research collaborators and interlocutors through the use pseudonyms.

Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the methods of data collection and analysis undertaken in this study. I have thus discussed the appropriateness and benefits of queer ethnography as a research method of scholarly enquiry. I have described the anxieties and challenges attendant to re-entering the field as a researcher who was familiar with the subculture and its participants. By so doing, I have taken critical and self-reflexive account of my own liminal (yet privileged) positionality as an ethnographic investigator. In keeping with the interdisciplinary spirit of queer ethnography, this chapter has detailed and justified the use of digital visual media in this study. I have argued for the significance of using critical discourse analysis as a tool for interpreting my interlocutors' own strategies of self-representation on various social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. I have discussed the use and interpretation of digital visual photographic material as strategy which augmented the classical ethnographic approaches of participant observation and face-to-face interviews. The ethical concerns regarding visual data collection, reflexivity, and anonymity have also been explored. The following chapter introduces my key interlocutors and other significant participants within the House of Indigo. In what follows, I investigate the subcultural hierarchies, kinship networks, and material culture at the House of Indigo.

Chapter 4: The House of Indigo: Subcultural hierarchies, networks of sorority, and the gender divide

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

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

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

"By hand," he says proudly. "But I sewed the dress with my machine. You know I make all of her gowns and dresses myself."

He then walks away to attend to some task behind the bar. Zelda also saunters away to "work the room" – welcoming the few guests in attendance.

This chapter introduces some of the key participants in the House of Indigo. It outlines the social hierarchies and kinships system that shaped the subcultural dynamics at the House of Indigo. The hierarchical structure is discussed in relation to the overlapping forms of sociality and kinship which were observed at the nightclub. The subcultural members' respective roles and interrelationships are also outlined herein. This chapter shows that these bonds of kinship echo the extended family structure found in many African homes. More importantly, these social and familial roles are not reducible to the characteristics of a normative Western nuclear family. I argue that the kinship structures observed at the nightclub were not autonomous from those formed within the various members' birth families.

The coalescence of these kinship networks between birth and subcultural families resulted in forms which I describe as complementary kinship (further explored in Chapter 5). They shaped the members' life trajectories, opportunities, aspirations, and personhood. I also argue here that the bonds of complementary kinship fostered at the House of Indigo were constructed through performative actions such as the gifting and circulation of commodities and material goods (further explored in Chapter 6). The subcultural hierarchies and interpersonal relationships observed at Club Indigo thus enable us to reconceptualize the scholarly debates about chosen families and queer kinship.

4.1 The Mother and Father of the House of Indigo: The labour of gay parenting

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

Introducing the mother of the House: Darryl Adams

Darryl was the indomitable maternal figure at the House of Indigo. All the Indigo Divas, including his life partner Lawrence, referred to him using the colloquial term "ma" or "mommy." They also used the personal pronouns "he/his" and "she/her" interchangeably when referring to him. Neither these maternal nor the masculine pronouns existed in conceptual conflict with his cisgender identity as an openly gay man. Darryl did not mind the interchangeable use of any of these gendered pronouns. Only the heterosexual cisgender

male staff (Jabu, Daylin, and Senzo) referred to him using either his first name or the above-mentioned masculine pronouns. This latter fact, however, did not diminish the significance and extent of his role as the mother of the House of Indigo.

This linguistic and conceptual disjuncture (between Darryl's gay male identity and maternal performativity) demonstrates that being a "mother" is not a biological fact, but a social category (Amadiume 1987; Bailey 2013; Guidio 2009; Oyewùmí 2000; 2005). This provides the basis for one of the central arguments expounded later in this chapter – that "family" is not simply a fact of genetic and/or biological history, but is also constructed through performative *acts* of kinship.

Throughout modern capitalist history, the private and domestic sphere of the home has often been associated with feminine and/or maternal labour (Davis 1981; de Beauvoir 1949; hooks 1982; Hill-Collins 2000; McClintock 1995). The emotional and physical labour, supposedly demonstrative of domesticity and care, have been relegated to individuals assigned "female" at birth. The social category of heteronormative motherhood (and the domestic labour connoted by it) have become subsumed within a biological and gendered sign system which functions along the female/woman axis (Cohen 2005; Hennessy 2000; Oyewùmí 1997; Rich 1980). However, in many queer subcultural communities the category of motherhood is not the sole purview of females or women. Men or males can also take up the role of motherhood – however they may self-identify along the sex/gender spectrum (Jackson 2002; Arnold & Bailey 2009). These male-bodied individuals are often described as mothers by their adoptive children, life partners, and other members of their queer communities. As such, they can lay claim to the social category of motherhood by engaging in various domestic tasks and behaviours associated with it (Livingston 1991; Valentine

2007; Gaudio 2009;). In such communities, "motherhood" indexes a wide range of practices and identifications which have no relation to the biological makeup of an individual who may have been assigned male at birth, or may identify as a man.

Darryl's role within the House of Indigo was a case in point. His self-identification as a cisgender gay man and his role as a mother were not incompatible. The seamlessness between his sexual/gender identity and his role as a mother was also evidenced through his performance of various forms of labour and care. The opening vignette to this chapter demonstrates how much effort and time Darryl took in his various tasks as a mother. His glee at seeing Zelda wearing the elaborate, feathered cloak and evening gown – which he made himself – highlighted the pride he took in his role as the nurturing mother of the House of Indigo. Moreover, his maternal labours and care were not just reserved for Zelda, but they were extended to all the divas at Club Indigo. He was extremely hands-on when it came to ensuring that they looked beautiful and were impeccably dressed at all times. I often heard him softly reproaching the queens for having a smudge of make-up on their white pageant sashes. When he was not in a particularly good mood, he would scold them for not wearing their tiaras – the ultimate symbols of their status and prestige in the nightclub.

> I even help them with their tucking. On pageant nights, I usually have a roll of Sello-tape tape. I sit in the changing room, and line them up, on-by-one, to tuck their dicks away. (Fieldnotes, Miss Club Indigo 2016)

No one at the nightclub questioned or challenge his authority. When I initially arrived at Club Indigo to conduct fieldwork, he was quite welcoming, albeit taciturn. I knew instantly that I would have to work hard to gain his trust. I later discovered that he preferred to rule

the House of Indigo as the reserved, self-effacing matriarch. I also came to learn that he was as generous and he was stringent. Darryl's maternal tasks revealed an immense level of intimacy that he enjoyed with of the divas as the nightclub. This was demonstrated in different ways – from tucking the queens' penises, to chiding them for the slightest sartorial mishap. With an unflinching hawk's eye, he guarded every detail in the running of the nightclub. He oversaw the transactions at the cash registers with the same amount of scrutiny with which he instructed the girls how to walk properly on stage.

"You ladies must mince, mince, mince," he would say during pageant rehearsals, sashaying his short, stocky frame towards the stage (Fieldnotes, MGJ Auditions 2017). By this he meant that the girls should add a touch of campy flourish to their catwalk across the stage through the act of "mincing" (Mulligan 2018: 28).

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

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

Despite Darryl's above-stated ideals, the divas just could not be whomever and "whatever they want to be" at Club Indigo. As evidenced by his continual admonishments, Darryl's maternal role was also characterized by the vigilant policing of the drag queens' deportment and self-presentation.[2] This policing also occurred outside the physical space of the nightclub as well.

On the Valentine's Day 2017, Darryl, Lawrence, Kelly, and I attended a cabaret performance by Zelda at the quaint D6 restaurant in a suburb northwestern suburb of the city centre (Fieldnotes, 2017). The four of us attended to show Zelda support at the event – to which she was especially invited by the owner of the family restaurant. This also provided a unique opportunity to witness how an audience outside of the subcultural context of Club Indigo would receive her performance. Just before we entered the restaurant, Darryl pulled Kelly to the side, straightening her Miss Club Indigo 2017 sash, primping her wig, and making sure that her tiara was pinned to it properly. Zelda enthralled the intimate audience with renditions of her favourite Shirley Bassey songs. The audience were also captivated by Kelly sitting demurely and quietly at our table – with her legs crossed and her hands clasped on her lap. During dinner, one woman walked up to our table to take a closer look at her sash, asking her about her pageant title. Smiling, Darryl answered:

> This is our current queen at Club Indigo. She is here to represent us at the club and to show support to Zelda. (Fieldnotes, Valentine's Day 2017)

[2] The subcultural systems of gender policing are further explored in Chapters 6 and 7.

While the cabaret performance was certainly well received by everyone in attendance, Kelly basked in their admiration and complements. The majority of them, it seemed, hadn't been in such close proximity to drag queens before. Kelly's posture and graceful, poised demeanor highlighted the seriousness of her ambassadorial role as the reigning beauty queen. Similarly, Darryl's words and his fastidiousness attention to Kelly's (and other divas') appearance and deportment demonstrated the extent of his authority as the mother of the House of Indigo.

Bailey (2013: 80) describes the "labour of care" which is attendant to the work of mothering and heading a drag and ballroom house. He observes that a "fetishistic femininity" is also attached to the various forms of maternal care – regardless of the gender identity or sexual orientation of the person who takes on this subcultural role (Bailey 2013: 106). Critical African feminist scholars continue urging us to think about gender, sexuality, and power in very localized and contextual ways (Amadiume 1987; Bakare-Yusuf 2003; Lewis 2001; 2008; Gqola 2001; 2008; Oyěwùmí 1997; 2000; 2005; Tamale 2011). Of equal importance, is the imperative to draw linkages relating to desire, sexual and gendered practices, and identities in various transnational contexts (Grewal & Kaplan 2001; Milani & Lazar 2017). In the light of this, Bailey's (2013: 108) observation seems convincing to the extent that the dominant social script of mothering provides to be the blueprint through which housemothers in queer subcultural communities.

Darryl's maternal role were clearly evidenced through his labours of care. This maternal role was simultaneously self-imposed and projected onto him by everyone at the House of Indigo. However, a fetishistic femininity seemed to completely envelope his performance of this maternal role – through the strict policing of the drag queens' feminine deportment and

self-presentation. Although Darryl worked hard in his continual attempts at creating a queer space which allowed the drag queens "be whatever they want to be," his words and actions were not easily reconciled with his ideals.

Father of the House: Lawrence Arendse

Lawrence Arendse's role at the House of Indigo was that of a father figure. His role, and the authority which resulted therefrom, was neither questioned nor challenged. His role as the father was projected onto him by others while it was simultaneously internalized. They mostly referred to him using his first name and masculine pronouns. The few occasions when he was referred to as "father" were when he was formally introduced by the mistress of ceremonies at the annual beauty pageants. Otherwise, he did not seem to mind being called by his first name.

As Darryl's life partner for more than twenty years, Lawrence was the co-founder and co-owner of the nightclub. He generally oversaw the club from the business side of things. While his involvement in the club's maintenance was largely financial, he was also very passionate about the well-being of the divas (his "girls," as he referred to them). He reveled in his capacity to offer gifts such as evening gowns, shoes, make-up, and cosmetic care products to his girls. Not only did he speak highly of these material commodities in themselves, but he also takes considerable pride in his ability to hand them over to his girls. This was, seemingly, his way of demonstrating his paternal affection towards them.

> I want my girls to look their best. I want them to stand out from the other pageant queens in Jo'burg. We go out of our way to give them something special. (Fieldnotes, 2016)

His role as the father of the House of Indigo was not just limited to proffering material gifts to the divas. He frequently provided cash for public transport to some of the divas who travel to the nightclub from distant township locations – such as KwaThema and Carletonville. He frequently balanced his paternal authority with his jovial equanimity. With an ever-present smiling, he commanded a high level of respect from everyone at the nightclub – the divas, the staff, and the patrons alike. His affable demeanour also became evident as he would walk around the nightclub, shaking hands and chatting with the patrons. In the light of this, his paternal role at the house can also be conceived as his own (unstated) form of drag. His performative role as the father of the House of Indigo does not imply that it was unreal, or fictitious in any way. What it demonstrates is that it is possible and conceivable to dissociate the concepts and practices associated with "fatherhood" from biological determinism.

The performativity of his paternal role and practices were not particularly neat. Similarly, he did not perform the role of a "typical" South African father – in any hegemonic sense of the term. His paternal role, and its related fetishistic masculine embodiments, exemplifies a key dynamic with regards to gender performativity. The performativity of his paternal role signifies that fatherhood, in fact, constitute repetitive acts and discourses that become normalized. Furthermore, these performative acts and discourses are not inherent to cisgender, heterosexual male identities or bodies. Lawrence's embodiment of a slightly effeminate gay male subjectivity demonstrates the social character of the role of

fatherhood. Similar to his life partner, it appeared that he performatively adopted the gendered role of fatherhood at the House of Indigo. Moreover, this performative identity was neither neat nor self-evident

His managerial endeavors came with several emotional costs to him. On several quiet, tedious Saturday nights at the nightclub, he spoke at length about the challenges he faced in running the space. He would rub his bald head, lamenting the lack of support from Johannesburg's class and racially stratified LGBTQIA+ consumers. He lamented the difficulty of trying to attract customers from such a fractured and widely-dispersed "community" – as he referred to them. He would segue into complaints about how queer rights organizations and activists looked down on him (as the sole financier, ergo metonym for the nightclub) and all his efforts to provide a space of acceptance, freedom, self-expression and entertainment. He was equally disgruntled at the City of Johannesburg municipality's reluctance to support the annual Miss Gay Jozi pageant.

Lawrence was proud of his steadfast efforts to institutionalize Club Indigo within Johannesburg's queer nightlife and entertainment landscape. He told me about the amount of time, money, and effort it took to keep a nightclub open for sixteen years. Lawrence's desire to create a space of freedom for people of colour points to the racially fragmented spatiality of queer consumer cultures and spaces in Johannesburg. Although democracy granted access to movement and consumption to formally oppressed groups, the city remains highly demarcated along the lines of race and class. What is elided, however, are the contestations of upward mobility and consumption among the now upwardly mobile and affluent members of those formally marginalized groups. And this is precisely what Lawrence struggled with in terms of maintaining and keeping the nightclub open. In our

many conversations, he would question (as did I) why the queer people of colour who could afford to patronize the nightclub chose to do so on such an infrequent basis.

Although he was proud that the nightclub managed to stay opened for more than fifteen years, Lawrence's primary concerns were largely financial. His role as the father at the House of Indigo meant that he was burdened with being its chief financier. An undisclosed portion of his salary – as manager at logistics company – was poured into maintaining the nightclub. The financial strain of keeping the doors opened on a weekly basis caused him a lot of stress – especially when so few people would attend the weekly drag shows. This was also the case with some of the annual beauty pageants. The nightclub was virtually empty at the Miss Black Pride 2016 pageant. Except for a handful of some of the contestants' supporters, the regulars, and the staff, no one else had attended the event. Lawrence sat at the bar looking forlorn.

His unending lamentations about the nightclub's dire financial straits signaled some of the main challenges faced by many men who assume the role of fatherhood in post-apartheid South Africa. The ability to provide financially for the family is of significant concern for many fathers (Richter & Morrell 2006; Mkhize 2006). Similarly, having the financial wherewithal to be a "good" provider is an important component of their sense of masculinity and successful fatherhood (Mkhize 2006; Clowes, Ratele & Shefer 2013; Ratele 2016).

Contrariwise, the inability to be a good provider has been shown to have deleterious effects in the behaviour, self-perceptions, and worldviews of many fathers in post-apartheid South Africa. Lawrence's preoccupation with the success (or shortcomings) of the business therefore indicates an important dimension in his role as the father of the House of Indigo.

The capacity to run a successful business, and by extension, to provide for his subcultural family demonstrates the gravitas with which he assumed and performed this paternal role. Although he never stated this explicitly, his (in)ability to provide for his girls and the rest of the House of Indigo family (by running a successful business) resulted in an enormous amount of strain to his own sense of successful fatherhood. His forlornness at not getting support and patronage from the gay community further illustrate the psychological and emotional costs which came with his paternal role.

The performance of fatherhood has been disentangled from biological determinism. Fatherhood is now critically examined as a composite of social, cultural, and economic factors (Khunou 2006; Padi et al 2014; Ratele 2016). The role of fatherhood encompasses more than just being a "good" financial provider and/or breadwinner. The significance of psycho-spiritual nurturance, emotional openness, sensitivity, and accessibility are also important factors in men's respective sense of successful fatherhood and progressive masculinity (Mkhize 2006; Khunou 2006; Clowes, Ratele & Shefer 2013). It is important to note that "there are many ways of interpreting fatherhood" (Morrell 2006, 23). Fatherhood, like any other social category, is thus better conceived as socio-historically and materially contingent.

Since the category of fatherhood has been divorced from the nexus between contraception and biology, the significance of gay fathers is therefore quite illuminating. Gay fathers – be they adoptive, social, or biological – enable us to broaden the definitions of fatherhood, masculinity, as well as the gendered performances thereof (Benson et al. 2005; Schacher et al. 2005). Lawrence's case exemplifies the structural and ideological constraints of traditional definitions of fatherhood. His performance of fatherhood is

partly shaped by the ideological construction of fetishized masculinity (Bailey 2013). This is a version of masculinity that fixes the performance of successful masculinity to a father's ability to provide financially as a breadwinner.

At the same time, his identity as an openly gay social father adds complexity to these categories. Although he was chiefly concerned with the successful running of nightclub as a business, he was also invested in the emotional, psychic, and aesthetic welfare of "his girls." His above-stated desire to give them something special and have them stand out from other drag and beauty queens demonstrates the multifaceted dimensions of his fatherly within this subcultural context. Likewise, his pride and earnest investment in their aesthetic beauty and overall safety highlight the emotional aspects of his role as an emotional accessible father at the House of Indigo.

4.2 Drag mentors and divas: Madame Zelda and LaBelle A'deva

This section introduces the two most senior drag performers and mentoring sisters. It provides an account for how they came to join the House Indigo and how they gained their subcultural status.

Introducing Madame Zelda

Madame Zelda Chanel-Diamond was undoubtedly the most senior drag and beauty queen at Club Indigo. Her prominent career within South Africa's drag and pageant industry is well-established. As the recent winner of the national Miss Gay RSA 2017 title, Zelda was the

leading beauty pageant title holder at Club Indigo. Like Lawrence and Darryl, she enjoyed and wielded a significant amount of authority amongst the various divas at the nightclub. She took incredible pride in being an older sister and mentor to the younger divas. They looked up to her for guidance and advice in terms of their own drag and pageant performances. She was the sole choreographer of the contestant's group dance and their catwalks at the beauty pageants. On these special occasions, her fans would wait in line just to take a picture with her.

Her prestige as the chief ambassador for the nightclub extended beyond its walls. She often appeared on news programmes and lifestyle blogs as the spokesperson and organizer of the Miss Gay beauty pageant (10&5 interview). She was well-renowned as a premier drag artist around Johannesburg and was invited to perform at the "Queer Art Nights" – which were hosted at another queer nightclub, Industry[3]. Zelda was the Mistress of Ceremonies for most of the beauty pageants at the Club Indigo – keeping the audience members in fits of laughter during the intervals. But her talents and ingenuity were not just limited to female impersonation and beauty pageantry. At the time of fieldwork, she worked for the ANOVA Health Institute as an HIV/AIDS councellor. She has recently come out as a trans-identified woman, and has started an NGO focusing on transgender women's primary and sexual health, public safety, and well-being.

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

Zelda's introduction to the art of female impersonation and beauty pageantry was quite serendipitous. Her training in the performing arts and involvement in several different dance academies might have influenced her trajectory as an artist, but her childhood impromptu shows for her younger siblings carved out her drag destiny, so to speak.

> I always knew that I was an entertainer from young because when my mom was away I had to entertain my siblings. That time my mother and I were the same size so I would put on one of her dresses and shoes. There was a wig involved some way or the other… It was drama deluxe and they would laugh. They would sit on the bed and I would do these entertainment scenes, but it was all from my mind. It was my fantasy, let me put it that way. I would just speak, and say a line, and sing a song. They loved it and that's how I entertained them.
>
> (Zelda Interview, 2017)

Zelda's introduction to drag began with a gold, lamé dress. She had neither dressed in drag nor entered a beauty pageant before she went to Club Indigo for the first time in 2008. She decided to perform in drag for a group of close friends at a pre-Pride party. She did not possess what she describes as "drag-related" clothing at the time. She then borrowed a hand-sewn dress from her sister-in-law for her performance.

"It was just for fun," she said, pulling out the metallic gold lamé dress she borrowed from her sister-in-law.

"My makeup wasn't even on point because I didn't know about foundation and layering and x, y and z like I do now." (Interview with Zelda, 2017)

After this closely-knit gathering, Zelda and her friends decided to continue the lesbian and gay Pride festivities at a nightclub in the city centre.

"The first time I went to the club was when it was still in the city centre," she reminisces. "I was brought up in a reserved home so I had never been to the club before." (Zelda interview, 2017)

Upon arrival, her friends urged her to enter the Miss Black Pride pageant which was taking place that night. Despite being unseasoned, she won second place in the pageant. She also recalled being affably welcomed and guided backstage on that evening by Darryl, Brooke Logan, and Madame La Rochelle[4]. Zelda stated that these three individuals played a foundational role in launching her career as a drag artist and beauty queen:

> I had to teach myself by looking my drag sisters [La Rochelle and Brooke]. But I never had a drag mother. I can't even say Darryl is my drag mother. Darryl is like my gay mother. (Zelda interview, 2017)

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

Introducing LaBelle A'Deva

LaBelle A'deva (affectionally named A'deva) was another prominent drag artist at Club Indigo. She was the winner of the Miss Club Indigo 2010 pageant title, and enjoyed a significant amount of prestige at the club. She was also an older sister and a mentor to the younger divas. She often took to the stage as the Mistress of Ceremonies. Her acclaim as a dancer and lip-synch performer was highlighted on the special Saturday evenings dedicated solely to her as the headlining act. She also choreographed some of the main dance sequences for the Miss Black Pride pageant.

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

> When I started entering the beauty pageants at the club, I literally bought dresses and I had to hide them. Lawrence can tell you that story. I remember calling Lawrence saying: "I'm going to come to the club as a boy. I'm only going to dress up there and I will change after the pageant." Lawrence said it was okay. For a full year while I was first princess, that was my life. I would wash my clothes at home but I would always lie. It's so weird I would lie to my parents and say: "I'm choreographing a dance piece, and the clothes you see on the line are for my dancers. It was a lie, they were mine." That was not the best year of my life but when 2010 came and I became Miss Club Indigo, I was like: "You know what? It's time for me to come out." But I had to deal with myself first because I realised that the enemy is not the people, the enemy is you because nobody ever said you don't have to be or do this. You pre-empt it and that's why you always feel like the world is against you. (Interview with A'Deva, 2017)

Although A'Deva had previously won a pageant title, she later saw herself as more of a drag performer.

> I'm done with pageants. I'm not a girl who like to be seen an evening gown. If you give me a gown and a sash, within five minutes it will be on the floor, and I'll be dancing. That long dress will become a 'freakum dress' [sexy mini-skirt]. (Interview with A'Deva, 2017)

A'Deva's words do not reflect a sense of disdain for beauty pageantry per se. She was still very involved in the pageants as a choreographer and lead performer for the drag trio "The Blue Belles." From her perspective, her talents were better expressed through performance and female impersonation on stage.

