

DEFYING DEFINITION: TRACING THE SOCIOLOGICAL,
HISTORICAL, AND LEGISLATIVE
EVOLUTION OF DRAG

by

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ABSTRACT

Drag has long been misunderstood and difficult to define, especially by those seeking to restrict it. In light of recent legislative attempts to criminalize drag, this paper attempts to answer the question, "How have the sociological, legislative, and historical trajectories surrounding drag influenced its current cultural and legal status?" Through an academic deep-dive through history, this question aims to illuminate the true essence of drag—an understanding often overlooked or misunderstood by those in opposition. Though the art of drag has been evolving for thousands of years, its impact cannot be fully encapsulated in a simple definition: drag is different and unique for every person who partakes. Understanding the complexity and nuance of drag is crucial in challenging misinformed perceptions and advocating for the widespread acceptance of this art form.

INTRODUCTION

In embarking upon this research process, my objective was to synthesize my interest in the performing arts with my academic background in a way that was culturally relevant and significant. Given our current political climate, I repeatedly observed landscapes of immense social warfare surrounding drag and drag performance. It was around that time that the Texas Legislature was in the process of passing Senate Bill 12, a bill that threatened the careers and well-being of not only drag performers but also many members of the LGBTQ+ community as a whole. This bill was unsurprisingly met with a lot of backlash. On top of targeting the art of drag in addition to, as many would argue, our First Amendment right to expression, the bill also inadvertently ensnared a whole slew of groups and professions completely independent of drag, calling *their* legality into question. This oversight was due to the fact that the bill was incredibly vague about exactly who and what it was trying to criminalize. Suddenly, a wide array of things - from bachelorette parties, to productions of Shakespeare, to the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders - were now put at risk. I realized that, in their attempt to criminalize it, the Texas legislators exposed the fact that they didn't know, or didn't *care* to know, what drag really is. At first, this became the basis of my research: I strived to sum up the full scope of drag in an all-encompassing definition, in hopes of understanding why legislators seemed to struggle with the same task. But I quickly realized that this task is immensely daunting: the full scope of the art form is far too vast to sum up in a concise definition, and cannot be truly understood without vast historical, legislative, and sociological understanding. With something that is so relevant and sensitive, I knew it was imperative that I as an ally educated not only myself, but also hopefully others who may not know the full depth and breadth of the art form.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As I began my research in search of the answer to the question “How have the sociological, legislative, and historical trajectories surrounding drag influenced its current cultural and legal status?”, I knew that figuring out what drag truly is would be impossible without going back to its roots. Definitions can change over time, and thus, I knew that I needed to do some historical research in order to fully grasp the journey that drag has undergone to land where it is today. Though I was aware of the fact that drag had been around for a long time, I didn’t know just how extensive its history was. Through my research, I discovered that drag’s historical journey is vast, and stretches across virtually the entirety of recorded history. Drag’s impact is expansive: if the sectors of society containing the presence of drag were put into a venn diagram, it would overlap politically, socially, historically, economically, and religiously.

No one is quite sure where the term “drag” originated; however, numerous theories surround its etymology. One popular theory suggests that it emerged in Britain as a subset of English theater slang in the 1870s, referring to the way the long skirts worn by male actors would “drag” across the stage (Andrew 2023). Others trace its origin back to 1860s Victorian England, crediting its first known use to Ernest Boulton of the famous duo Boulton and Park, who described his cross-dressing act as "drag" (Martin 2023). A third hypothesis proposes that the term entered popular usage from Polari, a secret language developed by the LGBT+ community in England (Hoffman 2023). And some argue that the word “DRAG” simply began as an acronym to indicate that an actor should “dress as a girl” (CBS News 2023). Whatever the true origins are, the Oxford Dictionary dates the word "drag" back to at least 1388, highlighting the extensive reach of its rich history (Hoffman 2023).

Elements of drag can be found across practically every culture for centuries. My background in theatre made me particularly aware of the historical practice of “cross-dressing,” which permeated the stages of ancient Rome and Greece as well as Elizabethan England. During these periods, women were prohibited from performing onstage, leading to men donning lavish dresses and wigs to portray the female characters of classic plays (Martin 2023). Contemporary drag scholars often debate whether this practice even qualifies as drag in the modern sense (Ormand 2003); nonetheless, it is undeniably an early example of female impersonation and one that, similar to present day, was executed in the performance sphere.