> When I stepped into the drag world, all I knew were pageants," she said in her husky voice, "not knowing that you can just be a performer, there's so much to do. So within my ten years [at the club], I realised that I was not a pageant queen. I was born to be a performer. (Interview with A'Deva, 2017)

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

4.3 The younger divas of Club Indigo: sorority and friendship networks

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

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

Their respective bonds of friendship and sorority were also primarily based on their shared interests and aspirations. More significantly, these relationships were built on their shared passion and love for drag performance and beauty pageantry. The divas often associated in pairs or groups of three or four individuals. These smaller friendship groups formed intimate nodes within in a network of sorority among the collective cohort of younger divas. In many instances, the relationships between them were either established or further developed outside the nightclub. Participation in the drag and beauty subculture at the nightclub thus facilitated the development of these relationships. These pairs and group provided members with the opportunity to share material resources, knowledge and skills, as well as emotional support.

These sisterly nodes and networks, more generally, were porous. The plasticity of this networks of sorority was shaped by the ever-changing dynamics of solidarity, support, material constraints, and the social drama of quotidian human interaction. While some of the younger divas were constantly present at the club, others were only present during the pageant evenings and/or the preceding events leading up to them. The porosity of this network of younger divas afforded young, aspirant beauty contestants or drag artists from

various parts of the city enough space to come in and out the House of Indigo. For example, some of these younger divas were only seen once a year at the Miss Gay Jozi or Miss Club Indigo auditions. If they were unsuccessful, they would not be seen at the club until the following year's auditions. Some would not return at all. Their intermittent presence, however, did not hinder their participation and significance within this subculture context.

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

Tracy, Olivia, and Phoenix were another group of close friends. They met backstage at the Miss Gay Valentine 2013 pageant in Daveyton – a township in the far east of Johannesburg. They became friends, and eventually decided to form a drag performance trio named T.O.P. Divas (the first letters of their respective pseudonyms were combined to abbreviate the group's name). They usually performed on pageant evenings and other special events at the nightclub. The T.O.P. Divas performed as headlining acts on one occasion during the course

of my fieldwork. Their set began at two o'clock in the morning, and each of them charmed the audience with their solo and group lip-synching performances.

Phoenix lived with her mother and younger brother in the Vaal triangle – forty-six kilometers outside of Johannesburg. Tracy and Olivia had known each other for much longer, and they both lived with their respective families 132 kilometers outside of Johannesburg. Tracy won the Miss Black Pride 2014 title, and Phoenix held the same title for the following year. Although Olivia had not won any beauty pageant, she was still a very significant member of their trio. She still hoped to do so, and thus continued to enter the different pageants at Club Indigo.

The trio did not rehearse in the same venue together because of the major distances they would have had to travel to each other's homes. Travelling to the club by public transport would have proved arduous, costly and thus inconvenient for their work and college schedules during the week. So, they devised a plan to combat these challenges.

> We share our ideas on our Whatsapp group. We also share videos and voice notes about our choreographed steps for the group performances. We also use it to discuss our group outfits for each set. We then prepare our own solo performances and send each other song ideas. (Interview with Phoneix, 2017)

Foxxy and Precious were twenty-one-year-old friends from Soweto. They shared similar stories of coming out as transgender women. Their trajectories of self-identification were not exactly the same, but their stages of coming out bore important similarities. They both initially identified as effeminate gay teenagers. But their journeys of coming out as young transgender women became more difficult as they neared the end of their respective high

school careers. Precious recounted that Foxxy came out as transgender first. She remembered the devastation she felt at seeing her close friend being turned away from the school gates for wearing feminine accessories with her school uniform. She was also taken aside by the school authorities during exam periods and threatened for sporting girls' hairstyles. Witnessing this institutional discrimination meted against her friend caused Precious to fear coming out as transgender:

> Although I knew in my heart that I was a girl, I decided to hide that side of myself until I left high school. (Precious interview, 2017)

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

One pair of divas who actually did meet at Club Indigo were Kelly (24) and Leila (25). They both entered the Miss Club Indigo 2016 pageant. This was the first beauty pageant Leila had ever entered. And she was duly nervous when I extended my hand to shake hers at the bar. She told me her name, and pointed to her five cousins and friends who had come to support her. This was also Kelly's first time entering a beauty

pageant at Club Indigo. I later discovered that she had won three beauty pageant titles before (Interview, Kelly). Although she had not come with any of her friends or family from home, she gained numerous supporters in the audience. Her exuberance and sassy command of the stage set her apart from her competitors, and many people in the audience predicted that she would take the crown.

Kelly and Leila became very close in the three weeks leading up to the final crowning night. One would have not guessed that they were actually competing in the same pageant at which they had only recently met. Kelly eventually won the crown, and their sister-friendship continued to blossom in the following months thereafter. They often sat gossiping and laughing at the hostess's counter – which was assigned to Miss Club Indigo ambassador for welcoming the guests. I sat with Kelly at her hostess' counter while Leila hadn't arrived. She had this to say about her friend:

> I just love that girl. She's become like such a sister to me. She even visits me at home sometimes. She drives all the way to my house on the opposite end of the city. We cook, relax, watch music videos, and gossip (Fieldnotes, 2017)

An important dynamic in the interrelationships between this network of Indigo Divas was respect. At the very least, the outward *show* of respect was demanded of them. This was evidenced through the general cordiality and solidarity which they displayed towards one another – even when they were not necessarily close. The divas often lent each other items of clothing without there necessarily being any discernible antagonism between the competing individuals. During pageant rehearsals, contestants guided their sisters or members of other groups with their individual catwalks and choreography for the group

dances. In this way, a network of sorority and solidarity was established and encouraged among the broader collective of the younger Indigo Divas.

It was also clear that the younger divas held both Zelda and A'Deva in very high regard. They were never disrespectful or rude to the more established divas. In fact, it was Zelda who decided which one of the younger queens would perform on stage on Saturday evenings. She also decided if and/or when a younger diva's drag performance was ready enough for them to be considered an established performer at the House of Indigo. Moreover, she was always in charge of the evening's programme every Saturday. All protocols and proceedings had to be run by her – including the DJ's music set during intermissions. In the light of her clearly discernible authority, most of the younger divas deferred to her and treated her with the utmost respect. On one occasion, a younger diva asked Darryl for permission to perform her favourite song on stage.

> Go ask Zelda," said the mother, "you know that she is charge of the programme. (Fieldnotes, 2017)

A high level of respect towards the parents and older mentors was demanded of the younger divas. And it was also encouraged an ethical code among them. The word "respect" was repeated several times by Darryl and Zelda as they instructed the girls on how to walk the ramp and face the judges.

But competition became tough on pageant evenings as each contestant was vying for the title and crown. One of the contestants at the Miss Black Pride 2016 said that even though she loves her sisters, it was important for her to look out for herself first and foremost. She recalled that her evening dress went missing at the Miss Gay Daveyton beauty pageant the previous year. The devastation and trauma from that event continued to haunt her despite the fact that the pageant was organized and attended by different people in another part of the city. Although the moral ethos of respect and solidarity was encouraged among the divas, the possibility of theft and/or sabotage still loomed over the pageant evenings at the nightclub. In efforts to curb this, Darryl said the following to the hopeful contestants at the Miss Gay Jozi 2016 auditions:

> It's very important for you girls to help each other. It's a sisterhood, so there should be none of that jealousy and stealing stuff. You must have fun with each other. (MGJ rehearsal fieldnotes, 2016)

Although pageant contestants generally helped and supported each other, it appeared that the possibilities of theft or sabotage were quite real. Inasmuch the above ethos sisterhood and respect were tacitly expressed by both parents of the House of Indigo, they were sometimes threatened by the possibility of transgression. In efforts to curb this threat, there was a zero-tolerance policy when it came to theft at the club. One of the contestants at the Miss Black Pride 2016 pageant was shocked when she discovered that her cellphone was missing. Tears welled in her eyes as she related the trouble she had gone through to buy it. The ensuing drama resulted in a frantic search for the missing phone backstage – much to Darryl and Lawrence's irritation and disappointment. The phone was eventually found inside a previous queen's duffle bag. The latter individual was already a suspect because of her

rumoured history of theft. This was the final straw for Darryl and Lawrence. The queen was asked to go backstage for a private discussion with the mother and father of the house. We later found out that she was summarily stripped of her pageant title and asked to never come back to the nightclub again.

> You have to keep your eye on your things. Even if you are on stage, you have to ask someone to look after your stuff. (Fieldnotes, 2016)

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

> **Precious:** "Even when people steal my things, I will become sad for just short while, and then I will move on."
>
> **Katlego:** "Doesn't that discourage you from entering other pageants?"
>
> **Precious:** "Not really. I know that it's part of the pageant world."
>
> (Precious interview, 2017)

Similarly, one of the beauty queens also added some complexity to my own observations about the interpersonal dynamics between the Indigo Divas. This was especially salient among the competing beauty contestants. Precious' words evidence the tensions between the subcultural tenets of solidarity and the element of competition. Their bonds of sorority were explicitly verbalized and displayed through various actions of support. But there still remained an underlying dynamic of competition among their different sorority and friendship networks. The apparent solidarities between the pairs and smaller groups of the divas were simultaneously complicated by jealousy and competition among the younger divas as a whole.

This tension, however, did not undermine the overall significance of their bonds of sorority in this context. Their sense of solidarity and sorority existed in tandem with their competitiveness. This tension – between solidarity and competition – lends dynamism to the critical examination of these subcultural hierarchies and bonds of kinship at the House of Indigo. Ethnographers of beauty pageants have demonstrated how scandal and jealousy are part and parcel of the competition (Barnes 1994; Cohen, Wilk & Stoeltje 1996; Balogun 2012; Faria 2013; Lieu 2013; Ochoa 2014). Similarly, scholars and documentary filmmakers have shown how the occurrences of theft, jealousy, and sabotage among queer subcultural group members have complicated the interpersonal dynamics within these communities (Livingstone 1991; Kulick 1998; deFay 2003; 2017; Reid 2013). The above anecdotes highlight how the tough sense of competition and jealousy among beauty contestants at Club Indigo who were part of the pageant world. Moreover, their observations problematize Lawrence, Darryl, and Zelda 's claims about Club Indigo being such a "safe space" of freedom and empowerment.

4.4 Masculinities and the gender divide at Club Indigo

This section underlines the performances of different masculinities within the House of Indigo. The gendered divisions and hierarchies are also discussed. These gender divisions were reified by sexual attraction and/or fetishization between the different members of the house. This section also shows that while the performances and boundaries of cisgender masculinity were both affirmed and sometimes fetishized. These masculinities occupied a marginal position in the subcultural hierarchy.

Lawrence continually reiterated that Club Indigo was more than just a nightclub for drag queens. He stated this several times during our casual conversations. He would rest his elbow on the bar counter, take the occasional puff from his cigarette, and say:

> You know, in our communities there is a lot of homophobia and people look down on gays – especially drag queens. So, when people come here, they feel comfortable and free. It's welcoming space. (Fieldnotes, 2016)

His utterances (often repeated using different words) rightly emphasize the everyday experiences of many Black and Coloured queer people in South African townships. The constant threats of emotional, psychological, and physical violence continue to haunt millions of LGBTQIA+ citizens of colour – especially those who live in poor, working class township communities (Tucker 2009; Matebeni 2011; Msibi 2011; Makhubu 2012; Bennett & Reddy 2015; Judge 2017). Lawrence's pronouncements about the prevalence of homo- and transphobia in poor township communities thus enabled him to position Club Indigo as a space that was "welcoming," "comfortable," and "safe." By implication, these spatial

attributes were extended to anyone who wanted to experience them – whether or not they were available to them within broader hegemonic society. These particular conceptions of freedom, comfort, and inclusivity therefore fell within the realm of possibility for *any* potential patron – including those who were cisgender and/or heterosexual.

It was not uncommon to see cisgender men and women enjoying themselves at the club. Their hetero-, bi-, or pansexuality was presumed on the basis of their objects of desire, and their flirtatious or romantic behavior towards individuals of the opposite sex. Many of them visited the club on the pageant evenings – to support the contestants whom they knew. They sometimes came to the club when it was not very busy. I was particularly interested in the cisgender men who either patronized the club regularly or worked there on a weekly basis. These were, namely, the two barmen, the disk jockey, and the bouncer who were introduced in the previous chapter. Eric and his boyfriend were also cisgender men who became one of my key interlocutors for this study. These six men were also important members of the House of Indigo. Their respective performances of masculinity were significant features in the structuring of gender and sexual dynamics at the club.

The four staff members were treated as men by the Lawrence, Darryl, and the divas alike. Everyone referred to them as "the guys" – which, linguistically, further reified their masculinity. This was also evidenced by how they performed traditionally masculine roles such as lifting heavy supplies or occasionally repairing broken fixtures around the club. The gendered performances of their work duties seemingly resulted in them socializing mostly with one other. Much like the nodal sister-friend groups, they mostly hung around in their small group. They sat next to each other on the plush white leather couches chatting, laughing, and sharing hookah pipe. They often had very little work to do during the quiet,

monotonous Saturday nights. Besides serving the occasional drink or changing the playlist at the DJ booth, they busied themselves by playing digital games or scrolling through social media networks on their cellphones. Although, I did not assume that they were heterosexual, they all volunteered such information about themselves at different stages during my fieldwork. One of them further emphasized the fact that he had fathered children and thus his heterosexuality (or masculinity) could therefore not be questioned.

Apart from these unsolicited proclamations, the guys' (as Lawrence and Darryl referred to them) gendered identities were never called into question. And they seemed to assert a division between their own masculinities and the hyperfeminine identities of the divas. This does not undermine the fact that they clearly enjoyed each other's company or that they related to each other on the basis of their masculine performances. The guys always treated the divas with a high level of respect and cordiality. They were always on hand to help the divas beauty contestants carry their bags filled with make-up and clothes. They engaged in a few instances of playful flirtation with the divas; or they would blush shyly when one of the divas and other patrons gave them a compliment. However, they made sure that their heterosexual masculinities were clearly understood – through their behavior as well as their explicit statements about themselves.

However, the divas sometimes crossed this boundary. One of the divas once sidled next to me as I was sitting at the bar, and whispered that she had heard that one of the guys was bisexual. The other party with whom I was sitting chimed in to assent to this claim. But they had no evidence to corroborate this information. This piece of gossip was not particularly surprising since speculation about "straight" men's sexual fluidity often circulated with rapidity at the club. The truth or falsity as to this staff member's bisexuality remained a

subject of much debate, but his masculine identity was neither questioned nor challenged (most certainly not his face). The most salient aspect of this piece of gossip affirmed an important dynamic in this masculine/feminine division between the divas and the guys. It suggested that while the guys' sexualities were debatable (behind their backs, of course), their masculinities remained intact. The divas' sexualities and their sexual orientation, however, were up for debate. It was clearly understood that the divas were attracted to cisgender men who identified anywhere along the LGBTQIA+ scale. This much was clear in their salacious tales about their sexual escapades and their desire. In many instances, the diva's stated that they preferred to date or have sex with masculine men (whether straight, bisexual, or gay). Although there were no clearly stated rules forbidding any sexual or romantic intimacy between the guys and the divas, I did not observe any relationships. The rapport between the guys and the divas remained extremely cordial, and only fleeting instances of playful flirtation were observed. Even though one of the guys' sexual orientation was called into question through gossip among the divas, the perception of his (and the other guys') masculinity always remained intact.

Ethnographers of queer subcultural communities in different parts of Sub-Saharan Africa observe that their gender hierarchies and dynamics often reflect those of the broader hegemonic society (Teunis 2001; Guidio 2009; Tucker 2009; Reid 2013; Livermon 2014). This was also true in this study. The clear gender division between the guys and the divas at Club Indigo was clearly delineated, policed, and rewarded by *all* parties concerned. This further reified through the apportion of work duties, styles of dress and comportment, as well as in the gendered labour of pageantry. An important research finding in this study was that the possibility of sexual fluidity fell disproportionately upon the cisgender guys, thus drawing

them within realm desirability (and availability) for the divas. As such, the guys cisgender masculinities transformed them into the objects for the divas' erotic gaze. In addition to this: the hypersexualization of the guys' masculitinities rendered them even more marginal in this context. I borrow from Xavier Livermon's (2012: 304) concept of cultural labour to describe forms of creative and vernacular expression by queer people of colour in order to create spaces of visibility and belonging. The beauty pageants and drag performances at the House of Indigo can be conceived as these forms of cultural labour. The divas were more prominent in these forms of cultural labour – more so than the guys. They were at the center of *both* the literal and figurative stage, while the guys were positioned at the margins as their servers and/or objects of sexualized desire.

Eric was a cisgender, openly-gay man who had been a regular patron at the nightclub since it opened in 2003. He continued visiting the club throughout its trek to different venues in the inner city. This made him privy to its vicissitudes in terms of the clientele and the interpersonal dynamics among different members of the House. He had a wealth of knowledge about the various divas, regulars, and staff – some of whom had either passed away or moved to other cities. He had witnessed a lot of revelry and countless changes throughout his tenure as regular patron. And he had also seen a lot of drama unfold. He was himself sometimes at the center of these dramatic episodes that usually involved back-biting, unrequited love, or infidelity. But one would never have known this considering his unassuming and very reticent demeanour. Every weekend, he sat at the farthest left-hand corner of the bar sipping on his glass of rum and coke. I did not observe anyone else occupying his seat throughout my fieldwork.

Eric's long-standing patronage and loyalty made him a beloved member of the House of Indigo. He was held in high esteem by the parents, divas, and the staff alike. He often sat as a judge for the different beauty pageants. Although he had forgotten the exact number times he judged these beauty contests, he knew exactly what it took to win a crown. Although slightly effeminate, his overall masculine self-presentation commanded a somewhat deferential treatment from the younger divas. Their deference could have also been a result of his reserved and mature comportment as someone in his early forties.

Eric stated that he preferred to date "straight-acting" men. His sexual preference therefore made him both unavailable and unattracted to the younger effeminate divas. During one of our conversations at the bar, he opened up:

> I usually don't date guys from the club. I don't want any stress and drama. And my last serious boyfriend cheated on me, so I don't want to go through all of that again. That's why I mind my own business. (Fieldnotes, 2016)

But this statement about not dating guys from the club was contradicted by the fact that he visited the club with his then boyfriend on weekly basis. They had in fact, met inside the club. The lovers usually sat next to each other while nursing their drinks, laughing, and gossiping. It was very rare to see either one of them on the dancefloor or sitting with anyone else. Their very close intimacy may have also been due to the hurt that Eric felt at being cheated on by his previous boyfriend.

Unlike the other masculine guys (the staff members) at the club, Eric was not positioned marginally within the subcultural hierarchy. His long-standing patronage and experience afforded a high status and authority within the subcultural hierarchy. Similarly, his open

self-identification as a gay man brought him within the central fold of filial and romantic intimacy within this kinship structure. Together, the assemblage between his gay sexuality, experience, and consumer loyalty thus positioned him as an older and highly respected brother to the younger divas and guys.

Conclusion

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

Chapter 5: Doing Family: material culture and queer belonging in the House of Indigo

This chapter outlines the kinship structure forged at the House of Indigo. It places the hierarchies and networks of kinship within the context of the broader sociocultural meanings of family in contemporary South Africa. As a point of departure, it takes a social constructionist view of kinship as performative. It highlights the practices of sociality by which the various members of the House of Indigo came to conceive themselves as part of a family structure. A specific focus is herein placed on the use and distribution of material objects such as clothing, makeup and accessories. The materiality of objects is thus discussed as deeply significant in the cultural practice, or doing, of kinship. This chapter also draws attention to the significance of the divas' birth and subcultural families as networks of emotional and material support. The sociocultural meanings of consumption within both these family contexts are analyzed herein. I suggest that both these domains or networks of kinship (birth and subcultural families) functioned in tandem within a system of what I describe as complementary kinship.

5.1 Kinship as social practice

The term "family" recurred in different ways throughout the duration of fieldwork. At the linguistic level, the notion of family (and its related concepts) featured prominently in my interlocutors' interview and conversational responses. They constructed the House of Indigo

and its kinship structures explicitly as a particular kind of family. They also described how they felt a keen sense of belonging within this family. Imani, for example, was a novice beauty contestant at the club. Although she had participated in a few smaller pageants in her small hometown of Venda (in the Limpopo province), this was the first time she entered a regional pageant such as the Miss Gay Jozi 2017. Imani identified as a transgender woman, and was one of the two hearing-impaired contestants who entered the pageant that year. (The other contestant was her friend Ella). During one of the long breaks at the pageant rehearsals, we conducted a recorded interview with the help of her sign language interpreter. She described her first experience at a Club Indigo in the following manner:

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

Imani's above assertions explain how her conception of "family" was extended beyond the biological domain. As she recounts the ways in which she was welcomed into the House of Indigo, she clearly disentangles the notions of kinship and family from heteronormative, biological and/or reproductive determinism. The subcultural hierarchies and social bonds sketched out in Imani's response evidence "alternative kin practices that redefine home and family" (Bailey 2013: 89). That she was accommodated, given help and advice, and treated as part of the House of Indigo are not especially remarkable. Any such demonstrations of affection tend to occur in quotidian friendship, romantic, and/or family relations between

human subjects. However, Imani's framing of these affectionate practices as contributing to her betterment as a beauty contestant extricates the concepts of family and kinship from the "fictions of 'bloodline'" (Butler 2004:103). Her above recollections evidence that she felt part of the House of Indigo family not because she was born into it, but because she was welcomed and accommodated through various members' affectionate actions towards her. Butler (2004: 104) suggests that kinship variations which depart from the heterosexually based family structure are commonly construed as dangerous and disruptive to the "natural and cultural laws said to sustain human intelligibility." Imani's assertions evidence that the practices of family she observed at the House of Indigo were neither dangerous nor disruptive, but provided the foundational basis for her improvement as one of its members.

Several of my interlocutors also described the House of Indigo as a "home." These descriptions highlight the interrelationships between the members' shared life histories, material aspirations, and worldviews. These relationships were actively and consciously built and reproduced by agentive individuals. Each member at the House of Indigo had significant (though not the same) affective and material investments in the bonds of kinship forged therein. The latter metaphor of "home" also indexes how these relationships were mediated through the consumption and distribution of various material commodities – such as makeup, evening gowns, shoes, tiaras, jewelry, and so on. The various hierarchies and kinship bonds outlined in the previous sections were significantly constructed through the consumption and distribution of these and other similar material commodities. The metaphor of "home" seemed to mediate their sense of belonging within their House of Indigo family *as well as* their birth families.

5.2 Material support, solidarity and belonging

This section describes the Indigo Divas respective bonds with their respective birth families. I herein focus on the practice of kinship as embodied through support and solidarity. I show that these practices were materialized through objects, affection, acceptance as well as a keen sense of belonging.

Precious (Miss Black Pride 2017) described her relationship with her birth mother, stating:

> My mother is very supportive of me, and what I do at the pageants. When she goes shopping without me, she even buys me clothes. Like, for this year's [Miss Gay Jozi 2017] pageant, we didn't have enough money to buy a new gown. So, she helped me transform my cocktail dress from the last pageant [Miss Club Indigo 2016] into a new gown. (Precious interview, 2017)

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

> My father is very fond of me, he even still calls me his little girl. Sometimes he gives me money to buy dresses and make-up for the beauty pageants. At first, he was scared of seeing me in girls' clothes. He would ask me why I didn't act like his brother – who is also gay, but butch. But he got used to it over time. Now, he supports me all the way. (Kelly interview, 2017)

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

My interlocutors' participation as family members of the House of Indigo existed in complementary relation to their biological family bonds. Moreover, their descriptions of various queer subcultural members using familial terms and metaphors fit adequately within local understandings and constructions of the extended family. The ways in which they described the House of Indigo as a family reflect how the extended family plays a significant role in the construction of personhood for the majority of post-apartheid citizens. This is because the postcolonial African subject (who is simultaneously traditional and modern) can have numerous mothers, fathers, siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles. More importantly, these extended family bonds need not be based in any biological ties. The personhood of this African subject exists "in relation and with reference to, even as part of, a wide array of significant others" (Comaroff & Comaroff 2012: 53). These significant others are often incorporated into the African subject's conceptions and doings of family. The Indigo Divas' collective sense of empowerment was catalyzed by the negotiation of different kinship bonds – with their birth families as well as their queer family at the House of Indigo.

These different familial domains were not mutually exclusive, but were complementary and reinforcing. This complementarity kinship between their birth and drag families was mediated by the dynamics of agency and belonging.

This overlapping sense of belonging was evidenced quite poignantly on my visit to Phoenix's home for a recorded interview. Upon arrival, I stood at the doorway to the small living room for a few seconds, looking for a convenient spot to place my equipment. The rug with kaleidoscopic swirled patterns was immaculately cleaned. Not wanting to dirty it with marks from my sneakers, I found a clear spot behind the brown leather couch and offloaded the bag. Two trophies behind the glass doors of the display cabinet immediately captured my attention. Two bedazzled tiaras beamed in front of each trophy. Phoenix told me that she won the matching trophies and tiaras after placing second and third runner-up at Miss Gay Khathorus and Miss Gay Valentine's pageants respectively. The trophies and matching tiaras stood out prominently in the cabinet, memorializing her outstanding achievements at both beauty pageants.

These pageant accoutrements were imbued with social meaning, and thus served a specific communicative function within the home (Appadurai 1986; Lury 2011; Miller 2001; 2013; Dosekun & Iqani 2018). Their display represented Phoenix's family's pride in her achievements as a contestant in these drag pageants. They also signaled her future achievements as a pageant winner in that they were simultaneously decorative and aspirational (Clarke 2001). Their placement in that specific place in the living room invigorated them with a specialness and sentimentality reserved for a few other such objects. Not only did they signal Phoenix' stellar achievement in the subcultural world of

drag pageantry, but they also brought that world into the home within which she was raised as a child.

Desiree Lewis (2019: 35) avers that:

> queer subjects whose biological families participate in their communities on their terms – for example by attending and enjoying gay pageants – can experience not the reward of 'being accepted' through assimilation, but the far greater pleasure of being recognized as different.

By situating these objects in a very significant place in the home, Phoenix's family simultaneously recognized and celebrated her queer difference. Their strategic placement amongst other significant objects – such as her younger brother's athletics bronze medals – also symbolized the importance of these achievements for the family as a whole. They communicated the high esteem with which her birth family regarded her glamorous achievements as a pageant winner. Moreover, the ornamentation of these objects melded Phoenix' two worlds of her drag and birth families – simultaneously blurring their boundaries while rendering them mutually reinforcing. These objects' prominent position in the glass display cabinet foregrounded Phoenix's belonging and empowerment within these different family contexts.

Some ethnographic inquiries into queer communities and subcultures have tended to emphasize their subjects' marginality from their birth families and wider hegemonic society (Newtown 1972; Weston 1991; Teunis 2001; McCune 2004; Boellstorf 2005; Valentine 2007; Berkowitz & Belgrave 2010; Bailey 2013). From this perspective, queer families and

subcultural production – such as drag pageants and vogue competitions – have been theorized as spaces of refuge from homo- and transphobic social environments.

Other ethnographic studies, however, have shown that queer communities and subcultures are neither completely marginal nor assimilated within their wider, heteronormative societies (Kulick 1997; Guidio 2009; Tucker 2009; Matebeni 2011; Livermon 2012; 2014; Reid 2003; 2013; Deumert & Mabandla 2017). The present discussion (and this study, more generally) builds upon the latter body of scholarship. I posit the idea of complementary kinship in order to describe how my interlocutors negotiated different family bonds between this queer subcultural context and broader hegemonic society. As Butler (2004: 103) observes, kinship is not a privatized, sociocultural formation that is autonomous from the wider, hegemonic community and forms of friendship. The research material presented here shows that my interlocutors' complementary kinship bonds were important suturing elements between this queer subcultural family and the wider, heteronormative society.

The foregoing ethnographic material has shown how different forms of birth and queer kinship are consciously and strategically chosen and negotiated. I have also stressed that these bonds are not formed as substitutive or compensatory forms of kinship. I agree with Freeman's (2008: 299) assertion that "kinship is a social and not a biological fact, a matter of culture rather than nature." In the light of this, I interpret the hierarchies, practices, and sense belonging within and outside of the House of Indigo as forms of complementary kinship. In the light of these conjectures, I argue, therefore, that these articulations of queer kinship are neither derivative nor subsidiary to my interlocutors' biological family ties. These are bonds of complementary kinship which are simultaneously authentic and legitimate.

Clothing, accessories, and other methods of styling the body are very important within various drag subcultures throughout the globe. It is surprising, however, there is a distinctive paucity of analytical as well as theoretical attention paid to these specific material objects within studies of drag and beauty pageantry. Material objects such as gowns, dresses, shoes, make-up, and accessories signify different meanings in the different spatio-temporal and geo-political contexts (Miller 2010; Mitchell & Smith 2012; Msibi 2012: 243). Clothing and clothing styles symbolize and mediate between different kinds of relationships, structures, hierarchies, and networks of sociality in these different contexts. During fieldwork it became apparent that the ways in which my interlocutors related to each other, their bonds of kinship as well as their antipathies, were facilitated by the various associative meaning attendant to clothing, accessories, and bodily adornment. Clothing and accessories functioned as the suturing symbols or signs of kinship among the different social actors within and outside of Club Indigo. As evidenced by Precious and Kelly's interview responses, various items of clothing had similar performative functions within their birth kinship systems at home. The semiotics and materiality of clothing (and other methods of bodily adornment) brought the Indigo Diva's birth and subcultural families together in a system of complementary kinship. The performative doing of kinship in both these contexts was mediated through the consumption, display, and contestations as relates to these material commodities.

5.3 The materiality of clothing: queer bodies, and the paradox of public visibility

The previous section emphasized the significance of material objects in bringing together different identities, bodies, and systems of complementary kinship within the House of Indigo and beyond. These bonds of complementary kinship were fostered by the materiality and consumption of commodities such as make-up, clothing, and fashionable accessories. These material goods were imbued with social meanings and value that transcended the subcultural boundaries of the House of Indigo. These systems of complementary kinship enabled my interlocutors conjoin their chosen subcultural and birth families through the acquisition, competition, possession, and display of these goods. In what follows, I examine the social materiality which undergirded the consumption of these commodities.

As a starting point, Douglas and Isherwood's (1996: 39) assertion that material commodities "make and maintain social relationships," seems apposite. Sartorial items – clothes, accessories, make-up – are significant in the construction of subcultural relationships and identities. This is because they afford participants various degrees of membership and status within different subcultures. Contemporary examples of such subcultural bonds catalyzed and facilitated by the consumption of sartorial commodities are Les Sapeur (Democratic Republic of Congo), izikhothane (South Africa), or the Death Metal Cowboys (Botswana). The acquisition and flamboyant display of clothing enables these subcultural participants to distinguish themselves from mainstream or dominant cultures (Hebdige 1979; Gelder 2007; Thomas 2007; Miller 2009). Clothing and other related fashion items can therefore be conceived as both functional and communicative. These material goods allow subcultural participants to express their identities and consumer aspirations, while simultaneously practicing various modes of resistance and kinship. Clothing and other

sartorial commodities are not merely consumed for their use/exchange value, but also consumed within a semiotic matrix of socio-cultural sign systems (Barthes 1990; Featherstone 2007: 82).

The term "materiality" will heretofore refer to this duality between the functional and expressive dimensions of sartorial commodities such as clothing, shoes, and accessories. Building on Daniel Miller's (2010: 41) conception, this term is helpful because it invokes the tactile and quotidian intimacy of material objects and commodities. Furthermore, it is appropriate for the present discussion insofar as it pushes the argument beyond an either/or analysis of clothing – as either functional or communicative. The term "materiality" provides the analytical basis upon which to examine how clothing mediates between the social relationships and systems of complementary kinship outlined in the previous sections.

Most of the Indigo Divas preferred casual and trendy streetwear when they were not performing or modelling in the beauty contests. During those occasions when they were not performing, they wore clothing that was modern and up to par with the ever-changing transnational, cosmopolitan fashion trends. When asked where they bought their day-to-day streetwear, they respectively mentioned the local and fairly affordable retail chain stores such as Mr. Price, Truworths, Foschini, and Edgars. These retail stores sell fashionable yet cheaply-made clothing from Chinese, Indonesia, and Pakistani sweatshops. They are popular throughout all regions of Southern Africa. These stores cater to a wide variety of (globally popular) fashion styles for young consumers. They also accommodate different body sizes, styles, and price ranges of their clientele – from the fairly cheap to the considerably expensive. These stores cater to the average yet fashion-conscious (read

cosmopolitan, global, and trendy) consumer market among South African youth of all class categories and gender identifications. There exists a wide range of styles between smart and casual clothing items – such as jeans, printed T-shirts, blouses, jerseys and cardigans, skirts and dresses, as well as a plethora of shoes and accessories.

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

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

The Indigo Divas' feminine self-styling often aided them to pass as cisgender women in public. This enabled them to go unnoticed in the Johannesburg streets as they strolled to the nightclub at dusk, or at dawn after a very long night of dancing and sashaying on stage. But such instances of passing were not always guaranteed. When I asked Tracy how safe she felt using public transport while dressed in feminine clothing, she answered that she sometimes felt some apprehension about her physical safety. She stated that the girls ran the risk of ridicule and/or physical violence if they were perceived as visibly transgender or femme in public spaces.

> "Some of girls are even forced to take off their wigs by the taxi drivers, and people laugh at them," she lamented during a casual conversation (Fieldnotes, 2017).

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

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

Katlego: To look less feminine?

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

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

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

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

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

(Phoenix interview, 2017)

As evidenced by Tracy and Phoenix's statements above, the spectres of emotional and physical violence were ever-present threats to their sense of safety, citizenship, and belonging. Despite (or because of) their individual choices in style and/or dress, the Indigo Divas constantly teetered on a fraught tightrope of either being outed and ridiculed or passing, unharmed, in public spaces. The fact that the divas had to cover their legs by wearing clothing which was less revealing highlights the ephemerality of the sense of safety and freedom which they felt so keenly inside the nightclub. However, the unfortunate imperative of having to change or "tone down" their feminine appearance and style in public space also indexes the limitations to this freedom. Similarly, the divas' functionalist use of denim jeans to protect their bodies and emotional/psychic wellbeing in public space attests to the materiality of these fashion commodities in relation to their kinship bonds.

Matebeni (2011) describes the paradoxical implications of walking through Johannesburg as a visibly queer person of colour. In what she theorizes as "walking abOUT the city," Matebeni (2011: 54) highlights the extent to which queer individuals and communities are simultaneously exoticized and desired within broader public spaces. I would, however, caution against an overreliance on the analytical binary between the concepts of exoticism and desire – especially as relates to openly queer and gender non-conforming bodies in public space. Although public acceptance of gender non-conforming bodies and identities does indeed exist, it is contingent. This much is evidenced by Kelly's response to one of interview questions. Describing how people reacted to seeing her around the township where she grew up, she stated the following:

> I don't think they're used to gays because I'm the only gay in that section [of the township]. I get criticism and people swearing at me but I don't care. There are

> three houses in my area where people love me. I would be coming from an interview or coming from town in heels, they would come outside and call each other asking me for photos and stuff. (Kelly interview, 2017)

Public acceptance of queer visibility is not readily available to all gender non-conforming individuals in all places at all times. However, Kelly's response above demonstrates that it is inaccurate to claim that the wider public's acceptance of queer bodies and identities does not exist *in toto*. While South Africa's anti-discriminatory laws are enshrined in the constitution, these are mostly articulated as legislative and political ideals at best. Tracy's lamentation above show that homo- and transphobia still exist as ideological effects of a society that is pervaded by heteropatriarchy, gender-based violence, and racialized sexism. Furthermore, the Manichean racialized class inequalities afford some queer individuals with moderate to exponential privilege a relative level of safety away from threats of hate crimes and/or violence (Livermon 2012; Matebeni 2011: 50). However, there are instances and spaces wherein public queer visibility is both accepted and celebrated. This much is evidenced in Kelly's account of her neighbours' fascination with her when she appears in public dressed in her high heels.

None of my interlocutors explicitly expressed the desire to pass as cisgender women in public. In fact, many of them reveled in strangers' complements about their beauty and stylishness when they were out in public. It seemed that the ideal to which they aimed was, in fact, to pass as cosmopolitan and trendy feminine consumer subjects. That they would actually succeed at the former mode of gendered passing (being read publicly as cisgender women) appeared to be merely been circumstantial. In her ethnographic encounters with street youth in Dar es Salaam, Eileen Moyer (2003) observes the significance of the clothes

in the wearers' quotidian efforts to pass as ordinary members of the city's populace. This capacity to pass as "respectable" has important implications in terms of one's claims to citizen rights and to make a decent living. But there are also gendered and sexualized implications to such public passing through clothing and fashion.

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

Although my trans and femme interlocutors did not conscientiously set out to transgress the gendered and sexualized boundaries attendant to women's bodies through dress, they nonetheless did so when they were perceived or outed as being visibly queer. Their sartorial and stylistic choices in public were, therefore, multi-layered and polysemous. According to Kopano Ratele (2016: 27), "clothing, especially fashionable clothing, is imbued with

meaning, tied to identities and subjectivities and thought by subjects to be liberating…even though it can also be oppressive." I am not claiming that the Indigo Divas faced unabetted violence at every turn in public spaces. In fact, I walked alongside and sat beside a number of them in public spaces without any provocation or harassment from the people around us. The foregoing discussion highlights the ways in which both oppressive and liberal discourses regarding queer identities and bodies exist in dialectic (and irresolvable) tension in contemporary Johannesburg. Moreover, this discussion provides a contextual account of the ways in which the functional and expressive materiality of fashion commodities is intimately linked to hegemonic discourses about queer bodies, identities, and how they take up space in public.

Nonetheless, the Indigo Divas expressed a collective sense of empowerment and kinship through their choices of stylish dress. As shown in the previous sections, their bonds of complementary kinship were facilitated through the consumption of clothing. Moreover, being perceived as fashion-forward, stylish, and trendy remained aspirational ideals that were signified through their clothing as they travelled to and from the nightclub. In what follows, I discuss how the materiality of clothing fostered a wide range of kinship bonds among the divas of the House of Indigo. the materiality of fashionable goods engendered a complex array of social relationships in broader public spaces outside of the nightclub.

5.4 Home, belonging, and complimentary kinship

Many divas described Club Indigo as a home away from home. The conceptual import of this familial metaphor was augmented by the extent to which they were welcomed into the House of Indigo. Regarding her earliest introduction to the House of Indigo, Kelly stated the following:

> I was welcomed with open arms. I wasn't judged and people around here feel free, they are always free when they come to Indigo. That's what made me feel at home. (Kelly interview, 2017)

In a similar vein, Zelda expressed similar feelings of being welcomed and a sense of belonging at the nightclub:

> Club Indigo is like a home for me. I feel so free when I go there. I have been going there for many years now, and that's where I feel like I can be myself. It's where I belong. (Zelda interview, 2017)

In what follows, I argue that the divas felt at home at the House of Indigo not only because they were welcomed with open arms but also because of the distribution of material goods as gifts. These goods were integral to the divas' progress and success as drag queens and beauty contestants. To the extent that they were given material gifts and offered emotional support (by their peers, mentors, and parents), the divas were able to gain a keen sense of

belonging and develop their skills as drag performers and beauty contestants at the house of Indigo. In the light of this, the divas relied on their membership within the House of Indigo "not only to survive but to enhance the quality of their lives" (Bailey 2013: 6). Their respective senses of belonging were thus fundamental to their participation within this subcultural queer community. Their participation and belonging within this subcultural community catalyzed articulations of queer freedom – however limited and/or conditional it may have been. Furthermore, I argue that the subcultural bonds of kinship and belonging existed alongside the bonds of kinship among the divas' birth families. In a system I described as *complementary kinship*, I show how the divas were able to rely on material and affective support from their birth as well as subcultural families.

Upon arrival at the nightclub, the Indigo Divas would change from the "street" fashions to their very best, elegant items. Tasteful, sequined and bejeweled gowns, elaborately sculpted cocktail dresses, and very high stiletto heels were the order of the day (or evening, to be exact) for most of the queens at the nightclub. These glamorous items of clothing, however, are harder to source or buy for the average working-class woman. They are often sold in high-end boutiques in the affluent Eastern and Northern suburbs of Johannesburg - which cater to a middle- and upper-class clientele. And they are mostly custom-made for formal, black-tie events. This made them extremely exorbitant for many of the Indigo Divas. In this respect, many of the girls opted to have their dresses sewn by local dressmakers, seamstresses, family members, or even just do the job themselves. During our recorded interview, I asked Phoenix who makes her dresses for her. She laughingly answered in a cavalier tone:

> I make them myself, of course. I can't buy those dresses at the shops. They're way too expensive. (Phoenix interview, 2017)

She also explained how she learned to sew her gowns by hand because of her limited funds. "A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do," she smiled as she reminisced on her early days of in the beauty pageant scene. Her make-up business was still in its infancy in those days, and what little pocket money she received from her single mother was used to buying material and a sewing kit to make her own dresses. Phoenix was not the only girl who, with limited funds but a wealth of ingenuity and creativity, made her own dresses for the drag shows and beauty pageants. Many of the girls often transformed an evening gown worn at one beauty pageant, into a shorter, more casual, cocktail dress for the next pageant. Failing which, the girls wore the same dress or bikini for as many pageants as it took to win the crown.

Darryl and Lawrence went to great lengths to either make or buy dresses and shoes for their girls. For example, each pageant winner received a custom-made evening gown and pair of high-heeled shows to go with her crown. Her runners up also gifted with make-up kits, and other cosmetic beauty products. All of the pageant contestants receive something item of clothing, jewelry or make-up in return for their participation in the events.

Lawrence displayed immense pride in his ability to give these gifts to his girls. Although he often lamented the overwhelming financial strain he felt in keeping the nightclub open, this ability to give such gifts to his girls was a source of great satisfaction for him. Similarly, he spoke very highly about the kinds of gifts which the winning beauty queen would receive: An elegant evening gown that which his sister sent from New York, Betsy Johnson branded high-heeled shoes, an enormous Bobbi Brown makeup kit, and a cash prize of R5,000. Upon

closer analysis, Lawrence was not just bragging about these gifts. From his perspective, his ability to proffer these gifts to the winning contestant exemplified the performance of successful fatherhood to everyone at the House of Indigo. So too did it bolster a fetishized and traditional masculinity within himself – to the extent that he was able to provide the best gifts and prizes for all his girls. Lawrence's performance of a fetishized paternal role – through the provision of material goods and money – were thus "shaped by the notions of fatherhood and masculinity in the outside world" (Bailey 2013: 110). In the following chapter, I will discuss the unstated subcultural implications of this form of gifting. For the present discussion, it is important to examine the performative enactments of fatherhood through these material objects.

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

The foregoing sections have shown that the girls were not rejected by their birth families. While they were extremely grateful for the gifts, and coveted the winning prizes greatly, they were neither destitute nor abject individuals. Their birth families were also often present to cheer them on and show them support before, during, and after the beauty pageants. For example, Miss Toni's (Miss Gay Jozi 2015) birth mother was always present at

all the pageants to help sew the contestant's hems or mend a damaged garment. She also sewed some of the contestant's gowns, selling them at discounted prices. In the light of this, the kinship bonds and hierarchies within the House of Indigo were never absolutely autonomous from those in the outside world. These queer kinship bonds existed in cohesive relation to those which the divas enjoyed with their respective birth families. During fieldwork, it became apparent that both domains of kinship (subcultural and birth families) were not mutually exclusive. In fact, they provided mutually reinforcing environments and/or systems of support such that the divas could rely on their birth and subcultural families for material as well as affective support. The materiality of clothing and other sartorial commodities mediated between these family contexts thus culminating in systems of complementary kinship for each of the divas.

Conclusion

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

In what I conceive as a system of *complementary kinship*, the family bonds forged within the House of Indigo were strengthened by those from outside the subcultural domain. In many, I agree with Janet Carsten's (2003: 140) observation that "local practices…do not appear to privilege biological kinship." The conception posited in this chapter therefore melds biological and chosen kinship bonds in efforts to interpret them in through a contextual lens. The notion of complementary kinship provides a localized basis upon which one can interpret the interrelationships between queer/chosen and biological kinship systems – within and outside of the House of Indigo. I will also show that these complementary systems of kinship allowed the Indigo Divas to gain support, affirmation, empowerment, as well as interpersonal contestations along various familial avenues.

Taking a social semiotic perspective, this chapter has argued that the materiality of goods mediates relationships between different family contexts and kinship systems. I have shown that the system of kinship constructed among the participants at the House of Indigo did not exists in isolation from kinship bonds among their birth families. The relationships between their chosen and birth families culminated in systems of complementary kinship. The participants drew upon these systems for support and empowerment.

The following chapter examines the ways in which gender performances were policed and controlled within the House of Indigo. This examination provides us with the cogent analytical tools by which to understand queer consumer cultures, practices, and kinship systems as being fraught with contestations and interpersonal entanglements.

Chapter 6: Policing Gender: Pageantry and the Performance of Ideal Femininity at Club Indigo

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

"OK. The soup is almost ready," Darryl announces as he walks out of the kitchen behind the bar. "I hope there's enough for everyone to have breakfast."

We are all waiting for Lawrence and Zelda to arrive with bread rolls. Darryl busies himself by searching for Styrofoam cups in which to pour the soup for everyone. But he soon abandons this task for some reason.

"OK, come girls! Let's gather at the front here," he commands. They all obey him immediately. He has summoned them to do their warm ups in order to keep them busy. They will be rehearsing their catwalks on the stage. They have to

learn how to walk in perfect sync with the music while smiling at the audience and the judges. This impromptu session gives Darryl a chance to make sure that the ramp is sturdy enough for the girls to walk on. He starts by taking roll call. All but one of the sixteen contestants are present.

This chapter provides an exegesis of the standards of beauty and their gendered performances as relates to the respective pageants at Club Indigo. This chapter traces how the ideals of beauty and cosmopolitan femininity circulated within the House of Indigo. It examines how these standards are policed within this subcultural context. I argue that these beauty pageants ultimately mark the spectacular enactment of discourses which are about more than physical attractiveness. The intersecting values and standards that act as a pivot around which these discourses circulate have to do with the performance of a cosmopolitan femininity. This chapter examines how these gendered performances took shape within Club Indigo, and how they were policed and controlled both on and off stage.