A few centuries later, drag began to find its widespread appeal. Drag's rise to popularity in the late 19th and early 20th century was largely owed to the vaudeville circuits, where working-class male performers enthralled audiences with acts performed in female personas. These performances often culminated in a flashy and highly-anticipated reveal, in which performers dramatically shed their dresses or wigs to reveal their true gender (BBC 2023). This era marked the beginning of drag's transition from the fringes of entertainment into mainstream culture. Unsurprisingly, this rise in popularity was coupled with a bubbling rise in resistance.

The history of drag would be incomplete without discussing the history of drag legislation. Though the topic of drag performance is an incredibly hot-button issue in our society today, “cross-dressing” bans and other laws restricting gender expression have actually been present in America for over 100 years (O’Kelley 2023). The vaudeville era not only saw a rise in drag; it also saw a rise in anti-drag legislation. San Francisco was the first city to enact a cross-dressing ban in 1863, prohibiting people from going out in public “in a dress not belonging to his or her sex” (O’Kelley 2023). This led to the implementation of similar “masquerade laws”, as they came to be known, in other states and cities that were aimed at curbing what were seen as

“outlandish” expressions of gender. Some places - like Columbus, Ohio - would just directly follow in San Francisco’s footsteps. Others - like New York State - would instead reinterpret existing masquerade laws. For instance, New York’s masquerade law made it illegal to have your “face painted, discolored, covered, or concealed, or [be] otherwise disguised... [while] in a road or public highway” (O’Kelley 2023). These bills were intended to prohibit people from participating in illegal activities in disguise or costume; in fact, a lot of the time they didn’t even mention cross-dressing at all. Nonetheless, in a way that is eerily similar to legislation today, masquerade laws were used as an excuse to arrest queer and gender-nonconforming people for just existing in public.

No stranger to the law and one of the earliest individuals to refer to himself as a “queen of drag”, a man by the name of William Dorsey Swann was pivotal in pioneering drag’s ascent into popularity (Andrew 2023). Formerly enslaved, Swann began hosting drag dances at his Washington, D.C. home in 1882. After a police raid on one of his parties in 1888, Swann famously confronted the authorities in a cream satin gown, for which he was arrested and charged with "being a suspicious character"; this would happen countless more times throughout his life (Martin 2023). Swann is credited with laying the foundation for modern ball culture.



Figure 1: William Dorsey Swann in drag in 1903, with excerpt from *The Evening Star* detailing his arrest

While drag as we know it today owes much to the influence of ball culture, it has evolved into its own distinctive subculture over time. Though the first drag ball dates back to 1867, ball culture fully emerged alongside the civil rights movement and was predominantly led by Black communities (Buckner 2011). These balls, which functioned like competitions that celebrated heightened expressions of gender, offered a platform for expression and creativity at a time of extreme oppression. Though the ball competitions of the 1960s contained very few categories, with queens primarily portraying Las Vegas showgirls, over time the culture expanded its categories to promote inclusivity, particularly for those who were marginalized or on the fringes of society; to this day, ball culture still mainly consists of disadvantaged groups (Bucker 2011). This heightened acceptance of marginalized people was largely due to the fact that these balls were conducted underground, away from the eyes of the law. It was around this time that the informal "three-article rule" became a catalyst behind many LGBTQ+ arrests. The rule, which

was never truly a law, said that people must have at least three pieces of their gender attire in order to avoid being arrested for crossdressing (Ryan 2023). While this rule is referenced countless times throughout history, with numerous drag performers and LGBTQ+ people of the time expressing accounts of arrest as a result of it, historians have concluded that the three-article law must have either been an informal rule of thumb used by the police or a way for members of the LGBTQ+ community to warn each other. According to Martin Boyce, a New York City resident collared by police in the 1960's for having a Halloween costume that was "too feminine", cross-dressing arrests fell by the wayside almost immediately following the Stonewall Inn uprising; it was around this time that the "three-article rule" also fell out of favor (Ryan 2023).

By the 1970s, ball culture saw a significant growth in its popularity and reach, beginning to permeate into the mainstream. Traces of the culture began to influence popular culture in numerous ways, from colloquial slang to trendy dance moves. In fact, voguing - the dance made famous by Madonna's hit song - originally emerged from ball culture in the 1980's, and voguing categories quickly became popular in the ball community (Bucker 2011).