I demonstrate that performances of femininity and beauty standards at the House of Indigo were both normative and transgressive. These were imbricated within and thus reflected the hegemonic discourses of sexuality and gender performativity in post-apartheid South African society. The practices of drag and beauty pageantry were performed by clearly gender non-conforming bodies. Likewise, these practices occurred within a context which policed, disciplined, and rewarded normative iterations of gender performativity and beauty ideals. The disciplining of normative gender ideals thus occurred within a space which was intended to be empowering, inclusive, safe, and/or "queer." This, therefore, culminated into subcultural system that was simultaneously transgressive and assimilationist. This chapter

contributes to Butler's (1990; 1993) theory of performativity by showing that the embodiment of sex/gender difference must be analyzed in geo-local context. The transgression and/or reification of gender norms ought to be examined in specific relation to the socio-cultural and economic milieux within which they occur.

5.1 Becoming a Star: The journey from a beauty contestant to an Indigo Diva

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

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

had to do was send a Whatsapp text to Darryl for details about the venue, date, and time of the auditions.

The contestants were allowed to enter any number of pageants hosted at the club – or anywhere else around the country. For example, any contestant could enter the Miss Black Pride, Miss Club Indigo, or the Miss Gay Jozi pageants any number of times she wished to do so. There were no limits regarding which of these three pageants the hopeful constants could enter. The contestants were also allowed to enter other local beauty pageants – but this was highly frowned upon by the parents of the house. The only firm rule was that no winning beauty queen could hold more than one pageant title *within* the House of Indigo. And if a beauty queen won a title, they were no longer allowed to enter another pageant at the nightclub.

While any transgender or femme gay individual was allowed to enter the beauty pageants, none of them arrived "ready-made" as Indigo Divas. The achievement of this latter status required a prolonged period of time and labour on the part of the gay parents and mentoring sister at the club. Becoming an Indigo Diva was not an individual achievement, but a collective endeavor undertaken by various stakeholders within the subculture. The system of grooming was very important in terms of learning the ropes of performing drag and beauty pageantry. Although some contestants were more experienced in the rituals of pageantry, none of them arrived at the House of Indigo "ready-made," so to speak. And winning a pageant title was only one of the initial stages in the course to becoming an Indigo Diva.

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

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

their choosing. Zelda took charge of the programming for these events as she wrote a list of the divas who wanted to perform on stage. The responsibility of grooming the younger divas fell primarily on Zelda and A'Deva's shoulders – a responsibility which they both took very seriously.

These various stages and duties outlined above show that becoming an Indigo Diva was a processual affair. It is one that took a a considerable amount of time and effort. Moreover, the achievement of subcultural status – such as winning a pageant crown – was only one stage along one's journey to becoming an Indigo Diva. The following section provides ethnographic evidence of the ideals and standards of gender performance within this subcultural community. I highlight the ways in which the confluence between idealized feminine beauty and cosmopolitanism governed gender performance at the House of Indigo.

5.2 "My girls are real girls": Naturalness, ideal femininity, and the politics of passing

The opening vignette to this chapter gives an account of the characteristics of the style of beauty pageantry observed at Club Indigo. It highlights the various elements which constitute it as a specific kind of gendered and aspirational performance of beauty. Nervous anticipation, beautification, repetitive stylized practice, and thematic choreography are all the integral aspects of this spectacle. The twin elements of discursive reproduction and sociocultural assimilation are also sutured into the entire gamut of ritualized practices, glamor, and beauty work which give this genre of performance its distinctive specificity. The

participants and audience may be well aware of the codes, styles, and themes specific to this genre. And these may be as predictable as they are enthralling. But it is still important to pay attention to "the complex ways that beauty contests connect to issues and struggles going on in arenas outside of the immediate purview of the contest" (Cohen, Wilk & Stoeltje 1996: 8). Beyond the staged grandiloquence lies an assemblage of socio-cultural, economic, and moral values that are legitimated through the enactment of this ritual. The repetitive practices of cat-walking (or sashaying), smiling, grooming all culminate in forms of aesthetic labour specifically intended to reify and police a particular form of femininity. Likewise, the ideological constructions of race, sexuality, gender, class, citizenship, and ability are normalized within this spectacular combination of competition and reward.

Beauty pageants are discursive fields upon which debates about these cultural ideals and values are mediated (Crawford et al. 2008; Hoad 2010; Tice 2012). More often than not, these are never easily resolved. Drag and other LGBTQIA+ beauty pageants further complicate these contestations insofar as the bodies and identities which are often stigmatized in many societies take center stage (Reid 2003; Bettar 2012; Bronson 2013; Matebeni 2016; Lease 2017). Drag beauty pageants mediate these contestations about sexual difference and gender non-conformity at local, national, and even global levels. In turn, these mediations of queer subjectivity have become recognizable through the lexicon of spectacle, glamour, and competition. They are now popular and commercially lucrative because they commodify gender non-conforming bodies and sexual difference (Brennan & Gudelunas 2017: 17).

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

> This pageant is about the art of transformation. I mean, think about the Cape Town girls. They pad a lot. It's actually just *too much*. They exaggerate their make-up, and add heavy hips, and all that. They focus on doing drag. *We focus on being beautiful*. We focus on naturalness. (Fieldnotes, MGJ Rehearsal, 2017).

Lawrence and Zelda walked into the club just before Darryl finished his lecture. They were carrying plastic bags filled with saris and jewelry for the girls. Each contestant would wear her own sari during the opening traditional South Indian *bharathanatyam* for the opening act of the pageant. This particular dance sequence is usually performed only by one woman. But Zelda had especially modified it into a group performance. After offloading the plastic bags, she went straight to teaching the girls the dance moves – meticulously showing them

where to place their hands, fingers, and feet. All the contestants obeyed her instructions to sway their hips coquettishly this way and that. She also made sure to place each girl at a specific spot on the stage depending on her height. She also instructed the strongest contenders to help Ella and Imani (who were both hearing-impaired) when she could not.

While the atmosphere was exciting, I was particularly interested in Darryl's excerpted advice about beauty and "naturalness." For him, beauty and the performance of ideal femininity are embodied through the subtle use of make-up and hip pads. The application and use thereof should not be "too much." His words, "they focus on doing drag. We focus on *being beautiful*," are also illuminating. These words demonstrate that there are different subcultural standards of drag and beauty in various in different geographical locations. From his perspective, the Cape Town girls were "too much" in their exaggeration of feminine features.

This differentiation between the Capetonian style of "doing drag" and simply "being beautiful" is also noteworthy. The one is a style of female impersonation emphasized through the over-use of makeup and hip pads which, according him, is just "too much." It also suggests the artifice "within which gender traits are exaggerated for theatrical and often comical effect." (Halberstam 1997: 116) The style at the House of Indigo was more toned down. According to Darryl, it was not campy or "too much." It was a demure style characterized by a focus on the conventional (global) attributes of beauty. In order for a contestant to be eligible, she was supposed to eschew camp and just *be* beautiful and focus on "naturalness."

The concept of “naturalness,” is also analytically significant. This is because of the conflation between being beautiful and being natural. According to Darryl, “naturalness” or the ability to appear authentically feminine stands at an ideological remove from doing drag. The ability to display a “naturalness” is equated with an idealized interpretation of feminine beauty. Being beautiful is thus bereft of any artifice, exaggeration, and is not “too much.” It appears, idealized feminine beauty is collapsed into this idea of naturalness. Within this discursive rubric, there is a marked distinction between beauty and artifice. Similarly, there is an inference that beauty is equated with the display of naturalness and/or feminine authenticity.

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

> Drag queens’ are your over accentuated highlighted eyebrows, colourful and glitter on the lips. Those for me are your ‘drag queens’. You know your ‘Pricilla: Queen of the Desert’, everything is accentuated – high hair, hairstyles. That’s a ‘drag queen’. When you look at us, especially the girls of ‘Club Indigo, we are more female impersonators because our makeup is very aligned with the way a woman would do her makeup. We do our makeup like a woman would do her face. Because of our jawlines and five o’clock shadows, there are extra layers of makeup that has to be used. That’s a female impersonator for me. I impersonate a female. (Zelda Interview, 2017)

Zelda ‘s notion of female impersonation approximates Darryl’s notion of performing “naturalness.” According to her, female impersonation stands in aesthetic opposition to the accentuated flamboyance of a “drag queen.” The female impersonator’s subtlety is

diametrically opposed to the drag queen's extra pomp. In this conception, "natural" beauty is collapsed into the normative idea and representation feminine authenticity. In order for the Club Indigo girl to be natural and beautiful, she had to impersonate a woman by using various techniques of beautification and bodily comportment. However, some conceptual tensions seemed evident in the above ideas of "naturalness" and female impersonation.

A person who is wearing make-up and styling themselves through beautification is not "natural." They are embodying a wide range of discourses related to self-presentation and beauty. That which is considered to be natural is a function of historical, material, and ideological constructions. The natural is, therefore, culturally produced (van de Port 2012: 866). A queer and feminist perspective holds that gender identities are never "real" or "natural." They made to appear as such for a variety of ideological and often oppressive ends. The focus on natural gender identity in a beauty competition targeted at gender non-conforming individuals seems, therefore, to be a paradox.

The contestants were expected to perform naturalness while wearing make-up and other technologies of beautification. The glamorous performance of a normative, feminine beauty is therefore collapsed into this idea of naturalness. The contestants were expected to be as glamourous as possible in order win and therefore be rewarded in these pageants. They had to wear very high stiletto heels, elaborate evening gowns, skimpy swimsuits, and tuck their penises tightly beneath their perinea. However, and rather paradoxically, they were instructed (and certainly expected) to appear "natural."

Another related dilemma inheres in Zelda's concept of female impersonation. This concept frames feminine beauty (and the subtle performances thereof) as something that is inherently cisgender. Her above statement that "…our makeup is very aligned with the way

a woman would do her makeup" evidences this. From this point of view, a woman is someone whose subtle style of make-up and self-presentation is to be impersonated. But this idealized subject is not just any kind of woman. She is female and presumably natural. Zelda's conflation of the sexual and gender categories of woman and female points to the general naturalization of one form of beauty.

The ideal, natural woman is someone whose beauty and style has to be impersonated and performed through various forms of beautification. But this framework completely disregarded the fact that most of the contestants at Club Indigo identified as transgender women. The idea that they had to impersonate an idealized femininity that is natural (ergo cisgender), presupposes that they do not possess this embody femininity in the first place. But Darryl's framing of "naturalness" as femininity *par excellence* seemed to undermine his political project of empowerment and visibility for these young women.

These standards of idealized feminine beauty and "naturalness" were to be taken very seriously within the House of Indigo. These were beauty standards in which both parents and mentoring sisters at the House took extreme pride in maintaining. This is precisely why they were clearly outlined so early during the pageant rehearsals. To this end, these were heavily policed by those at the top of this subcultural hierarchy. This echoed the extent to which idealizations of beauty and "femininity can be very restricting" (Matebeni 2016: 29).

But there was another important dimension with regard to the policing of beauty and femininity. Their proper display (both on and off stage) meant significant financial, material, and affective reward for the contestants. If they met and upheld this standard, they would move on to the semi-finals and final rounds of the pageant. Their proper adherence to these standards brought them closer to winning the coveted crown. The beauty pageant crown

and “Miss Gay Jozi” title were the highest rewards for keeping to these standards. This title came with a R6000 prize, as well as a brand-new evening dress, pair of shoes, and a make-up kit. There were other non-material rewards for the proper display and embodiment of these standards: subcultural approval and status. Each girl who thus performed idealized feminine beauty and naturalness was thus elevated from being a contestant to an Indigo Diva.

This standard of “natural” feminine beauty was made apparent to me on another occasion. This occurred during the earliest stages of fieldwork at the previous Club Indigo venue. A “Men in Skirts versus Men in Shorts” themed party had taken place at the club the night before. Although there were drag performances that night, this party was not a competition or pageant per se. It was a carnivalesque frenzy of house music and gyrating, sweaty bodies. Mostly cisgender Black gay men from different townships around the city attended this event. But the following evening’s Miss Black Pride 2016 pageant seemed more subdued. A somewhat orderly, formal atmosphere filled the club. A mixed audience milled about drinking and chatting as they anticipated the proceedings. Lawrence lorded over these happenings in his collared red-and-black paisley shirt. He sat at the bar with his usual concoction of whiskey, water, and ice. I sat across him, and asked a few general questions about the club’s pageants. He responded:

> I groom my girls to look and behave like *real* girls. The figure must be like a true woman’s. I want my girls to walk through town, and not have anyone ask if she is a real girl or not. (Fieldnotes, Miss Black Pride 2016)

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

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

But these gestures and performative aspirations towards ideal femininity have real, social effects within the context of transnational consumer capitalism. Their representations are simultaneously an effect and catalyst of the global, capitalist beauty industrial complex. As

such, there are significant material as well as affective rewards in performing and/or displaying ideal femininity and beauty (Craig 2002; Jha 2016). And this was true for many of the contestants who participated in the Club Indigo beauty pageants. Most of the pageant contestants were petite and quite thin in terms of their physical stature. They often stand on stage, one behind the other, accentuating the uniformity of this specific body type and beauty ideal. They all clearly met Lawrence and Darryl's requirements for slimness and the disregard for exaggeration through padding. While entry into these events was open to any contestant who was interested, there seemed to be clearly defined criteria regarding body shape, size, and ideal feminine embodiment.

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

In the excerpt above, Lawrence stated that he wants his girls "to walk through town, and not have anyone ask if [they are] a real girl or not." This statement points to significant politics of queer passing, survival, and gender performativity in Johannesburg's public spaces. An ideological quandary regarding gender identity and performativity presents itself

here. First, he assumed that a gender non-conforming individual's capacity to pass as cisgender in public space guarantees them protection from such invasive questions. He assumes that gender conformity may provide some modicum of protection from emotional and physical harm within a society that is fundamentally heteropatriarchal, heterosexist, homo- and transphobic. But the fact of the matter is that *all* South African women are subject to myriad forms of violence in public and private domains. The hierarchies of race, class, and sexuality place a disproportionate number women of colour within closer proximity to these forms of violence (Lewis 2001; Makhubu 2012; Gqola 2015; Judge 2018). But this spectre of violence threatens all women in South Africa – whether they are transgender, queer, lesbian, or cisgender. Therefore, passing as a "real" or "natural" would not necessarily guarantee any of his girls protection from such invasive forms of gender policing.

Second, the idea that his girls would have to be groomed into performing "real" femininity relies on an ideological sleight of hand. This idea reinforces the historically phallogocentric ways in which male organizers and owners of beauty pageants have defined ideal and authentic feminine beauty (Banet-Weser 1999; Clowes 2001; Craig 2002; Thomas 2006). That these contestants would have to groomed (by two middle-aged and middle-class gay men) into becoming "real" girls presupposes that they not "real" in the first place. This presupposition relies on the historically patriarchal episteme within which definitions and categories of authentic womanhood have been defined by men (Rich 1980; hooks 1981; Gqola 2010).

Many of the contestants who participated in the Club Indigo pageants identified as transgender, or simply referred to themselves as girls. Others identified as femme gay men, or chose to not disclose their gender identities. Lawrence and Darryl's definitional scope of realness or naturalness forecloses gender non-conforming identities such that they are made to strive towards this performative gendered ideal. The politics and categories of womanhood, femininity, and/or transfeminisms are fraught and highly contested (Stryker 2006; 2016; Garner 2017). But it is incumbent upon any individual, state, institution, queer political project, and subcultural families to recognize transgender women *as women*. Therefore, this imperative of grooming (read policing) the beauty contestants into performing real or natural femininity is this restrictive to the extent that it reifies a somewhat narrow gendered norm. Lori Watson (2016: 247) correctly reminds us of the importance of paying empathetic heed of people's own modes of self-identification. Unwittingly or not, the system and ritual of grooming these young women and femmes into performing real or natural femininity undermined the very sense of queer freedom and empowerment which both these pageants sought to promulgate.

5.3 "She's so ratchet": Policing femininity, rewards, and agency

This section discusses the subcultural regulations of gender policing among the Indigo Divas and beauty contestants. Its highlights how the policing of femininity sometimes fueled interpersonal antipathy among some of the divas. I also discuss how they navigated through these forms of gender policing with through agentive strategies of resistance and

negotiation. The broader implications of these power dynamics within this hierarchical are also discussed.

The strict regulation of femininity was quite palpable among the parents, divas, and beauty contestants at the House of Indigo. The house rules and gender policing were not just enforced by both parents and mentoring sisters. This regulatory system also permeated into the networks of the different friendship groups and their counterparts. Although the friendships among the younger participants were generally founded upon unwavering sorority, some rivalries were clearly discernible. This created a complex assemblage of solidarity, antipathy, competition, and reward among the various participants. Some people fought one another (verbally), passive aggressive hostilities abounded, and bitter rivalries lay dormant only to be later expressed through vicious backbiting. However, most of these antagonistic dynamics were later resolved through dialogue, negotiation, and forgiveness. Some of the divas who detested one another on one week would become friendly the next. This formed a system of interpersonal interactions that were dynamic and ever-changing. The policing of feminine deportment, conduct, and self-presentation was a technique which made the members of the House of Indigo fall in line with its core values and norms of the house. Just as siblings tend to codify and police behavior among each other within birth (or biological) families, so too was this evident within the House of Indigo.

The newly-crowned Miss Black Pride 2016 was scheduled to give a lip-sync performance at the club. This was set to be her inaugural performance as one of the new ambassadors for the club. It was also meant to lay the groundwork along her journey to becoming a bona-fide Indigo Diva. A week after she won the title and the evening gown prize, she shuffled

nervously onto the stage. Her tiara was not pinned properly, and so it sat unsteadily on top of her wig. Zelda came to stand next to me at the bar. She gave me a wry smile as we waited for the DJ to play the ballad. Barely looking at the audience, the performer took a deep breath.

“She didn’t pin her crown down,” Zelda said with a knowing chuckle.

One of the cardinal rules within the House of Indigo is that the reigning queen must always wear her crown. On stage, began to shily mime the lyrics to the ballad.

“She’s drunk,” Zelda spat. She shook her head in undisguised disapproval.

Clearly, Zelda was not impressed with the fact that the new title-holder would have the gall to perform in such an inebriated state. She looks towards the dancefloor and points at another young queen. The youngster was wearing a white evening gown flowing to her ankles. One of its spaghetti straps hung off the shoulder. She was not wearing any shoes.

> "You would never see me dead wearing such a beautiful gown with no heels,” Zelda scoffs at the performer on stage. “That's so ratchet [unsophisticated]. She hasn’t even tucked properly,” she said, horrified at the sight of the conspicuous bulge beneath the new queen’s mini-skirt. (Fieldnotes, 2016)

The new Miss Club Indigo clearly fell out of line with the rules of the House. She clearly flouted these rules by not pinning her crown properly and not tucking per penis adequately. She dared to walk onto the stage in an inebriated state. By so doing, she flouted the clearly-delineated rules of the House. Zelda’s disapproval towards the performer was caused by what she perceived as unbecoming behaviour from a pageant winner. Although she did not

directly express her disapproval to the transgressor, her response highlights the extent to which she was invested in this regulatory system of body and gender policing. This response also shows that the femininity that was idealized at the club extended beyond being slim-figured and winning a crown. This iteration of femininity required "proper" lady-like, and sophisticated self-presentation. Being drunk or ill-dressed was seen as "ratchet" was unacceptable, and thus had to be kept in line with the rules of the House.

Elias, Gill & Scharff (2017: 8) posit that "beauty is a form of disciplinary power." It is regulated within a system of values and norms which are seen as indicative of the subject's interiority. It is, therefore, "interpreted as a manifestation of [a person's] inner moral qualities" (Craig 2002: 49). Although the new Miss Club Indigo had won an important pageant title just a week before, her drunken deportment placed her at a disadvantage. There was a clear disjuncture between her pageant title and her self-presentation. There was a discordance between her outer beauty and her what Zelda perceived as her unrefined interiority. And since there was no evident correlation between her outer beauty (for which she as rewarded with the pageant title and crown) and her unbecoming behaviour, Zelda saw fit to dismiss her outright. Had the new Miss Club Indigo presented herself and behaved in a way that was deemed as worthy or fitting, she might have been rewarded with a compliment. Furthermore, she might have gained more esteem thus elevating her status along her journey as an Indigo Diva. But the exact opposite was the case. Zelda's dismissal, it seems, amounts to a form of gender policing in this context.

There were two more correlates within this subcultural framework of gender policing. The dynamics of competition and reward appeared to be inexorably linked as relates to this regulatory system. At a perfunctory level, the pageants were staged competitions in which

every contestant had significantly high stakes. But another aspect of competitiveness lay behind the staged spectacle of these pageants. The younger beauty contestants competed for the affection and regard from both parents of the House. Such parental regard was materialized through gifts such as evening gowns, shoes, and even cash. One of the more established Indigo Divas stated:

> There can be a lot of drama and jealousy in the House. The girls are always battling for attention and gifts from mommy and daddy. I've also been sabotaged a couple of times. But, I guess that's how the cookie crumbles. And I guess a queen has to get used to the rules of the game. (Fieldnotes, 2016).

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

The competition among these younger divas and queens attests to their complicity within the subcultural system of gender policing and bodily surveillance. This point is aptly evidenced by their aspirational desire for approval from the older mentor and parents at the

House of Indigo family. Such familial approval was made manifest through material gifts, subcultural status, and affectionate regard from Lawrence, Darryl and others at the top of the hierarchy. The distribution and/or withholding of material goods and resources effectively resulted in the overall dynamic of coerciveness as related to the younger divas' performances of ideal, cosmopolitan femininity. As stated in the excerpt above, the queens had to "get used to the rules of the game" in order to succeed, and thus gain subcultural status. Their respective performances of this specific, idealized femininity had to conform to the tenets and values of the house such that they would receive recompense in the form of material gifts, mentorship, attention, and approval. These latter gifts were used strategically as coercive techniques in the negotiation of power between the older (and rather well-resourced) parents and the younger participants at the House of Indigo.

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

> What keeps me coming back is that I want to win this crown because it's always been my dream to get this crown on my head. I want to show everyone that anything is possible if you put your mind to it. If you're proud of who you are, give yourself some time and you will win. (Ella Interview, 2017)

Ella's response evidences a keen sense of resilience in her willingness to continually return to the annual Miss gay Jozi pageants. Moreover, it reveals a certain level of agency and complicity in terms of her participation at the pageants at Club Indigo. By carefully considered extension, I suggest that this moderate level of complicity can be attributed to the other divas and beauty queens within the house. Many of the hopeful beauty contestants echoed Ella's sentiments regarding their participation in these pageants. A number of them responded that they felt empowered and that their participation gave them confidence. Although the stylization and performance of this idealized (slim-figured) feminine beauty was quite rigid, these younger beauty contestants willingly complied to it. They appeared to consent to this form of gender policing through their eagerness to repeatedly participate in these pageants on an annual basis. Moreover, they went to great lengths to ensure that they received both material and non-material rewards for their efforts.

Darryl and Lawrence exercised an incredible amount of control over the girls by either proffering or withholding these rewards. This also ensured that the regulation of a singular, idealized femininity was kept firmly intact. However, these exchanges of power were dynamic and multi-faceted. This system of gender policing and rewarding was not merely a top-down form of dominance by two well-resourced, middle-class men over younger, vulnerable beauty contestants. The girls also exerted a considerable amount of agency

through their compliance to this system as well as through their competitiveness. This became especially apparent when it came to the giving of gifts as rewards.

Gifts have different meanings in different societies. Similarly, they are given in different context, and thus bear various implications. Marcel Maus (1950: 23), famously asserted that gifts presuppose three obligations: giving, receiving, and reciprocation. This model may seem self-evident at first since it clearly distinguishes gifts from commodity exchange or donations. But Maus' assertion made in relation to the specific Maori society he was studying. Because of their diversity and plethora of expectations, gifts can be seen as ambiguous. They can be "at once free and constraining, self-interested and disinterested, and are motivated by both generosity and calculation or expectation of return" (Yan 2005: 258). The distribution of gifts to the queens at the House of Indigo was not without the expectation of returns. In order to receive these gifts, the younger queens had to perform and constantly display the kind of femininity which was strictly sanctioned within the house. This was an idealized femininity and beauty that was strictly policed by the parents, mentors, and among their peers. This system of policing, therefore, functioned both vertically and horizontally. Along the vertical axis, the younger queens who conformed adequately received gifts, attention, and approval from the senior members of the House. And along the horizontal axis, they received approval and prestige from their counterparts when they did well in the pageants or when they comported themselves well around the club.

Scholarly as well as popular rhetoric have framed the relationships between well-to-do, older men and younger women as dangerous and/or morally abhorrent. The older men in these relationships have been colloquially dubbed "blessers" or "sugar daddies," while the

younger women have been named “blessees” or “sugar babies.” Such analyses have tended to overemphasize the interrelated threats of HIV infection, pregnancy, socio-economic and sexual exploitation as the inevitable come-uppance for these young women (Gobind & du Plessis 2015; Thobejane, Molaudzi & Zitha 2017; Varjavandi 2017). Moreover, they have taken such these young women’s exploitation and social stigmatization as prima facie.

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

Without making too hasty a generalization, I will provide an important analytical caveat. At no time during fieldwork did I observe, encounter, or hear about any sexual exchange between the Lawrence, Darryl and the younger women at the House of Indigo. But important parallels can be drawn with regards to the latter body of scholarship on blesser/blesse culture and intergenerational relationships. There is no escaping the blatant fact that the process of gifting and rewarding the younger queens was enactment of power

of Lawrence and Darryl's parts. They exercised their parental and upper middle-class privilege through the practice of gifting the younger girls with money and expensive commodities. By so doing, there were implicit as well as explicit expectations of reciprocity from the queens through their proper behaviour. However, the offering of any gift encompasses the enmeshment of ambiguous and complex interpersonal dynamics between social actors (Yan 2005: 249).

Darryl and Lawrence derived an enormous sense of authority, pride, and prestige from dolling out or withholding these gifts from the young women. Similarly, (as evidenced by Ella's above statement), these young queens also garnered limited senses of empowerment, and pleasure by performing their femininity in such a way as to make them eligible to receive these gifts and rewards. From this viewpoint, there existed an unequal and seemingly coercive exchange of commodities, power, and agency at Club Indigo. Both the owners of the club had clear investments in policing gender performativity and the displays of ideal feminine beauty. The cumulative effects of this regulatory gender framework kept this subcultural milieu intact for well over a decade. At the same time, the younger beauty contestants, queens and the more established Indigo Divas also had lucrative stakes therein. Their competitiveness and agency thus gained them considerable prestige through their performance of idealized feminine beauty.

According to Muñoz (1999: 5):

> disidentification is not always an adequate strategy or resistance and survival for all minority subjects. At times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct; on other occasions, queers of colour and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere. But for some,

disidentification is a survival strategy that works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously. (emphasis my own)

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

5.4 Cosmopolitanism and aspirational beauty

Beauty pageants entail the performance of various intersecting discourses in spectacular form (Ballerino Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje 1996: 8). They articulate the values and ideals that are held in high esteem within a specific spatio-temporal context. The earliest mass mediated forms of pageantry amongst the Black population in Southern Africa can be traced

back as early as the 1930's, in the *Bantu World* newspaper. Lynn Thomas (2006: 465) states that "*Bantu World* was the first newspaper targeting Black South Africans to offer women's pages, and to feature representations and discussion of the modern girl." Later, *Drum* magazine's "Miss and Mr. Africa" beauty pageant, established in 1952 also became hugely popular among urban male and female entrants and readers (Clowes 2001). As a textual bastion for urban Black dwellers during 1950s South Africa, both elite and otherwise, the *Drum* magazine actively sought to represent the capriciousness and inevitable challenges of urban city life for the South African Black population[5]. The representations of urbanized modernity and cosmopolitanism espoused within the pages of *Bantu World* and *Drum* magazine were also gendered in very specific ways (Clowes 2001: 5). Both the textual and visual materials foregrounded the representations of a gendered binary within which, on the one hand, urbanized Black men were constructed as industrious migrant labourers, and, on the other hand, Black women were represented as modern, respectable, and dependable wives who governed the domestic domain.

Both these media titles offered Black urbanized city dwellers mass mediated platforms upon which to perform modern cosmopolitanism through pageantry. They offered both Black women and men the chance to submit photographs of themselves and others whom they deemed modern, cosmopolitan, and beautiful. The editors and readers of these titles would then judge these photographic entries along very Westernized standards of "modernity" – which eschewed more traditional African norms and standards of beauty. These textually mediated beauty pageants constituted performances of race, gender, and the contextual

[5] *Drum* magazine later opened international offices in urbanized cities as afar as Nairobi and Accra (Clowes 2001).

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

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

> We are a very cosmopolitan club, we cater for everybody. Even some of the girls tell me that this is the only place where they feel safe in drag. That's why they make such an effort to get dressed up when they come here. (Fieldnotes, 2016)

Lawrence's description melds the ideas of cosmopolitanism with open-mindedness. His statement that "we cater for everybody" places his description within the queer, liberal thinking. The space and the subcultural practices housed therein are cosmopolitan because they are open to everyone – regardless of gender and/or sexuality. Marcia Ochoa (2014: 22) argues that beauty pageants embody fantasies of being on the global stage. Lawrence's claim shores up a very specific set of meanings related to his ideas of beauty, style and fashion. Lawrence and Darryl often insisted that their girls were on par with cisgender women who entered the Miss South Africa pageant:

> My girls are the best of the best. They can even give those Miss South Africa contestants a run for their money (Fieldnotes, 2016)

To them, the Miss South African beauty contestants represented ideal cosmopolitan glamour sophisticated. Lawrence and Darryl's continued insistence that the contestants at the Club Indigo beauty pageants were on par with the Miss South Africa contestants in fact reveals an aspiration towards this latter form of femininity. In doing so, they place an incredible amount of pressure on their contestants to display this form of beauty. They took incredible pride in their beauty pageants and contestants. But their aspiration for being "the best of the best" drag beauty pageant appeared to cultivate a sense of antagonism and disdain for pageant organizers – particularly those from Cape Town. Unlike the Miss Gay Western Cape and Miss Gay RSA pageants, the Club Indigo pageants were not sponsored by any corporations or brands. This resulted in a palpable resentment for the Capetonian pageants.

> The Cape Town girls try way too hard with the make-up and the padding, they almost look clownish. (Miss Club Indigo 2016 Fieldnotes)

According to his statement, "trying too hard" was undesirable, and the effect was that one ended up looking "clownish." He considered this representation of femininity to be unacceptable because it was unsophisticated and, therefore not cosmopolitan. The twin ideas of sophistication and cosmopolitanism functioned as the benchmarks for the kind of femininity most idealized at Club Indigo. It was the sole iteration of femininity which was rewarded and held in high regard. Any of the Indigo girls who did not live up to this standard was therefore ineligible for receiving material rewards, affection, and subcultural status.

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

> **Zelda:** "Don't take for granted what has been given to you on your lap and expect your plate to constantly be full." Because if I look at these girls, they see a silver platter in front of them and they see that it's been handed to them.
>
> **Katlego:** Just in life generally? Or even specifically to the club like a title for example?
>
> **Zelda:** Life in general, but also specifically to the club like title. I'm talking about things that come with the title. I'm talking about things that were given to them during their reign, after their reign – those kinds of benefits.
>
> **Katlego:** Like what?
>
> **Zelda:** Dresses, shoes, wigs, free alcohol, free entrance and then to still bite the hand that feeds you in terms of arrogance, attitude, bad mouthing is heart-sore. I think it would be for any parent biological or spiritually or socially. When you do something for somebody you expect them to be grateful.
>
> (Zelda interview, 2017)

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

Conclusion

Together, these values of naturalness and cosmopolitan femininity functioned as the performative ideals at the House of Indigo. They were determined the extent to which the younger divas could excel or receive material rewards at the club. As Zelda stated in the above statement, the proper compliance to this singular iteration of femininity resulted in

various material benefits. Dresses, shoes, wigs, free alcohol, and free entrance were some of the rewards that came with demonstrating a sophisticated, cosmopolitanism femininity. This singular, aspirational femininity was restrictive in several ways. And one's inability to display a cosmopolitan, sophisticated femininity often resulted in nasty gossip and ridicule's among the girls. The policing of this specific femininity complicates Lawrence and Darryl's claims about Club Indigo being space for queer freedom. It also complicated my own assumptions about it as a space of queer sociality.

This chapter analysed the ideal, cosmopolitan femininity performed by the beauty contestants at Club Indigo. I have shown that this iteration of femininity was held in very high regard, and therefore naturalized by the parents and mentors within the House of Indigo. I have argued that it was promulgated and performed by various parties, it was heavily policed through a variety of explicit and implicit ways. I have argued that these beauty pageants, as well as the subcultural values underpinning them, constituted interlocking systems of gender policing. I have therefore suggested that the naturalization and strict policing of this form gender contradicted the owners' claims about Club Indigo as a space for queer freedom and acceptance. I have also shown that the beauty contestants demonstrated and retained strategic forms of agency in their respective performances of this specific femininity. Inasmuch as they conformed to this clearly normative femininity, they participated in with a considerable amount of pleasure.

The following chapter describes how the Indigo Divas performed this particular femininity in ways that benefited them in significant ways within and outside of the club.

Chapter 7: Drag Performance, Empowerment, and Self-Branding

No one knew exactly why Zelda and A'Deva had been keeping a cool distance from one another lately. Neither of them said anything terrible about the other, but a palpable tension had arisen between them. One could hazard a guess that their broil had something to do with the latest object of Zelda's *affections. She had recently become besotted with an eligible, handsome young man who had been frequenting the club lately. It so happened that he was A'Deva's close friend, and owned the hair salon where she worked as a receptionist.*

Notwithstanding this platonic and professional connection, Zelda had apparently felt uncomfortable with A'Deva's proximity to this young man. This was not the first time the two divas had disagreed over a potential lover. Their relationship had always been marked by a series of stinging antipathies. So, we all stayed out of the matter, assuming that they would resolve it among themselves – as they had done so many times before. Whatever the origins of their new-fangled clash, the two divas agreed to remain cordial towards one another.

Both of them had committed to a duet lip-synching performance, and were determined to stick to it. They chose the live version of "Proud Mary" by two of their idols – Tina Turner and Beyoncé. This song was a perfect fit as it reflected their individual personalities and styles. Zelda would lip-synch to Turner's lyrics while A'Deva gravitated towards Beyoncé's parts of the song. This would be the first time they performed on stage together. As the most prominent divas at Club Indigo, they took their upcoming performance very seriously. Numerous posts

announcing the performance were posted onto the club's Facebook and Instagram pages. So, it seemed that they put aside their personal differences during the rehearsals. They both arrived in full make-up and drag on the Saturday before the scheduled event. Chase[6], the DJ, sat silently at his booth. He obeyed every one of their commands to stop or start the song as they practiced their choreography countless times. They shared notes about which poses to strike to the beat, they guided each other's movements, and seemingly enjoyed the occasional laugh when they made a mistake. When Zelda made a slight misstep during the song's bridge, they started the choreography from the beginning:

"Oh, sorry angel. Let's take it from the top," Zelda suggested, wiping her brow with a tissue.

"OK. Sure," A'Deva *agreed as she walked back to her initial position on stage.*

The classic electric guitar riff to the song began yet again, and the two divas began swinging their hips left to right in perfect synch. Zelda began miming to Tina Turner's sultry voice as it boomed through the speakers behind her:

"Every now and then, we like to do thing nice and easy…"

[6] Not his real name. A pseudonym has been used for ethical purposes as outlined in Chapter 3.

7.1 Drag, empowerment and utopic pleasure

The importance of lip-synching cannot be understated in any discussion about drag subcultures. The art of lip-synching was not only a means of entertainment, but it was also a rite of passage at the House of Indigo. So significant was this social and aesthetic practice, that it greatly impacted one's horizons for gaining status, rewards, and adulation within this subcultural context. The previous chapter detailed the various stages and factors which determined how one *became* a Indigo Diva. It highlighted the fact that in order for the aspirant beauty queens to be elevated along the hierarchical ranks, they had to master the art of lip-synching performance. The mastery of lip-synching was one of the determining factors with regards to possibly winning a pageant title and crown. But it was also a criterion by which the display of idealized hyperfemininity was policed and/or rewarded. This section examines lip-synching performance as an integral aspect of gender performance. Similarly, it is herein analyzed as the mediated performance of transnational consumer and popular culture. Following this, a cogent discussion about drag performance as identity work, or aesthetic labour will be provided.

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

Princess was featured in Luis de Barros' 2017 *Jozi Queens*. The film was commissioned by the Gay and Lesbian Queer (GALA) Archives in Johannesburg. It provides a fifteen-minute history of Club Indigo, and features several of my key interlocutors included in this study. Princess describes her love the stage as such:

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

Yaya's sentiment that being on stage "literally takes everything, all the negativity, away" emphasizes the gravitas with which drag performance was regarded at the club. For many of the divas, performing drag – through lip-synching and dancing – provided a form of respite from the discriminatory antagonism of the heteronormative world.

Black and Coloured poor and working queer citizens still face disproportionate levels of homo- and transphobic violence in post-apartheid South Africa. This is evident at institutional as well as grassroots levels. This conjecture does not collapse the discourses homo- and transphobic violence within essentialist notions of race and class. However, at the statistical levels, it appears that such hate crimes are often reported and mediated within the context of the "poor" South African township, and thus connotatively associated with Black and Coloured identities (Matebeni, 2013; Livermon 2012; Judge 2018).

Coupled with these multiple and intersecting forms of violence is the discursive erasure of their heterogenous experiences as queer people of colour (Imma 2017). Across mainstream media, Black and Coloured queer people have historically been misrepresented within stereotypical, homogenizing frameworks (Talmor 2013). Queer characters on soap operas as well as upwardly-mobile (particularly cisgender gay male) celebrities have become instantly recognizable across all media platforms. However, the fact that these public images exist as part of consumers' media diet does not necessarily mean that they are progressive. Grant Andrews (2018: 55) highlights the liminality of queer media in South Africa. Contemporary struggles around queer representation and public visibility are still fraught and unresolved in post-apartheid South Africa (Andrews 2018; Kiguwa & Siswana 2018). Yaya's statements therefore attest to the multilayered intricacies of affect and empowerment as relates to Black and Coloured queer citizens' public visibility.

As evidenced by Yaya's statement above, drag performance empowered the Indigo Divas in that it allowed them to feel that they were "doing something right" with their lives. Drag performance and beauty pageantry were the discursive thoroughfares along which they could negotiate their ways towards enjoying "livable lives" (Butler 2004; Livermon 2012). Phoenix highlighted this sense of empowerment and peacefulness in her interview response:

> Anything that's got to do with stage performance, I adore. So, I know that when I go to Club Indigo and get on stage, *I'm going to be at peace*. It is my alter ego there, but a part of the real me is there too. (Phoenix interview, 2016)

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

As with *A'Deva* and Zelda's case in the opening vignette, drag performance and professional self-presentation on stage were paramount. Admirable stage presence and performance took precedence above all else – including negative interpersonal relations between the divas. The divas were expected to give and *show* the very best of themselves while they were on stage. To this end, they had to set aside any feeling of enmity such that they could deliver performances that were entertaining to their audiences and the more senior members of the house. Likewise, the homo- and transphobic negativity from the outside world had to be excised (or at least momentarily bracketed) while they were on stage. The performance of drag was, therefore, integral to their artistic and psychic development. During those relatively brief moments when they were on stage, they could continually reimagine themselves as the ideal performers that they wanted to be. More than merely escapist frivolity, drag performance enabled the divas to reshape and embody new selves. These practices of world-making enabled them to reconstruct their identities in ways that were simultaneously liberating and quite possibly utopian.

José Esteban Muñoz (2009: 20) has suggested that "the field of utopian possibility is one in which the multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity." One such of utopian possibility opened up once the divas hit the stage. Drag performance enabled them to shed whichever aspects of themselves (and their experiences) which may or may not have been most suited to that particular performance. They reconfigured their identities in such a way as to gain a sense of belonging within the House of Indigo and their followers. Phoenix explained this best as we prepared for her mini-photo shoot at her home. She looked into the mirror of her mother's varnished dressing table while lathering shaving cream across her chin and neck. Her tiny stubble had to be removed before she applied any make-up. She stated:

> Drag is having to dress up in something and do the things you don't normally do on a daily basis. You're basically channelling your alter ego…It's a way of socialising, a way of being out there and being with other people – people that are regarded as different by the society. I felt like being with such people, my people, would empower me to be a better me at the end of the day. (Phoenix Interview, 2016)

While clearly positioning drag performance as entertainment, Phoenix' response also indexes the intracommunal sense of belonging that it engendered. According her, the art form of drag encompassed more than just "dressing up." Drag is a praxis that constantly redevelops and reconstructs an idealized feminine alter-ego. In this formulation, drag provides a critical mode interpersonal connection with other subcultural members as well as the audience. These aesthetic practices and labours were political insofar as they catalysed

the coherence among queer bodies and identities that were otherwise marginalized because of their sexual, gender, and class difference.

Livermon (2020) posits that "performance is embedded in processes of meaning making that refer to fantasy, utopia, and pleasure." Phoenix's statement above supports the notion that drag performance at the House of Indigo can be analyzed as an aesthetic and utopian project of world-making. Drag was social practice that appeared to be simultaneously political and pleasurable because it was co-constructed by the performers, their audiences, and the House of Indigo members. It was an aesthetic praxis that gestured towards a utopian field of empowerment and pleasurable possibility with regards to the members' shared values and their sense of belonging within this subcultural community. Therefore, it laid out a utopian field wherein the divas' personae were continually reshaped in efforts to embody their most prized and empowered selves.

7.2 Intersecting Performances of Gender: Drag, pageantry, and cosmopolitan femininity

In this section I suggest that drag performance at the House of Indigo may be analyzed as a form of gender policing. My analytical position is evidenced through the observation of the subcultural mores and values which belied drag performance at the club. In many respects, the hopeful pageant contestants were expected to demonstrate some competence with

regards to the performance of drag. Few contestants entered the beauty pageants at Club Indigo for with the sole intention of winning a title and the attendant material rewards that came with it. Some constants had other aspirations in terms of their subcultural status and upward social mobility at within the house. A superseding dynamic of affective motivation to their participation was a sense of queer belonging and acceptance within a community of like-minded drag performers. In order to bring these aspirations to fruition, they had to develop their stage personae not only as beauty contestants, but as drag performers as well.

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

In order for the audience, judges, and other subcultural members to reciprocate love and appreciation, the performer had to display or emphasize specific aspects of their alter-egos. These are what I shall heretofore refer to as their drag personae. For reasons which will become clearer later in the chapter, it is extremely important that I clearly distinguish between the human subject (or interlocutors) with whom I engaged, and their drag personae – although they may have carried the same name, title and status.

This proper performance of well-curated identity was also rewarded with a composite of material and non-material gifts. It was an unstated, unwritten expectation that any beauty queen who won a title and crown at the club would develop her a talent as a lip-synching performance artist during her tenure – and the subsequent years thereafter. Being beautiful was a clear advantage for the hopeful beauty queen. Displaying an idealized, "natural" femininity at the pageants also gave her the upper hand. But an ability to deliver a flawless lip-synching performance on stage gave her an extra boost which stood her in great stead above and beyond her competitors.

The art of lip-synching was held in such high regard that it was classified as one of the fundamental categories of assessment in the Miss Black Pride and Miss Club Indigo pageants. For example, the latter Miss Club Indigo pageant ran over three weeks. Each week the contestants would participate in different rounds, or "heats," as the organizers called them. In each heat, the contestants showed off various aspects of their feminine beauty in terms of sartorial style and other related aesthetic accoutrements. In this way, the pageant contestants literally performed this idealized femininity on stage by putting it on glamourized display. They would be subsequently rewarded by entry into the next phase or the next heat of the pageant in the following week.

In the first two heats, the contestants were judged according to categories such as "casual and cocktail wear," "evening gown," "lingerie and swimsuit," "accessories and grooming," "interviews and elocution," as well as "poise and coordination." The contestants were scored up to ten points for each of these categories. These points could be carried over each week, whereupon they would be tallied on the final crowning night. A third and final

category was added in the third and final heat. This was the “lip-synching” category. Each finalist had to perform a song of her choosing for which she would be judged and scored in terms of her creativity and, according to Lawrence, her “stage presence.” She would be scored a maximum of ten points in this category.

This system of scoring ten points in the lip-synching category reveals two important dynamics. First, that this category carried ten points demonstrates that it was held in equally high regard as the other categories of style and feminine self-presentation. It appears, then, that the ability to deliver a stellar lip-synching performance was an integral measure of each beauty contestants’ potential as an ideal ambassador for the nightclub. Second, the intersplicing of performance among other aesthetic and sartorial categories demonstrates its significance as a criterion by which idealized femininity (“naturalness” as discussed in the previous chapter) was both policed and rewarded. Therefore, lip-synching was not trivialized as mere entertainment for the judges and audiences. It proved to be a definitive yard-stick which bore critical implications in terms of the contestants’ success and status at the club.

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

> “Ladies,” she began lilting in her soft-spoken tone, “this competition is not just your beauty and your looks. It’s not just about your dresses and make-up. It's also about class and etiquette. It’s about your passion and character. You must believe in yourself no matter what. You must show the people that you are confident in yourself. This is your final opportunity to clinch that crown, so give your performance everything you got.” (Miss Club Indigo fieldnotes, 2017).

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

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

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

Portia's words here echoed her earlier directive to the hopeful contestants about etiquette and class. In order to success or "make it" in the drag and pageant industry, one had to display the proper etiquette which represented the correct level of distinction. One could not perform their femininity as they so pleased.

It was clear that the two divas who had "made it" were A'Deva and Zelda. These two senior divas were given the license to present their respective femininities in their own respective ways. But this "freedom" was neither absolute nor without its requisite efforts. Over time, it appeared that their seniority was hard-won and, as such, materialized through the ability to navigate the space of the club with relative self-assuredness. Darryl and Lawrence hardly ever engaged these two in the same way that they did with the younger divas. For instance, Darryl never admonished them about wearing their tiaras or sashes in the appropriate manner. And Lawrence calmly rolled his eyes, dismissing their infrequent fits of anger as egotistical tantrums. Such kid-glove treatment, therefore, allowed these two senior divas the space to display their femininity with more agency (both on and off stage) than their younger mentees. They were no longer as self-conscious about how their deportment and what they wore. This was because they had won pageant titles and subsequently developed their performance repertoire to the extent that they no longer had to be as vigilant in their self-presentation.