Ball culture was also the birthplace of the career of RuPaul, host of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and arguably the most famous and influential modern drag performer. RuPaul arrived in New York in the early 1980's, originally living with other homeless drag queens in a park and appearing in underground gay porn movies (Balster 2005). But in 1993 she rose to stardom with her MTV music video "Supermodel of the World", which skyrocketed her to international success and brought drag to the forefront of mainstream culture. This increasing success culminated in the creation of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, a competition-style reality TV show that aims

to find “the next drag superstar.” Today, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* boasts sixteen seasons, eight all-stars seasons, two celebrity seasons, and twenty international versions (World of Wonder 2024), and RuPaul’s influence on drag led to her being named one of Time Magazine's 100 most influential people in the world in 2017 (BBC 2023). The cultural rise in popularity that drag has seen in the last couple decades is due largely in part to RuPaul, and it is because of Ru that it is garnering more widespread acclaim.



Figure 2: RuPaul in a promo photo for RuPaul’s Drag Race

But despite drag’s increasing popularity, an abundance of legislation targeting it still dominates the political landscape today. In fact, the masquerade laws of the 19th and 20th centuries made a resurgence in 2011 when police found new applications for the law, utilizing it to arrest protesters who wore masks in the Occupy Wall Street movement; this once again

highlights how vague legislative terminology can be used as a weapon (Ryan 2023). Similar to Senate Bill 12, new legislation targeting members of the LGBTQ+ community is unveiled every day. In 2023 alone, over 340 anti-LGBTQ+ bills were introduced across the country (O’Kelley 2023). Figure 3 shows the presence of anti-drag legislation across the U.S. Clearly, we’ve made progress since the 19th century, but still in six states, including our own, the art of drag is threatened or banned altogether.

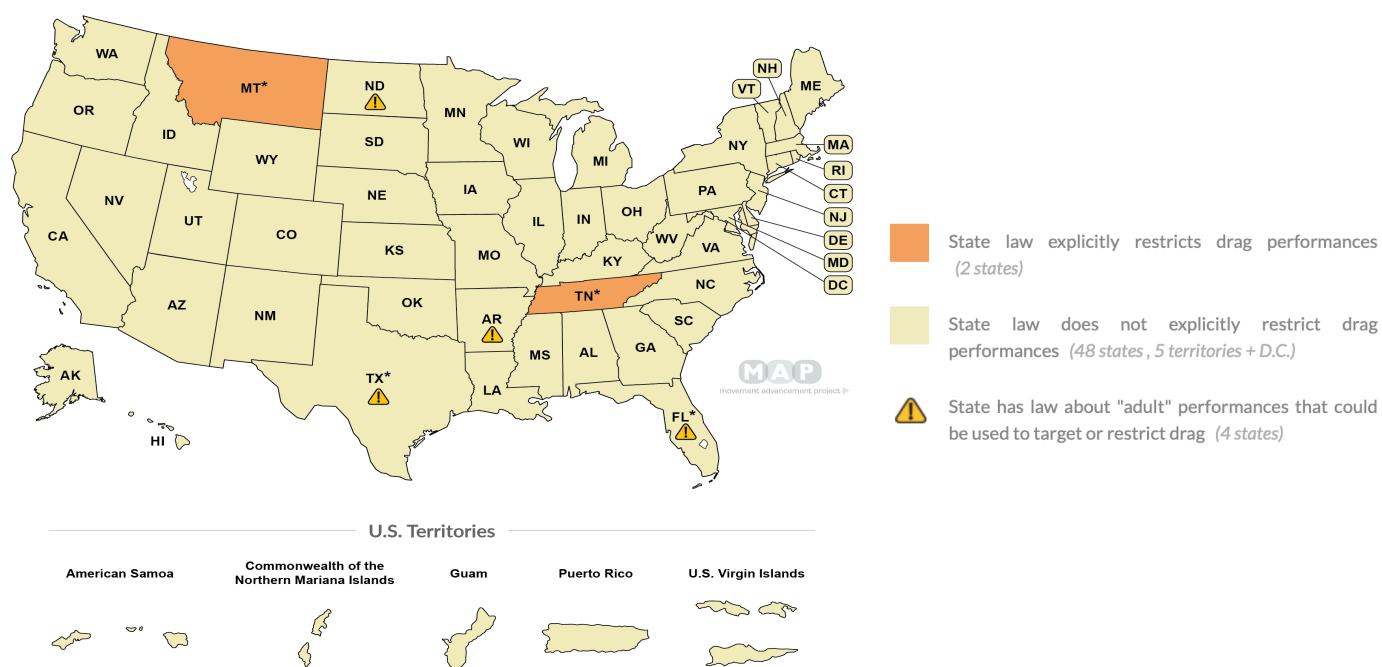


Figure 3: Map depicting anti-drag legislation in the United States

INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality plays a significant role in drag culture, influencing how individuals navigate and express their identities. When viewed through a historical and sociological lens, we can see how the convergence of race, sexuality, gender, and class creates unique experiences for