Although *A'Deva* and Zelda enjoyed subcultural status, their performances of drag (and gender more broadly), still operated the matrix of idealized femininity. This ideal, so crystallized and sacrosanct within this subcultural domain, was the rubric upon which they based their drag personae. As the mentoring divas, this was an ideal which they both upheld and vigilantly monitored among the younger divas (Zelda more so than *A'Deva*). In elucidating her famous thesis of drag as metaphor for gender performativity, Butler (1993; 2004) states that it is not necessarily always already subversive. Minority subjects who form drag communities create these enclaves of subcultural production as responses to and modes of survival within often hostile environments bent on their invisibilisation through physical, sexual, and systemic violence (Butler 2004: 216). In such conditions of existence, drag communities and performance may assimilate into and reify the categories of gender and sexual subjectivity as a necessary strategy to lead livable lives. At the same time, their existence and counterpublic vernaculars and social practices are significant insofar as they call into question the binaries of hegemonic and mainstream society.

Through drag pageantry and performance, the Indigo Divas complicated the established norms of gender and sexuality within hegemonic post-apartheid South African society. In so doing, they clearly resisted these norms by framing their performances within narrative discourses of visibility, empowerment and queer subjectivity. However, the Indigo Divas shed light upon the restrictive boundaries of gender without necessarily subverting them. In fact, the gender policing that went into maintaining them made them all the more susceptible to analytical scrutiny. This required significant courage, financial effort, and creative ingenuity from the various members of the House. As Zelda joked in her opening

statement at the Miss Black Pride 2016 pageant: “It takes a lot of balls for us to get on stage, and do what we ladies do” (Fieldnotes).

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

While the Indigo Divas complicated the hegemonic norms of gender and sexuality, they did not subvert or transform these in any radical way. Their conformity to ideals of “natural,” cosmopolitan femininity was a practice of self-fashioning within a heteropatriarchal society that is not always accepting of their bodies and practices. At the same time, these performances of ideal femininity were also survival strategies and ways of creating utopic freedom, excess, and pleasure (however limited) within a subcultural context that engendered queer belonging and acceptance. Muñoz’s (1999) conceptual model of queer disidentification is analytically useful here. Framing it explicitly as a practice of survival for queer people of colour, Muñoz (1999: 12) puts it thusly:

> Disidentification is [one of the many ways] of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.

This does not suggest that the Indigo Divas were politically confrontational towards heteropatriarchal society in their performances on stage. And neither should it express that they intended to dismantle or challenge these specifically through drag performance. In fact, public visibility and acceptance for femme gay men and transgender women were the most salient themes that occurred whenever the Divas would actually speak on stage, and allow their own voices to be heard over the microphone. However, the performance and display of a singular, heavily policed iteration of femininity pointed to the boundaries of gendered subjectivity and valorized beauty within a broader societal framework.

The Bluebelles & T.O.P. Divas

The most favoured and thus highly-endorsed for drag performance at Club Indigo was through lip-synching. While a performer's rhythmic dance moves could certainly enthral the crowd (as was often the case with A'Deva), the art of lip-synching took precedence over all forms of stage performance. With the exception of Zelda, who had an astounding singing voice, none of the other Indigo Divas ever sang live. And none of them were encouraged or compelled to do so. They were free to choose any musical genre or artist for their lips-synching performances. As such, a wide variety of local and transnational musical genres abounded during the musical performance. It was possible to witness a lip-synch performance to a local Kwaito hit record by local stars, Boom Shaka, followed by international RnB ballad by Mariah Carey. Some of the divas preferred solo performances, while others gravitated mostly to performing duets or in trios. Others divas chose to include solo as well as group performances in

their repertoire. Neither of these choices were given precedence or preference. There were no restrictions in terms of groups and/or solo performances.

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

I recall an T.O.P. Divas performance in the early stages of fieldwork:

> The T.O.P. Divas trio also drew upon transnational influences in terms of their performance styles. The trio were scheduled as headlining acts for the Joburg Pride Afterparty. This special event was widely publicised on the club's Facebook and Instagram pages for almost three weeks. It was set to place a week prior to the Miss Black Pride 2016 pageant. So, this was effectively Phoenix's last performance as the reigning titleholder. Although they were all nervous, they were also excited to show off their latest choreography and matching outfits.

Their performance set was composed of five different performances. The first and last acts were group performances. The three acts in between were allotted to their solo performances. In this way, each diva could display her distinctive finesse as an individual performer and group member. In matching white chiffon mini-dresses, they opening act with the famous Abba ballad, "Fernando." The audience, however, seemed nonplussed and slightly disinterested at the performance. They responded with a tepid of clap of their hands, barely whistling or shouting their characteristic cheer, "YAASSSSS GIRL," as they usually did. But they were enthralled when it was time came for the final song. I looked at the time on my cell phone. It was 02h30 am, and there were still several acts to follow.

I looked up from my phone and saw the trio walking out of the dressing room and onto the stage. They had changed their outfits, each wearing domestic workers' uniforms with matching aprons and doeks[7]. These were of the local variety decorated in geometric, brightly coloured, ethnic prints. They began with

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

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

Witnessing this transformation from one style of drag to another was as entertaining and analytically complex. Observing this T.O.P. Divas performance – especially during the earliest stages of fieldwork – enabled me to gain into the general range of styles of performance that were highly regarded regard at the House of Indigo. The above observations demonstrate, the localized ways in which the Indigo Divas simultaneously consumed and performed celebrity as well as popular cultural texts and images.

This directive towards ideal femininity was also inflected within the described performance. As with the T.O.P. Divas, their literal transformation on stage foregrounded the performance cosmopolitan, aspirational, fashionable femininity. This form of femininity took precedence over all others. Wittingly or not, their performance was overladen with

historical as well as political implications. In that moment, the T.O.P. Divas divested themselves of the sartorial significations of working-class, localized femininity. In taking off their maids' uniforms (however colourful and eye-catching these were), they removed themselves from any aesthetic associations with racialized, working-class, domesticity and/or servitude.

From a historical perspective, the institutionalized role of domestic servitude has long been associated with Black subjects, especially Black women (Hill-Collins 2000: 72 – 73). In post-apartheid South Africa, the role of the racialized and gendered (read Black woman) domestic worker continues to be marginalized, exploited, and regarded as inferior because of her assumed low educational level and her class background. Sithabile Ntombela (2012: 143) argues that domestic workers' uniforms are some of the discursive technologies that signify the wearer's marginalized and exploitable socio-economic status. The T.O.P. Diva's drag transformation, therefore, suggests an aspirational and ideological shift away from these historical associations with servitude and marginality.

Their choice of musical accompaniment to their performance bore significance in relation to the mediation of transnational popular cultural texts. The T.O.P. Divas specifically chose and choreographed their own songs (as did all the other performers at Club Indigo). Their choices of musical accompaniment to their performance were thus agentive in that they reflected the groups tastes, style, and how wanted to represent themselves on stage. Taylor (2012: 85) writes that the "musicality of drag performance is often ignored." The sonic and aesthetic codes of drag are as significant as the gendered (re)constructions which they foreground. As Jeffery McCune (2008: 152) astutely positions drag as an art form with multiple variances and interpretations. Apart from the polysemous trajectories of drag in

different part of the world, it remains important to examine its many forms in their contextual and aesthetic specificity. The T.O.P. Divas' collective decision to incorporate local as well as international songs in their performance, therefore, had semiotic implications which warrant further explication.

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

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

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

By taking off these vestments of domestic servitude, the T.O.P. Divas made a rhetorical movement towards globality and feminine cosmopolitanism. They did this through their specific choice of dress and music. The abrupt switch from a high tempo, campy song into a slow US-American RnB ballad, changed the discursive playing field upon which they expressed their queerness. Although it seemed to be incongruous and sonically mismatched, this musical transition was a symbolic remixing of local and global discourses through sartorial and musical codes. This musical transition, therefore, was not so much a displacement or an elision of local, vernacular femininity. Rather, it was an articulation of transnational cosmopolitanism. Contrariwise, this performance was "partly in *a dialectical relationship* with the global north and its expansive capitalist imperium" (Comaroff & Comaroff 20102: 7, emphasis my own).

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

A mix of local and the global influences

As young, digitally-connected media consumers, the Indigo Divas were attuned to the latest popular and consumer cultural trends. This pertained to their musical tastes as well as the visual images they gravitated towards on social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. This was reflected in their stage performances as well. They spoke very passionately about being stage performers. And they often detailed how long they rehearsed their performances. To them, this passion and dedication had to be parallel by an awareness of the latest songs and music videos from their favourite stars. Their biographical narratives about their childhood usually included donning mothers' wigs, clutching hair combs and brushes, and singing along to their pop idols in front of the TV screen. Phoenix echoed this experience, recounting her early days as performer on stage:

> **Phoenix:** I love anything that's got to do with stage. I watched musical shows, musical game shows, and *Idols: South Africa* to begin with. I love music, so it wasn't much of a dilemma to begin with. But it took time to prepare for my debut performances. I watched a few girls from Club Indigo, so I knew what was expected of me.
>
> **Katlego:** So growing up as a 'little girl' who was your ultimate star? Who did you wake up and want to be or be like?
>
> **Phoenix:** Rihanna. I've always loved her music since I knew her. That was probably in grade four. I love her music and she has been a role

> model to many people and I don't know what drew me to her, but I just love her to this day.
>
> (Phoenix interview, 2017)

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

> My ultimate diva is Beyoncé, definitely. Her presence on stage. There's no way you wouldn't feel her. She gives in her best in all her performances. I've watched her performance fails on YouTube, and she didn't allow any of them to sabotage her performances. She still managed to live it. At one point she actually tore her ear with an earring, and she carried on with the dance. She gives it all – the choreography, the preparations. She literally gives it her all. So, kudos to that, I love her. (Phoenix Interview, 2017)

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

> You cannot predict what I might perform because I've done from Afro-pop to RnB, to pop, to the classics. I've even done a Tina Turner song, something a lot of people weren't expecting. I'm mostly familiar with heartbreak songs, heartfelt songs – so people were thinking: "oh, Phoenix is much more comfortable in this kind of music and that's what's expectant from her. I think it is important to be a

versatile performer because as much as it is about us, we're not only entertaining ourselves but the crowd as well. (Phoenix interview, 2017)

The divas usually drew upon various media texts, influences, styles, and musical genres as inspiration for their respective performances. Their creative agency in musical choice and style were encouraged in this aspect. The Indigo Divas also had an affinity towards local genres as well. As outlined above, Precious' choice to perform a local gospel song by local gospel superstar Lebo Sekgobela for the last heat of the Miss Club Indigo pageant was both strategic and well-received. Her awe-inspiring performance was followed (almost immediately) by a standing ovation from the audience. Although she did not win the pageant that evening, Precious was still reeling from applause and adulation she received from different people after the performance.

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

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

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

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

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

Precious: I love gospel. I think you saw for yourself after my performance at the Miss Club Indigo pageant, a lot of people were talking about it. Others said they felt so blessed. I love blessing people, and making them feel

> closer to the Holy Spirit. I come from a very Christian background, so I listen to a lot of Mahalia Jackson. I love her voice, all her music.
>
> (Precious interview, 2017)

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

> That is an experience I will never forget. It was the 31st of December 2008 – at five past twelve to be exact. I remember the song I performed. I was still learning how to tuck. I remember Lawrence shouting at me because I was backstage tucking and my name had already been called. I could not even get into my outfit so I took a gold jacket from my mom with only underwear underneath. I performed Brenda Fassie's "Vul'indlela." In the back audience, I saw Somizi [acclaimed South African choreographer and television personality]. I've always looked up to him, so I couldn't believe it when I saw him and I performed until I cried. I remember afterwards Somizi saying to me: 'You are the next Brenda Fassie.' Ever since then, I never looked back from performing. (A'Deva interview, 2017)

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

> She still lives in me. She's not gone. People will tell you that when I'm backstage getting ready for a show, I'll be listening to Lebo Mathosa. I listen to her and I know that I'll kill the performance. That's what I do every single time I perform. (A'Deva interview, 2017)

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

7.3 Interpreting performances at Club Indigo: Drag and cosmopolitan femininity

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

> Glamour drag and serious drag are synonymous in terms of female impersonators. No serious attempt is made to present any female image other than that of a 'star' or a female nightclub performer (singer or dancer). Any deviation from that image is treated as incompetence, bad taste, or comic effect. (Newton, 1972: 49)

The foregoing sections have demonstrated the seriousness with which glamourous female impersonation was regarded at Club Indigo. I have also shown how a very specific iteration

of ideal, cosmopolitan femininity was inflected within the performance of drag as a form of gender policing. A diva's incompetence or failure to perform this glamorous form of drag was often met with sneering derision or quick admonishment from the senior members of the House. Conversely, one's capacity to perform glamorous drag was met with material as well as affective rewards from the parents, mentors, and audiences.

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

Following suit, some analyses have framed drag performance as a quintessentially camp aesthetic sensibility characteristic of queer performance (Reich 1992; Meyer 1994; Taylor 2012). Mattijs van de Port (2012: 870) aptly cautions against an uncritical transposition of the Western analytical concept of camp within social contexts and milieux wherein it may not necessarily make sense. In his analyses of a Brazilian drag artist, van de Port (2012: 866) suggests that some queer performances can be seen as "genuinely made up." They are enlivened by their transgressive and radical potential in their "cultural production of the real." But what happens when drag is performed by queer individuals but continue to reify

and police the heteronormative idealizations of gender and self-stylization? How can we analytically account for a queer aesthetic praxis that recapitulates the normative standards of gender, beauty, and cosmopolitanism? To what extent, then, could the drag performances (and pageants) at Club Indigo lay claim to "queerness" if they were so stringently founded upon (hetero)normative dictates of beauty and idealized femininity?

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

My interlocutors identified variously as femme gay men and transgender women. But once they performed on stage, they were all perceived as drag queens. As in the case with the beauty pageants, no gender or sexual identification took precedence over the other. They styled and branded themselves openly as drag queens through the various labours of beautification and gendered performances which have been outlined above. While the Indigo Divas were encouraged to express and display their uniqueness through drag performance, these performances were policed and thus founded upon idealized, cosmopolitan femininity. These performances fell in strict adherence to idealized gendered norms of with regards to hyperfemininity, deportment, and beauty. I argue, therefore, that

their drag performances were simultaneously assimilationist and subversive. This discursive tension added analytical complexity to the Indigo Divas' aesthetic labour of queer self-fashioning and identity work.

Performing aspirational stardom and stylistic reinterpretation

In addition to the imperative to perform this a specifically idealized kind of femininity, the Indigo Divas were also performing aspirational stardom. Their respective drag performances of drag provided the platform to simultaneously develop and experiment with their own distinctive drag personae. The subcultural drag vernacular preferred by the Indigo Divas was innovation. The exact imitation of a musical icon's style would not suffice. The Indigo Divas each excelled in the art of stylistic improvisation. Their respective styles of performance were clearly indebted to those of iconic musical superstars such as Whitney Houston, Patti Labelle, Gladys Knight, Shirley Bassy, Brenda Fassie, Lebo Mathosa, Adele, and Rihanna. Interestingly, Precious explained how she grew up listening to Mahalia Jackson's music, and how the singer's gospel hymns gave her the confidence to give her best performances on stage. The divas were always encouraged to add their own stylistic flare in rendering lip-synch performances. The overall effect was that they used their favourite icons' music and performance styles as a blueprint upon which they could their own distinctive repertoire.

In examining Yoruba performance rituals, Drewal (1992: 10) avers that individual bodily and stylistic techniques are used as "resources for negotiation that are deployed in performance by knowledgeable agents." Dynamism, creativity, and improvisation are therefore key elements within this performance schematic. Zora Neale-Hurston (1981: 49 - 68) famously

described “impromptu ceremony” and “dynamic suggestion” as characteristic elements in Black people’s aesthetic cultural forms and practices. Likewise, my own analysis here highlights the concept of improvisation, rather than imitation or mimicry. The improvisational style of drag foregrounded at Club Indigo was always poised for idiosyncratic flare. It was based upon the creative and personal interpretations of popular musical forms and celebrity figures. But the such improvisational agency did not make the Indigo Divas’ performances any less serious or professional. This is why positioning the drag performance at Club Indigo as camp seems conceptually inadequate.

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

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

I suggest that the divas' respective performances of femininity and drag evidenced a spectacularly feminine style and sensibility. Such spectacularism was evidenced through aesthetic form rather than content. Without necessarily being outrageous, the Indigo Divas performed a style of femininity that was at once connected with global trends yet distinctively local. Much like Dosekun's (2016; 2017) interlocutors, the Indigo Divas were oriented towards spectacular, hyperfeminine modes of self-stylization and deportment. This was made clear in their consumer choices vis-à-vis fashion, shoes, make-up, accessories, long wigs, and weaves. A key difference here was the obvious vector of class difference. The Indigo Divas were certainly not wealthy and/or elite consuming subjects. The divas were predominantly college students who earned extra money by working as hairstylists, make-

up artists, and pageant tutors for younger girls in their township communities. Others who could not make ends meet in this way, often struggled in the mires of unemployment. Most (if not all) the divas came from working class backgrounds, and lived with their parents, grandparents, siblings, and other members of their extended birth families. Few had not left the Gauteng Province for any form of leisure travel. And very few of them had even boarded a plane for a local – let alone international – travel.[8] However, the Indigo Diva's drag performances were comprised of a spectacular admixture of global, cosmopolitan, and unabashedly local aesthetics.

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

[8] Only Zelda had travelled to a foreign country in her earlier years. She visited China in 2007. during these formative years in her performance career, Zelda was recruited as a male dancer for a dance company. She spent three weeks between Beijing and Shanghai.

agency, creativity and/or resourcefulness. They demonstrated an incredible level of resourcefulness in spite (or maybe because) of the structural and socio-economic conditions within which they maneuvered their lives, relative freedoms, and desires.

Their performances of spectacular femininity were undergirded by the affective blueprints of cosmopolitanism, consumer desire and aspiration. The nexus point between empowerment, aspiration, and the performance of our consumer identities is analytically instructive here. It is important to remember how our consumer identities and aspirations are constructed in relation to the "longing for a better life, which takes on extremely political overtones when considered in the context of inequality." (Iqani 2016: 47) As such, the Indigo Divas' spectacular femininities were constructed and duly performed in accordance with their consumer aspirations for material, social, and civic goods – particularly as socio-economically marginalized Black and Coloured queer individuals. Their drag performances and personae were neither ironic nor parodic. They were not characterized by a depoliticized aesthetic queer sensibility (Meyer 1994; Taylor 2012). In fact, these were highly inflected by the socio-economic, civic, and political realities that structured their realities and desire for the good life.

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

7.4 Online Self-Branding: Indigo Divas on social media platforms

Throughout my time spent at Club Indigo, I became accustomed to waiting for long periods of time. Waiting for the pageants to properly begin as the clock teetered past eleven o' clock. Waiting (and hoping) for the few patrons to arrive at the nightclub to cheer and sing along to the Diva's performance. Waiting for the afterparty to end as the sunlight crept through the cracks in the doorways inside the still dimly-lit nightclub. Waiting for one of the divas to arrive for the drag shows and pageants. Or waiting for them to finish the last sips of their drinks, so that we could share an Uber ride home after the evening's revelries. Waiting had become a significant component of my time spent during fieldwork. As sometimes frustrating as they were, the times spent waiting at the club were sometimes ethnographically fruitful.

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

With less consumer interest and a frankly unremarkable publicity (a few Facebook announcements here and there), the club was clearly suffering under financial strain. This

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

The opening vignette of this chapter highlighted the level professionalism required of an Indigo Diva. I have also suggested that drag performances at the House constituted forms of empowerment, utopic pleasure and cosmopolitan self-styling. For the divas, drag was not a comedic parody of sexual and gender identity, but a rather serious social practice of self-fashioning and identity construction. They saw drag performance as form more than just

trifling entertainment. To them, this was a form of aesthetic labour. This observation is evidenced in Zelda's interview for the *Jozi Queens* documentary film (de Barros 2017). Fully dressed as her persona, Zelda had this to stay about her role as a drag performer:

> *For me, drag is not about mock. It's…It's like your job, you know? And that's why I believe that we are artistes in our own right. (*Zelda in *Jozi Queens,* 2017*)*

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

These digital media representations can also be seen as performances by the Indigo Divas. As such, they were performing and branding their drag personae on different kinds of mediated stages or platforms for digital audiences. Performance scholars agree that given the right context any act or social practice can be understood as performance (Goffman 1956; Schechner 2002). From this perspective, we can think about performance as a multilayered, intertextual continuum, rather than culturally specific or geographically situated (Conquergood 1992; 2002; Drewal 1992; Madison 2005). If this is the case, then

drag can take place in various forms, places, and spaces. A corollary to this is that drag can be performed on different kinds of stages – on physically built or digital media platforms. The following discussion shows how the Indigo Divas used various media platforms as digital stages in order to brand, and visibilize their personae to multitudes of digital audiences.

It was a common practice for the various divas to request the digital photographs I had taken of them while they were on stage. While some were more demanding than others, I duly complied and sent the images to whomsoever made the request. I made it very clear that they could freely select and alter the images in whichever way they pleased. Many of the divas chose still photographs depicting their solo or group performances. Darryl also uploaded the digital still or video images which I captured at the performances and festive events. Although less fastidious, he made sure that the images were timeously uploaded onto the club's Facebook page. He was less concerned with his own image than the execution of the club's main digital marketing strategy. However, the Divas were far more meticulous when choosing and uploading their images on social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram. They augmented these images by using digital filter technologies. They also captioned these images by adding their idiosyncratic witticisms or political slogans queer freedom and visibility.

In doing so, the Indigo Divas used social media as a way of branding their respective drag personae. They used social media to market their brands as drag performers, musicians, and dancers. Commentators have noted the importance of social networking sites such as Instagram as platforms for personal styling and self-branding among social actors (Duffy & Hund 2015; Khamis, Ang & Welling 2017; Liu & Suh 2017). These social media platforms have become essential for social influencer marketing, entrepreneurial, bloggers, and micro-

celebrities. Similarly, the divas used social media to style and brand their drag identities for a wider digital audience. By posting their photos regularly, they increased their public visibility while identifying themselves as pageant queens and drag performers. They also posted political messages against racism, femicide, trans- and homophobia.

After winning the Miss Gay Jozi 2016 pageant, Boene went on her official media tour around Johannesburg. She was interviewed at several media institutions such as the *Destiny Magazine* offices, the Cliff Central, and Talk Radio 702 stations. Her media tour is well documented her tour on her Instagram page. As the newly-crowned ambassador for the House of Indigo, she made sure to thank the club for the coveted title and crown. She used both the social and broadcasting media platforms to publicize her budding career as singer and songwriter. A post on her Instagram feed shows a selfie photograph of her closely-cropped face. Her make-up is impeccable as she smiles directly into the camera's lens. The luxurious tresses of her long, black lace-front wig fall onto her shoulders. The following bold text is superimposed across the left side of the image: "BOENE TAKES OVER 702 TALK FM, SUNDAY 31/01/2016 21H00 TALK @9." The caption to this post reads:

> "Catch my interview on @Talkradio702 this coming Sunday and get a chance to hear my featured track @dezamrkzn feat Boene My Everything 21h00pm... Tune in."

Foxxy (Miss Gay Jozi 2015) also used Instagram to expand her career as an aspiring radio and television presenter, model, and actress. The hashtags beneath all her selfies and portraits clearly identify her title as an aspiring media broadcaster. She also openly identifies her gender non-conforming identity by using hashtags such as #Drag,

#Transmodel, and #TransWoman. While most of the posts on her Instagram are still digital images, only one of these posts is a short video. In this clip, Foxxy stands in what appears to be her bedroom, and face the camera directly. She wears a slim-fitting jeans and floral crop top. This casual outfit is complemented by her long, curly weave that falls across her shoulders and décolletage. Her posture is confident and inviting. She greets her audience, and welcomes them to her potential programme "Chit-Chat with Me" on the Mojalove digital satellite television channel. This is clearly an audition video clip; one that is intended to grab the attention from a producer. She is using the digital media platform to market her talent as a presenter.

Other Divas also used social networking sites to market their businesses, thus widening their digital audience and clientelle. After winning the Miss Club Indigo 2014 pageant, Kiara quickly established herself as a prominent celebrity make-up artist among the wealthy, elite circles around Johannesburg. While her trajectory towards mainstream popularity and celebrity status is exceptional among the Indigo Divas, it provides a fitting example for the present discussion regarding online self-branding and public visibility. Her linked Twitter and Instagram accounts promote her business as a make-up artist. She also uses them to promote her prime-time television show (on the Moja Love satellite television channel) focusing on fashion makeovers and cosmetics. She also hosts a lifestyle talk show on her "On the Real" Youtube page. Her Instagram is awash with well-curated and highly-stylized images of herself, her clients, as well as the cosmetic products and services she promotes. Apart from promoting her own make-up business, she uses her social media accounts promote fashion and beauty products and services. Some of these have even been sponsored by multinational corporations such as MAC Cosmetics and the Steve Madden

shoe and accessory company. Recently appointed as the spokesperson for a brand of Pre-exposure prophylaxis, Kiara also used her social media to post information about LGBTQIA sexual health care.

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

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

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

As an electric engineering student, Phoenix did not have disposable income. Like most of the Indigo Divas, she came from a working-class background. He mother was a single parent with two children, so she could not easily buy the kinds of wigs, dresses, and accessories Phoenix desired. There were other financial priorities to be attended to on a monthly basis – including her daily transport fees to and from campus. Phoenix started a make-up business to supplant her monthly allowance. She found most of her clients through word-of-mouth referrals and social media. She posted images of her clients' beautified faces, pricelists and events packages on her Instagram and Facebook pages. She also posted images of herself in and out of drag: She described her use of social media in the following way:

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

Not all the divas had the resources or ingenuity to use social media platforms to perform and/or construct ideal drag identities on various social media. Not all of them could use their talents and contacts to propel them out of marginal economic living conditions. But the examples herein provided exemplify the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the ones who brand and style themselves as digitally-savvy and publicly visible drag queens.

Conclusion

Although these online constructions of ideal, cosmopolitan femininity did not challenge heteropatriarchal neoliberal capitalism, they gave the divas the opportunity to lead livable lives. Their strategic, creative and agentive use of various social media platforms enabled the divas to make themselves publicly visible as proudly queer citizens. As demonstrated above, many of their social media posts called for acceptance for queer people within a society that still remains largely homo- and transphobic. As disidentificatory performances of public queer self-fashioning and world-making, these strategies were both assimilationist and subversive.

These digital social media stages allowed the divas to brand themselves and thereby monetize their respective drag personae. These strategies of self-branding were used to empower themselves and thus improve their living conditions. The global mainstreaming and commodification of drag performance and subcultures warrants the analysis of these digital online strategies of self-fashioning and branding. These online social media platforms provided the divas with the space to write their own digital narratives of beauty and agency by using the creative resources available to them. Examining how drag queens from the Global South use digital social media enables us to document transnational development

and permutations of the art of drag. More importantly, the attention to queer digitality and self-fashioning allows to critically examine the global developments of drag performance while being attentive to the local specificity and situatedness.

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

Chapter 8: "The right to be fabulous": Concluding thoughts

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

"Many people don't know what it takes to get on this stage," she says. "They don't know the strength and hard work it takes for us to be here."

The audience claps, nods and clinks classes in agreement.

"We must remember that LGBTQ rights are human rights. So, it is also my right to be fabulous!"

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

Kiara's statements in the opening vignette adequately elaborate the aims of this study as well as the ethnographic material analyzed herein. That drag and beauty pageantry constituted multiple vectors of queer identity was a self-evident fact upon entering the research field site. Throughout this study, I have demonstrated what it takes for a community of (mostly) young queer people to get onto a small stage, and perform beauty and glamour. Underlying the various analyses and arguments put forward in this study, is a critical interest in such claim for the right to be fabulous. The research findings presented in this study demonstrate what it took for my interlocutors to construct, perform and navigate

their fabulousness. I have also shown how these performances intersected with their gender, sexual, racial, and class identities in very complex ways.

In the current climate of neoliberal consumer capitalism, human rights and citizenship are framed within the discourses of consumption (Hennesy 2000; Cruz-Malavé & Malanasan 2002; Iqani 2016). The right to consume as one wishes is ideologically constructed as a private, individual affair. This privatization of the civic rights and citizenship has become crystallized within the neoliberal discourse of winners and losers; the haves and the have-nots. In a society with staggering levels of racialized impoverishment and historical disenfranchisement, access to public and consumer goods have been similarly reduced to a matter of individual, human will. South African poor, working class Black and Coloured LGBTQIA+ citizens face disproportionate levels of homo- and transphobic violence and hate crimes on a daily basis. Within this socio-economic context, queer people's public visibility, empowerment, and human freedom are fundamentally connected to their consumer identities. The right to consume and to be fabulous is therefore inextricably connected human freedom, agency, and visibility.

8.1 Consumption, Kinship, and Material Culture,

This study has demonstrated how this queer subcultural space enabled participants to perform beauty and aspirational femininity among a community of like-minded peers and mentors. Their description of this subcultural community as a family was a key theme explored herein. Their descriptions of various participants as father, mother, and sisters suggests the key elements of belonging and meaning-making in practices of kinship. These

constructions of queer kinship are not unique to the House of Indigo. However, I have shown how they intersected with kinship structures among my interlocutors' respective birth families. I argued that my interlocutors relied on various kinship structures – their subcultural and birth families – for affective and material support in a system complementary kinship.

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

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

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

8.2 Queer Performances: subcultural world-making, aspiration, and agency

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

Ahmed (2006: 16) avers: “It is important that we do not idealize queer worlds or simply place them in an alternative space.” Only one type of femininity was observed during fieldwork for this study. It was stringently policed by various members of the subculture

who wielded considerable power and privilege – including the performers. It was restrictive in terms of its normative conformity to hegemonic ideals of feminine style and beauty. Moreover, the values inherent in this feminine beauty are a function of global consumer capitalist heteropatriarchy. These beauty ideals are disseminated through various media platforms including, but not limited to, popular music videos, magazines, internet blogs, and social networking sites. A key finding in this study was that this restrictive ideal of feminine beauty and style was reified through drag performance and beauty pageantry. Moreover, it was naturalized (both explicitly and implicitly) as an ideal model of gender to which the younger participants should aspire.

However, my interlocutors were not hapless victims of transnational consumer capitalist ideology. They expressed feelings of pleasure and empowerment when discussing their motivations for participating in the subculture. Chief among their motivations was the desire and passion for performance. They also spoke of the sense of belonging they felt from receiving admiration and respect among their peers, mentors, and the audience. Their collective sense of belonging was accompanied by feelings of acceptance and understanding of their queer identities. Inasmuch they were supported and accepted within their both birth and House of Indigo families, this was not necessarily the case in the broader, hegemonic communities. South Africa still remains a sexist and heteropatriarchal society.

Despite the egalitarian tenets of human rights enshrined in the Equality Clause of the constitution, many LGBTQIA+ citizens still face variously intersecting oppressions. Institutional and symbolic violence, daily microaggressions, sexual assault, and heinous murders are some of the oppressive conditions suffered by countless LGBTQIA+ citizens.

Moreover, these systemic forms of violence are often coupled with multiple forms of racialized and classed disenfranchisement – especially poverty, unemployment as well as the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Performing on stage and participating in the pageants provided my interlocutors with agency and visibility that was not readily available to them in the public sphere outside of their networks of complementary kinship.

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

An important research finding in this study was my interlocutors' creativity and ingenuity as digital citizens. They used social media and other digital platforms to brand their drag queen personae in highly strategic and lucrative ways. This observation has global implications in terms of the highly mediated and commoditized images of drag queens. This fast becoming a trend in global north contexts. Drag queens are literally becoming global superstars in their right. And across various mediascapes, the drag queens' images are steadily shifting from their previously marginal, subcultural status into everyday parlance. The drag queen has now become a highly mediated mainstay within our popular cultural lexicon. This study

problematizes as assumptions as to the unidirectional flow of ideas, images, and consumer commodities from the Global North to the South. As aspirational as my interlocutors' performances of cosmopolitanism may be, they demonstrated a cool disdain towards superstar drag queens such as Rupaul. As evidenced in my empirical analyses, these forms of drag were disregarded as too camp, outlandish, and therefore denounced within the House of Indigo.

8.3 Queer Methods: memory and archive

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

While this study is interdisciplinary in its orientation, it is not a history project in the strictest academic sense of the term. Neither does it fit neatly within the fields of ethnography, performance and subcultural studies. But therein lies the queerness of this research project: Its fluidity and its refusal of scholastic containment in any specific field. The dynamism and

glamorousness of the research object lent themselves to the incorporation diverse methods, research materials and analyses presented herein.

As a media and cultural studies scholar, I was particularly interested in the social semiotics of drag and beauty pageantry., I was specifically interested in these subcultural practices as modalities of popular consumer cultures in post-apartheid South Africa. Furthermore, I was concerned with how this community of Black and Coloured gender non-conforming individuals constructed a subculture wherein they could exercise their right to be fabulous as embodied through drag performance and beauty pageantry. But my interest could not merely end at these performances as text. At the same time, my decolonial critical feminist scholarship required ethnographic engagement with my interlocutors. I had to learn about who they are, where they come from, and every step it took for them to arrive on the stage at Club Indigo. My investigation of the consumer practices and identities of the Indigo Divas required extended periods of with my interlocutors: asking questions, walking and shopping with them, waiting for them in the wee hours of the morning, and conversing with them throughout various part of Johannesburg. It is precisely through this interdisciplinary combination of methods and material that I came to understand how and why, exactly, they claimed their right to be fabulous

8.4 Emerging questions and further opportunities for research

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

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

And maybe this is what made the House of Indigo an historical site of queer political struggle – its constant movements, changes and realignments for more than a decade. But many historical queer nightclubs and institutions have closed down throughout many parts of the world. How then do we document the histories of these spaces as well as the lives of

the people who frequented them? What sort of archive derived from this historical institution? Much like Madame Castello's in the mid-1950s Cape Town, how do we provide historical accounts and archives for these subcultural spaces of queer freedom, consumption, and sociality?

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

Appendix A

Transcribed interview with Phoenix BlackPearl (Miss Black Pride 2015)

Conducted by Katlego Disemelo

Location: Vaal Triangle, Gauteng

Date: 14 January 2017

Katlego: Hello, what did you have for breakfast?

Phoenix: I haven't had breakfast, I haven't eaten actually.

Katlego*:* What's your boyfriend going to tell us?

Phoenix: I don't have a boyfriend, it's true. Why would I lie?

Katlego: So tell me – How old are you?

Phoenix: I'm twenty, turning twenty one in August later this year.

Katlego: And what's your diva stage name?

Phoenix: Phoenix BlackPearl

Katlego: Tell me a bit about your childhood?

Phoenix: I was born here in the Vaal triangle. I am my mom's first male child but I'm the third to my dad. I have a younger brother and two older half-sisters. I actually had a very cool upbringing, being true to myself. I have always been feminine and always engaged in 'girl' activities even in preschool – grade RR. So this is nothing new to me.

Katlego: What do you mean when your say you've always engaged in 'girl' things? Tell me about an experience, sports or..?

Phoenix: I've actually never been a sporty kind of person but I've always had female friends. I've always competed in pageants even in preschool. Basically, I would always dress up and when there were fun activities at preschool, I was always with the girls and did whatever they did. There was once a day when we boys had to wear female stuff and the girls had to wear men stuff. My teacher actually said: "since you're always with the girls, are you going to wear men's stuff?" and I was like: "no, this time I want to be with the boys and wear girl stuff again". So that's what I've always been doing.

Katlego: How did your family respond to your attraction to female things, or what you call 'girl' stuff?

Phoenix: I don't know actually, but from my perspective they've always been supportive. There was a time when I actually 'came out' to them because I thought it was selfish of me to assume that they knew about my sexuality. They might be thinking that I'm 'metrosexual', so I sat down with them and I told them that I am gay. The response was something I wasn't expecting because they told me that they've always known.

Katlego: So who is 'they'?

Phoenix: My parents first and foremost, my mom and dad (who is late) and my grand mom, and my family from my dad's side.

Katlego: So you got a lot of support from them?

Phoenix: I got a lot of support from them.

Katlego: And in terms of your friends and the community outside. How did they respond to your femininity?

Phoenix: I don't know, I guess it's a lack of education but people always have things to say, whether you do good or bad. And of course they have things to say about my sexuality but I think they've actually come to terms with it. They've tolerated me, I wouldn't say understand me but they have learnt to live with the fact that this is who I am and this is what I am.

Katlego: Tell me about the first time you went in drag, can you remember that day, the experience, what you were doing and what was going on?

Phoenix: Firstly, I'd like to classify what drag is because a lot of people confuse crossdressing with drag. I've always crossed dressed but I began dragging in 2013. Drag is actually entertainment, drag is having to dress up in something and do the things you don't normally do on a daily basis. You're basically channelling your alter ego. The first time I had a drag experience was in 2015 and Club Indigo.

Katlego: So Club Indigo was the very first place you entertained people in drag?

Phoenix: Exactly, besides entering pageants, this was the first time I performed, I transitioned, I'd say into being Phoenix.

Katlego: Let's take it step then, tell me about your young self as you were crossdressing? Do you have any special memories?

Phoenix : I only cross-dressed from primary school, the intermediate phase – grades 5, 6, 7. It started off little by little with 'skinny jeans', certain kinds of takkies, 'Carvella' etc. the tops, certain kinds of hairstyles, the 'Mohawks' and the like. I wore whatever I wanted to but I don't remember wearing women's clothing on a daily basis in my childhood.

Katlego: Tell me about your first pageant because you just distinguished between dragging and crossdressing and for you being in a pageant is something different from dragging?

Phoenix: The very first pageant I entered was 'Miss Gay Vaal 2013' but unfortunately it got cancelled after we had registered and auditioned. So the director, Tebogo, after finding out that there was another pageant in November that year, told me that I should enter and it was 'Miss Gay Soweto' and I was like: "Okay, what's there to lose? And besides, I was the only one representing The Vaal. So I thought: "why not?" So I entered and made the 'top twelve' cut. In December it was the finals but unfortunately I didn't place anywhere as I didn't have the qualities of a beauty queen then.

Katlego: What motivated you to go to your very first pageant? What was in you that said: "Let me go do this"? What made you want to enter your very first pageant even though it was cancelled?

Phoenix: I felt that life is too short so I was thinking of trying different things. I've always been an indoor kind of person so me entering a pageant was a way of making fans. It was a way of socialising, a way of being out there and being with other people – people that are regarded as different by the society. Though I felt like

being with such people, my people would empower me to be a better me at the end of the day. So that's why I entered.

Katlego: How were you feeling? Were you scared or..?

Phoenix: I wouldn't say I was scared, I was more excited actually. I couldn't wait to get on stage.

Katlego: Tell me about your first 'Miss Gay Soweto' pageant? What was going through your mind? How were you feeling? Do you still remember?

Phoenix: Yes I still remember. So many things went wrong back then but I corrected them along the way from 2014 to 2015. The finale night, I remember that I had a big swimwear – it didn't fit, it was a bit loose. So that was a bit of a disadvantage. My evening wear again did not fit, it was big, it was actually long so I stepped on it whenever I walked. That's one of my biggest memories of that night. I didn't fall but I was nervous, especially when they were calling the 'top six'. I was hoping that my name or number would get announced but unfortunately it didn't.

Katlego: Tell me about other pageants you've entered since then?

Phoenix: The following year, 2014, I told myself that I would enter the same pageant again. So I started preparing myself. I started practicing how to speak, how to walk, how to dress. I learnt what the difference was between an evening gown walk and a swimwear walk. I started watching international pageants: the likes of 'Miss Universe', 'Miss World', and 'Miss South Africa'. In 2014 I was doing matric, so I had my English teacher help assist me with the general knowledge

questions. I also had my mom assist me. In September, while I was still preparing for November, a pageant organizer contacted me and asked if I was interested in entering his pageant. I turned him down at first however, a week later I changed my mind and was like: "You know I've been working so hard, why don't I use this pageant as a platform to see whether I've grown from last year or not. Lucky enough, I won.

Katlego: How many pageants have you entered so far?

Phoenix: So far I've only entered 6 pageants from 2013 to 2015.

Katlego: What's your most important form of growth from when you first entered till now? How do you think you've grown as a contestant?

Phoenix: I guess I've become more patient, more resilient, and of course I've grown mentally and physically. The people I've met along the way have a hand in grooming the person that I am today, compared to the person that I was back when I was studying entering pageants. A few people actually helped me: Lerato Mokoena of the 'Miss Valentine' and the 'Miss Gay Daveyton' organisations and of course my first director, Zanele Mji[9], and Darryl and Lawrence from Club Indigo.

Katlego: What's the once piece of advice you would give your younger self?

Phoenix: The one piece of advice would be that patience is a virtue.

Katlego: A virtue in terms of?

[9] This is not her real name.

Phoenix: You cannot be something big or have a title overnight. You have to be patient, you have to allow yourself to grow. You cannot force things – if it's not your time, it's not your time. What is yours, will be yours in due time.

Katlego: What is it that motivated you to do drag for the first time, to be the star on stage?

Phoenix: Honestly speaking, I never saw myself as being a performer. I only saw myself as beauty queen. When I won the 'Miss Black Pride' title, I knew that somehow I'd have to perform. I have seen the girls from Club Indigo, I've seen the queens, the divas and I knew that eventually I will have to share the stage with them. Fortunately, it was a month after I had won the 'Miss Club Indigo' second heat when I had my debut as Phoenix.

Katlego: And then, how did you feel? What did you do for preparation?

Phoenix: The preparations were crazy and I knew that the standard was high because I had seen a lot of girls literally bringing the roof down. I knew that I had to go big or go home and I was doing Jennifer Hudson's classic, 'I Am Changing'. One of my biggest memories was the fact that I actually changed on stage. I had a wrap dress and later on in the song I removed the dress and was just in my bikini.

Katlego: How were you feeling? How long did you practice?

Phoenix: I practiced at home, day and night in front of the mirror, with combs and the remote as a mic because I had to practice mic technique you know.

Katlego: Who helped you with those preparations, like walking?

Phoenix: I helped myself actually, with the internet.

Katlego: Like walking to perform, like lip-synching..?

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

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

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

Katlego: You say she's a role model, what is it about her that makes her a role model for you, personally?

Phoenix: The charities she's connected with firstly, the person that she is. There was a point in her life when drama followed her with the Chris Brown saga, I would say that, that motivated me. Whatever you're going through right now does not define who you are. The way that she handled it and the way that she's grown from then, is one of the qualities that drew me to her.

Katlego: Do you feel that it comes out through her music as well? Is that why you identify with her?

Phoenix: Exactly, most definitely. I love her music.

Katlego: And then the naughty girl?

Phoenix: She's quite naughty but she looks innocent. That's what a lot of people say about me. I'm not innocent but they say I look innocent.

Katlego: What is it about drag that keeps you going nowadays?

Phoenix: Music, music, I love music.

Katlego: What kind of music?

Phoenix: Anything, from gospel to RnB, to pop, to soul, to rock – some rock, to old classics – the likes of Tina Turner.

Katlego: So who is your ultimate diva?

Phoenix: My ultimate diva is Beyoncé, definitely.

Katlego: Okay, what about Beyoncé then? What is it about Beyoncé that makes you go crazy?

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

Katlego: Can you tell me about your own drag style? What makes Phoenix, *Phoenix*?

Phoenix: You cannot predict what Phoenix might perform because I've done from Afro-pop to RnB, to pop, to the classics. I've even done a Tina Turner song,

something a lot of people weren't expecting. I'm mostly familiar with Heartbreak songs, heartfelt songs – so people were thinking: "oh, Phoenix is much more comfortable in this kind of music and that's what's expectant from her.

Katlego: Do you think it's important for an artist to be versatile?

Phoenix: I think it is important because as much as it is about us, we're not only entertaining ourselves but the crowd as well. I'm not saying that the crowd should tell us what to perform but I believe that they are the ones coming to watch us, so we have to give them a little something – something that we enjoy as well.

Katlego: Can you tell us about your most beautiful, out of body experience you've ever had on stage?

Phoenix: My out of body experience was during the 'Miss Gay Jozi' auditions last year. I hadn't been to Club Indigo that entire year, the last time I was there was in December. So I thought: "Let me go and fulfil my duty as 'Miss Black Pride'. I knew what was expected of me, one of them was to perform actually. I prepared two songs, I did the first one and I loved it and the crowd loved it too. The second time, before I performed, the reigning 'Miss Gay Jozi' had a show stopper performance and I was thinking: "How am I going to top that?" I was overwhelmed about how I was going to top that. She did an up-tempo song and I only prepared a slow heartfelt song, so I thought: "You know what…" I just prepared the emotion and let it flow. I was doing Jessie J's *Big White Room* and that performance landed me a gig at the 'Miss Gay Jozi' finals. It was one

of the firsts because there has never been a reigning queen performing at the 'Miss Gay Jozi's". It was something big, I remember asking Zelda, Lawrence and Darryl: "Are you sure I'm performing" and they were like: "Ja, you're performing". Everyone loved that performance. People still want me to perform that song. So that has to be one of the best performances I've ever had to date.

Katlego: Tell me about your makeup business? Who taught you how to do your makeup?

Phoenix: I taught myself hey. You wouldn't have time to ask anyone to assist you because she also needs time to sort herself out. You have to look out for yourself at the end of the day. If I have to compare things from then, it was hideous but at least I got the foundation right. That's the one thing I invested it. Even if it's something from the street, it doesn't matter.

Katlego: And before, who did it for you? Your very first pageant?

Phoenix: I did it myself but I had assistance from Tyra, my predecessor and another girl Dimpho.

Katlego: What does drag do for you in your life?

Phoenix: It actually keeps me from things. This is life, I love makeup. Drag is all about makeup, drag is all about costumes and I get to design and do my makeup. Basically, I get to be me while being on stage, while preparing to be on stage.

Katlego: Can you tell me about some of the rewards that you get? Besides the material rewards, something in your heart that makes you go: "This is why I'm going to Club Indigo"?

Phoenix: My love for music, I've loved music ever since. Whenever I leave, I leave with earphones because of my love for music. I love everything that's got to do with the stage, whether it's singing, whether it's performances, whether it's magical acts, whether it's the circus. Anything that's got to do with performance, I adore. So, I know that when I go to Club Indigo and get on stage, I'm going to be at peace. It is my alter ego there but a part of the real me is there too. It's not all about Phoenix.

Katlego: So on an average day, you just hangout?

Phoenix: I just hangout, watch TV, read, listen to music, play with makeup and practice.

Katlego: Do you ever go in drag outside of 'Club Indigo'?

Phoenix: Yes, like now I have a booking in Daveyton for 'Miss Valentine's'. By the way, for 'Miss Valentine's 2015', I took first runner up.

Katlego: So when is it?

Phoenix: Valentine's weekend, that Saturday.

Katlego: Please remind me and we'll go together.

Phoenix: Okay

Katlego: Is the reaction you receive at Indigo the same as outside? I'm asking because we know you from Indigo and of course you know we love you, but do you receive the same kind of love and appreciation?

Phoenix: I do. From what I've encountered, the audience is as welcoming as Indigo.

Katlego: Here in the Vaal, do you ever have bookings?

Phoenix: Not really, the Vaal is not well known when it comes to that. 'Miss Gay Vaal' was cancelled.

Katlego: What are the LGBTI issues like around your neighbourhood?

Phoenix: I have not experienced any hate crime not have I heard of someone being murdered for being gay or lesbian. I don't want to lie, I have never heard of such. I'm not saying it hasn't happened, I just haven't heard of it.

Katlego: For you, what's your experience?

Phoenix: My experience has been sharp, apart from people throwing their two cents, opinions that I don't ask for. Wherever I go it's like that so Vaal is no different.

Katlego: Do you ever go around in drag?

Phoenix: Not drag but I do cross-dress sometimes.

Katlego: For events or just..?

Phoenix: Maybe for events but sometimes I just feel flamboyant when going shopping or whatever. So why not, throw on a pair of skinny jeans or stilettos.

Katlego: So you'll even go to the mall in Daveyton?

Phoenix: Yes, or even to Southgate mall, I like Southgate more often, Vaal mall.

Katlego: Do you ever go to school in cross-dress?

Phoenix: Maybe, I don't know how it's perceived but maybe a kind of top, you know, or skinny jeans, shorts, they are feminine so I would say I'm crossdressing basically.

Katlego: So you guys leave Club Indigo very early, do you ever cross-dress at the taxi rank?

Phoenix: No, at 'Club Indigo' I wear costumes, I don't wear normal dresses. Maybe I'll wear an evening dress and then for the after party of course I'm going to go for a 'freekum dress', something sexy. Something I wouldn't even wear at home, a costume basically. So I wouldn't go to the taxis because you know how these taxi drivers are.

Katlego: How are they?

Phoenix: I've heard stories, I've never encountered anything but they are short minded. They are ignorant. They will bother you, from what I've heard.

Katlego: So what have you heard?

Phoenix: Basically that they bother us when wearing something short. Not just us LGBTI people but even women as well. When you're wearing a miniskirt you may even get raped, not just by taxi drivers but people in the street.

Katlego: Just because of what you're wearing, as if you invited it.

Phoenix: Exactly. So I try and avoid such

Katlego: So when you're at Westgate, you don't go near them?

Phoenix: No I don't.

Katlego: Because on my way here, asking for directions – they scare me too. So for trans people or your trans friends..?

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

Katlego: To be more masculine looking?

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

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

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

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

Phoenix Yes, at the stop signs but not really around here. I wouldn't say I'm friends with the guys but I know them and we get along but I'm comfortable with them and they're comfortable with me. There is respect, not just from them for me but from me for them too.

Katlego: What happens when your family sees you crossdressing?

Phoenix: They're used to it shame.

Katlego: What was their reaction the first time Phoenix came? Have they ever seen Phoenix?

Phoenix: Yes they have. My mom has seen Phoenix at 'Miss Gay Jozi'

Katlego: I mean at events like family and you're all done up..?

Phoenix: Me all done up? I don't know.

Katlego: What was their reaction like?

Phoenix: The first time it wasn't close family, it was relatives and you know relatives wouldn't say if to you face if they have something to say. Sometimes the just don't have, sometimes they have but they just wouldn't say it to your face. I don't know. I was expecting the worst, I'm expecting drama, I'm expecting bible quotes, I'm expecting a whole lot of shebang – but no.

Katlego: What made you expect that? Are they conservative?

Phoenix: One thing people don't know is that I was once a Jehovah's Witness. So I've got relatives who are Jehovah's Witness. Along the way I thought this was a waste of my time and a waste of their time too, pretending to be something that I'm not. We dressed up especially on Sundays when we went to the meetings but I was usually in my skinny jeans and they put it that I was metrosexual. It was before the hair, before the makeup, the whole shebang. So I thought that they thought: "He's just metrosexual", so I had to address them and actually sit them down, including my parents. The only people I actually sat down were my grand-mom, my parents and yes, that was it. Everyone else will sort themselves out.

Katlego: So you go out to an event, or function, or funeral in the whole shebang?

Phoenix: Yes.

Katlego: What was their reaction the first time?

Phoenix: It was at my aunt's funeral, my dad's younger sister in 2015. December, 2015. Their reaction was… it's only the distant relatives who don't know me, who had a reaction.

Katlego: They were happy for you?

Phoenix: They didn't say anything to me

Katlego: But did you see or feel any of their reactions?

Phoenix: Of course I felt their reactions.

Katlego: Which were?

Phoenix: Do you know what it feels like when someone looks at you with attitude? They're probably thinking: "What's wrong with this boy".

Katlego: What gave you the confidence to go? That's what makes me interested. You know how our families and the people in the community can be, what gave you the confidence to say: "me too"

Phoenix: I was reluctant about over-crossdressing, with heels and everything. But I thought: "why not?" I have to overcome this fear, one way or the other. Me fearing is actually me conforming to the society. It is actually me giving into the society. You know what: what you're saying actually hurts me but it doesn't. So my dressing to family events, funerals and the like was a way of me

strengthening myself and to shield myself from not only them but the society as well. I feel that the more society sees you in heels for instance, the more they get used to it. The more they have less to say, but you never know.

Katlego: So for you, visibility will aid in people becoming less ignorant?

Phoenix: Yes, somehow it helps. The more they see you, the more they tolerate you. Even though they won't accept you, they will tolerate you.

Katlego: What's the difference, for you, between acceptance and tolerance?

Phoenix: Acceptance is knowing that this person is gay and gay people are like this etc. You love that person regardless of whatever it is that they are or they are not. To tolerate is: just saying: "this is how this person is just to pass time. This person is gay, okay fine – so what?" where you don't know what gay is. When this person is like this, what happened or what didn't happen? Or this person chose to be whatever it is that they are or they didn't choose or whatever.

Katlego: Do you care? In your life, do you want acceptance or tolerance or both? Do you negotiate?

Phoenix: Well I do want both but if I had to choose, I would definitely say acceptance. Because with acceptance, I would have to teach people what us, the LGBT people, face on a daily basis. Where if it were tolerance they wouldn't know, they would just tag me along and not know what I am or who I am and the things I face on a daily basis – not only me, but my fellow brothers and sisters internationally as well. So I would definitely choose acceptance because it goes hand in hand with education.

Katlego: Do you go to any other clubs?

Phoenix: No, not really.

Katlego: So when you're chilling?

Phoenix: I'm not really someone who likes going out hey.

Katlego: It never interested you, or..?

Phoenix: Not really, it hasn't. Well I've been to a few parties and clubs around.

Katlego: And gay clubs, besides Indigo?

Phoenix: I don't know, the one in Joburg CBD, is it a gay club?

Katlego: It's full of gays.

Phoenix: So if it's a gay club, I've been to that gay club.

Katlego: Did you like it?

Phoenix: I liked it actually, I would go there again.

Katlego: Lawrence was telling me that it used to be a gay club in the 80's actually.

Phoenix: What?

Katlego: But it was a different name.

Katlego: What makes drag, drag for you?

Phoenix: What makes drag, drag is actually having to be on stage, getting to be on stage and deliver - the boldness, the artistry that comes with drag, the makeup, the flamboyance, the extravagance, the glitz, the glam and the costumes.

Katlego: Most of your drag, most of your crossdressing and most of your performance is self-taught. What attracted you to it?

Phoenix: Nothing actually attracted me to it because firstly, I never thought that I'd actually be a beauty queen. So once I entered 'Miss Gay Vaal' it was just to pass time, and to make friends. I didn't actually have much love for pageantry or anything for that matter. So once I entered 'Miss Gay Vaal' I met Tebogo, as I told you, and through him I entered 'Miss Gay Soweto' and through 'Miss Gay Soweto', my love for beauty pageantry began. While I was still nurturing my love for beauty pageantry, I met Darryl, Lawrence and Lerato and that's when I started performing. Basically, one thing led to another.

Katlego: You just told me something interesting, that even a guy can be a drag queen – a straight guy.

Phoenix: Yes, straight people can do drag.

Katlego: What do you mean by that?

Phoenix: Drag is not a sexuality. Drag is fun, drag is art – anyone can do drag.

Katlego: What would you say makes South African drag different from the 'Rupaul's' style of drag?

Phoenix: I would say, our drag is a bit more subtle. As much as we are extravagant, I wouldn't say we are as extravagant as they are on an international level. I would say again that attitude also plays a role in this. I might take drag seriously and then another person wouldn't, so I think drag actually differs. It isn't a

matter of me being from South Africa or from a different country, it actually has to do with one's perspective or one's thought.

Katlego: Would you ever enter something like 'Miss Gay Universe' or 'Rupaul's Drag Race'?

Phoenix: Of course I would, but not now. You know I still want to nurture my foundation first. Maybe enter the likes of 'Miss Gay SA' before going international. Once I go international, I know there's no turning back. You cannot be a 'Miss Universe' and enter 'Miss Soweto'. We have to start somewhere. I'm getting there, one day at a time.

Katlego: So you're still willing to learn more?

Phoenix: I'm still willing to learn. I'm not perfect yet. My drag, my performances, anything that has to do with stage – I still need to improve it. I'm not too comfortable actually.

Katlego: Do you get tips and advice from people at Indigo? What kind of advice do you get?

Phoenix: Of course, I do get advice from them.

Katlego: From who specifically? Name them.

Phoenix: One of them definitely has to be Zelda.

Katlego: Like what? What does she tell you guys?

Phoenix: Firstly, she would complement your performance. She would tell you what to improve on, not only her but everyone at Club Indigo including Darryl and

Lawrence. They would tell you what to improve on, what your best style is but that I choose to ignore because of course yes, I'm probably good at heartfelt and emotive songs. I do try to be as versatile as I can, that I know. They give positive advice on everything else, even the things you wouldn't want to hear.

Katlego: Do they also give you advice on the look?

Phoenix: That's the first thing I tell you.

Katlego: What kinds of things do they say?

Phoenix: You just described Darryl Adams. Mama D is so fussy about the look. How you should look, the boobs, the makeup, the hair, the tuck – she's the mother figure so she has to be fussy.

Katlego: Do you tuck?

Phoenix: Of course, one has to tuck. It depends on the costume, maybe let's say you're not wearing anything tightfitting – you can get away with murder and actually not tuck.

Katlego: Does it hurt?

Phoenix: It does. It actually depends on what kind of tucking. I usually go for the normal tucking.

Katlego: Tell me because I don't know.

Phoenix: Normal tucking is basic tuck. You just tuck your penis without using duct tape or anything and then there's costume tuck for bikini's and swimwear and other kinds of costumes. So basically, it's more severe and the pain is excruciating.

Katlego: But you're there on stage smiling?

Phoenix: Of course, you're there on stage walking, strutting yourself but it hurts. The minute you get back stage you're like: "Ahhhhhhh". That's when you start breathing and sometimes you can't even walk.

Katlego: For the costume type, what do you use? Duct tape?

Phoenix: Duct tape

Katlego: I didn't even know you get duct tape in South Africa…

Phoenix: Yes, even any other tape like cello tape. I have used cello tape.

Katlego: So you tuck your penis under your bum basically?

Phoenix: Yes, you tuck it in between your thighs. You cannot see a thing. You are flat. You can imagine the pain and you're strutting yourself.

Katlego: Do you guys help each other with tucking?

Phoenix: Yes, we help one another, especially those who are not familiar with tucking.

Katlego: So did you also teach yourself how to tuck?

Phoenix: Yes, I taught myself. When I was at home not doing anything, I told myself: "you know what, there's an upcoming event so why not practice tucking" because there is no time backstage.

Katlego: How long does it take you to tuck a costume tuck?

Phoenix: I would say plus minus ten to fifteen minutes.

Katlego: Is there anything like a perfect tuck?

Phoenix: Yes there is a perfect vaginal tuck.

Katlego: Can you do it?

Phoenix: Yes I can but that's the most painful. You literally have to shave everywhere. It's the most painful tuck ever.

Katlego: You've done it?

Phoenix: Yes, when I still entered pageants – that was 'Miss Gay Jozi' and my previous pageants actually.

Katlego: I'm still thinking about the tucking.

Phoenix: It's intense but you get used to it hey. But the costume tuck, I don't want to lie, I don't get used to it and I don't think I ever will. It's hella painful.

Katlego: So what do you do then, instead of the costume tuck?

Phoenix: It's a normal tuck. I have sort of like a G-string – I created a 'gaffer' for myself. All my sisters would know, it's a denim thing. It's rectangular with pantyhose strings on the side and you wear it as a panty. You squat and then tuck, the denim part basically holds the scrotum and the penis in place – it's like a G-string. So the denim part is in between the legs to make it flat.

Katlego: I know tucking is painful but I didn't know that there are levels of tucking.

Phoenix: Costume tucking is like the most excruciating one.

Katlego: And you still have to answer questions at that time?

Phoenix: And you're sweating at that time. At the 'Miss Gay Jozi' it was a pageant but there was a panel of judges outside at Club Indigo. So you would come and

there would be a chair for you and you would sit down. So you can imagine sitting down with that tuck. You can't sit anyhow, you need to have the posture because you're selling yourself. You can't sabotage yourself and want to comfortable. You have to answer questions but you get used to it.

Katlego: It's the job, the show must go on my dear.

Appendix B

Transcribed interview with Kelly Italiana (Miss Club Indigo 2016)

Conducted by Katlego Disemelo

Location: Club Indigo, Johannesburg

Date: 11 March 2017

Katlego: Hi please tell me your name?

Kelly: Okay it is 'Kelly Italiana'.

Katlego: How did you get that name?

Kelly: I was trying to be different. Everyone else has a general name so I thought I should get this 'Italiana' name. It's actually a friend's name who stays in Durban so I decided to use it this side.

Katlego: So are you guys still friends? Does she mind?

Kelly: No, not at all.

Katlego: Does she still do drag?

Kelly: No, she's a woman.

Katlego: If you don't mind me asking, what is your sexual orientation? Do you identify as a gay man, a woman, a Trans woman?

Kelly: As a gay woman.

Katlego: In your everyday life you present as a woman?

Kelly: Yes, every single day.

Katlego: You're a beautiful woman by the way.

Kelly: Thank you.

Katlego: How did you start going into drag performance? Tell me how you started?

Kelly: At first when I came out of the closet, I was butch.

Katlego: When was that?

Kelly: I came out of the closet when I was sixteen years old. As time went on, I turned eighteen and had a thing for women's clothes and shoes. I then decided to try it out and since then I haven't looked back. I've been doing drag since I was eighteen years old.

Katlego: How was your experience when you came out?

Kelly: It was very difficult. I am the child of a drug dealer and on top of that my mother was pregnant and lost the child when I came out of the closet. I blamed myself but as time went on she told me that it wasn't my fault and that things happened. There were complications with the child.

Katlego: Tell me how you grew up? What was that experience like? Where did you grow up?

Kelly: In 'Eden Park' but we were not allowed to play with other children. My father was very protective over us because of his business. If people wanted to kill him – in this business if they can't get you, they go after your family. We were only raised in the house.

Katlego: When you did come out, was your father very protective of you about your identity?

Kelly: Very, he is still protective.

Katlego: So he treats you like his little girl?

Kelly: Yes now. At first he was like why can't I be like his brother who is also gay but he's butch. He is a bit scared of these girl clothes but he accepted it now. He is still very over protective.

Katlego: You said he wasn't sure about the drag? So when he sees you now in your fabulousness?

Kelly: He is still very overprotective over me. He is different now because he calls me his daughter. He always compliments me on what I have on, saying that I look beautiful and stuff like that.

Katlego: So you're his little girl basically? Does he still treat you like a little girl? You're twenty four right?

Kelly: Yes because I'm the last born and I'm twenty three.

Katlego: How did you start performing as a drag artist? Tell me how did it feel? How did you start going into pageants, or when?

Kelly: My first pageant was when I was eighteen in 'Rusteval'. There was a 'Miss Gay Coloured' there. My friend said I should try it because I had a good chance of winning. So I was like: "okay let me just try" and ever since then, I loved it. Ever since then I never looked back, I was always in pageants. I would wait on Facebook for them to put up a pageant so that I could take part in it.

Katlego: How was that experience for you? The first time you went on the stage weren't you nervous? Tell me about it.

Kelly: No, not at all. Okay before I came out of the closet I was a male model. I modelled before so I wasn't scared or frightened to get onto the stage. I was actually excited to walk on stage as a drag woman.

Katlego: So you say it was 'Miss Gay Coloured' right? Tell me about the first time you came to Club Indigo? How did you find out about it? Did you know about it?

Kelly: It was on Facebook. I was scared. I was never at Indigo because back home, I was under Belinda and Gabriella's wing and when they heard about pageants, they would tell me about it. They would never let me come to Club Indigo. When we moved to another place, I wasn't under their wing so I could try it out. I took Darryl's number and asked him separately what kind of pageants they do and how they work. He told me and so I tried. When I came here I could feel that this is home.

Katlego: In what way is Club Indigo home for you?

Kelly: I was welcomed with open arms. I wasn't judged and people around here feel free, they are always free when they come to Indigo. That's what made me feel at home.

Katlego: You're 'Miss Club Indigo 2016' right? What does holding that title mean to you?

Kelly: Words can't even describe it. It is such a fabulous experience. I really love it.

Katlego: How many pageants have you been in before?

Kelly: I've lost count.

Katlego: How many crowns do you have?

Kelly: I have seventeen crowns.

Katlego: What is the stage performance like? Doing lip-synching and all of that?

Kelly: Only at Club Indigo. Indigo was my first time lip-synching.

Katlego: How did that experience go for you? Did you have to practice? Who taught you?

Kelly: I watched the show 'Rupaul's Drag Race'. I always practiced at home. The first time I performed, I was nervous. As time went on it came naturally. I don't practice at all I just choose a song I know and come perform.

Katlego: Who would you say are some of your idols? Who comes to mind first?

Kelly: Obviously, 'Beyoncé'. There's no question about it.

Katlego: What is it about Beyoncé that makes you want to aspire to be like her?

Kelly: There's so much. She is a different person when she is not on stage. When she is on stage, you just lighten up and you want to be like her. You want to move like her. She is also the reason I want to practice dancing in heels like her.

Katlego: Is it difficult? Is it weird?

Kelly: At first but it also depends on the type of heel you have on.

Katlego: Please explain that to me?

Kelly: You have the six inch or twelve inch.

Katlego: So what kind of heel do you practice in?

Kelly: Anyone, except the 'Gaga' ones because those are a bit tricky. I'm even scared to wear them to Indigo because you walk on your toes.

Katlego: Oh, it's the one without the heel?

Kelly: Yes.

Katlego: Where do you practice?

Kelly: At home in my mirror. Sometimes I would walk outside or just sit in my room and close the door and I'll just practice there.

Katlego: You stay in the East, right? How does the community at home receive you when you present as a woman? How is the experience living there as a woman?

Kelly: It's a new area in the middle of East. I don't think they're used to gays because I'm the only gay in that section. I get criticism and people swearing at me but I don't care. There are three houses where people love me. I would be coming from an interview or coming from town in heels, they would come outside and call each other asking me for photos and stuff.

Katlego: Is it not lonely being the only gay woman there? Do you have friends there?

Kelly: No, not at all. I'm used to it because I was raised alone. I'm used to being alone.

Katlego: When you come here there is a sisterhood? Tell me about the other girls? Do you connect outside of Indigo? Do you meet up outside or only in here?

Kelly: Sometimes Layla comes to my house. I've been to Precious' place, Ronelle's place and Rodney's. I'm the type of person where if you want me to come and visit, I will come and visit.

Katlego: Okay. That wraps it up.

Appendix C

Transcribed interview with Ella Motaung (Miss Gay Jozi 2015 2nd runner-up and MGJ 2016 contestant)

Conducted by Katlego Disemelo

Location: Club Indigo, Johannesburg

Date: 6 May 2017

Katlego: Was that your first one?

Ella: It was my first time, yes.

Katlego: How would you prefer to be referred to as?

Ella: Most people in the deaf community get confused because when they see me, I'm a guy but I tell them that I'm a woman. What I prefer most is to be called a woman because even my family know me as a woman.

Katlego: Even at home? Even your family?

Ella: Yes they do know, definitely.

Katlego: Are they very accepting?

Ella: Yes, they are very accepting – hundred percent.

Katlego: Let's go back to 2015, the first time you auditioned. What motivated you and made you want to join 'Miss Gay Jozi'?

Ella: What motivated me to join 'Miss Gay Jozi' was to show people that even though we can't talk or hear what people say, we still have the same mentality, ideas, possibilities and dreams. As people we all fare hundred percent when it comes to God. What I wanted to do was to open up for deaf people that anything is possible.

Katlego: Do you feel that you've shown other gay hearing impaired people those possibilities? Do you feel that you've helped them see that they can achieve what they want?

Ella: Yes I have.

Katlego: Your friends and family..?

Ella: Yes, some of my friends are models from overseas. They are busy building their own deaf and gay contests but they want people to notify them of what's happening around them. We need more support so that our businesses could grow as we are gay and deaf.

Katlego: Where did you grow up?

Ella: In the Free State.

Katlego: What was growing up like for you as an LGBT person and being hearing impaired?

Ella: I grew up in Qwa Qwa, In the Free Sate. People were a bit worried because I'm deaf and gay. It was very shocking for people to really understand who I am. I had to take baby steps to outgrow myself and move to Jozi in order to take the steps in becoming the perfect gay that I want to be and have fun. I moved to 'Fun Valley' where I met a few gay people who helped me to be a 'straight gay' and taught me how to act. That's when I staring understanding myself and the

person that I am. I felt proud of myself for who I was because most gay communities are small, most people don't even notice them especially when it comes to deaf people. It is much more difficult for us to voice out who we are. It was difficult growing up.

Katlego: This is your third time. I am proud of you both. What keeps you coming back?

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

Katlego: Since this is your third time, do you think you have an advantage over the other girls? Have you learnt new things? What gives you an advantage?

Ella: What makes me a different person is that my experience counts a lot because it really helped me develop relationships with other models. I'm a bit sceptical about what's happening now.

Katlego: Why?

Ella: I think I'm different because I have a whole lot of experience from modelling and the people who have taught me. So when it comes to winning the crown, I think I do stand a chance to win it. I just need to be patient and have a positive attitude and I'll win.

Katlego: What does entering 'Miss Gay Jozi' do for you?

Ella: This really develops me bit by bit but you have to start somewhere in order to have something. It started off with a woman teaching a girl child how to be a lady so you need to be inspirational when it comes to these kinds of things. These people I see every day are my family.

Katlego: If you win, what do you think it would do for you personally as Eva since it's your dream? What will this crown do for you? I know you'll cry?

Ella: Yes, I will cry. Having that crown would mean the world to me. I will have the chance to meet up with other models from overseas and other countries and be an inspiration to them. They will know that disabled people can also do it even though the group is very small and their voice is not as loud – but I can be their voice.

Katlego: Alright, thank you and good luck. I wish you all the best.

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