each individual within the culture. As explored historically, the rise of ball culture alongside the Civil Rights movement integrated expression with activism at the core of the art form, the effects of which still linger today. In fact, as homosexuality gained more visibility towards the end of the twentieth century, it was often drag performers who were at the forefront of battles for equality. Some even believe that it was a drag queen - a Black activist by the name of Marsha P. Johnson - who threw the first brick at the Stonewall Inn riot in 1969 (Cueto-Villalobos & Sremac 2021). Since then, drag queens have mastered the art of utilizing performance to fight against marginalization, and intersectionality continues to shape the culture of the drag community today.

Collective Impression Management

Despite fighting for similar rights, many civil rights leaders actually contested the momentum that Black queer culture was gaining from 1960's ball culture. They sought to suppress non-heteronormative behavior in an attempt to better assimilate with the narrative of the dominant white culture (Buckner 2011). This represents an example of collective impression management, a theory by Erving Goffman that is defined as “the goal-directed conscious or unconscious attempt to influence the perceptions of other people about a person, object, or event by regulating and controlling information in social interaction” (Goffman 1959). The civil rights activists' fight for equality came at the expense of inclusivity and acceptance within their own community, highlighting the complexities of activism and identity within intersecting marginalized groups.

Drag and Transgender Identity

Particularly in recent years, the inclusion of transgender performers within drag has been a point of contention, with pivotal figures in the community expressing reservations about the inclusion of transgender women in the art form. Even RuPaul was hesitant to allow trans women to compete on *Drag Race*. In an interview with the Guardian, RuPaul argued, “Drag loses its sense of danger and its sense of irony once it’s not men doing it, because at its core it’s a social statement and a big f-you to male-dominated culture,” (RuPaul 2018). Though RuPaul has since changed her mind, and *Drag Race* has now seen a number of transgender queens, this paradox emphasizes a complex dynamic within the LGBTQ+ community: discrimination and exclusion still prevail within an art form that claims to provide acceptance for those who may not receive it from mainstream culture.

Drag and Gender

Gender theorists argue that gender is a social construct, an identity that is shaped by social interactions and power dynamics. Theorist Judith Baker argues, “Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed,” (Baker 1990). Drag, too, involves gender performance, although in a way that is heightened and exaggerated. However, there exists an interesting dichotomy within drag, in which members of the "dominant" group assume gender identities of the marginalized group in performance. Yet again, the art of drag strives to subvert expectations, challenging societal norms and emphasizing the fluidity of gender identity.

Drag and Class

Drag's history in working-class culture, particularly in vaudeville, continues to shape its perception. To this day, many refuse to take drag seriously. This is obviously due to a multitude of reasons, but one of the most pervasive is arguably its working-class roots. As explained by Jacob Bloomfield, "Working-class entertainment has often been dismissed as being not artistically credible," (Cain 2023). In spite of the struggle for understanding and empathy, drag culture largely manages to transcend class boundaries in a way that promotes unity and acceptance.

CONCLUSION

I started this project with the question "How do you define drag?" However, with a newfound and holistic understanding of drag, as well as of its origins and context, it became apparent that when taking into account history, culture, intersectionality, and legislation, drag is far too complex and nuanced to be summed up in a simple definition. The art form, shaped by a rich history and a centuries-long battle for liberation, transcends any such limitation. Drag is not simply difficult to define; it's impossible. The intricate web of sociological, historical, and legislative factors underscores this reality, demonstrating that drag is a dynamic and ever-evolving art form. There is no "universal" definition of drag, because drag *means* something different and *is* something different to every person who partakes. By shedding light on the multifaceted nature of drag, I aim to inspire understanding and empathy. Through this exploration, it becomes evident that drag is not just about performance; it is a reflection of our

shared humanity. We may find that we're more similar to these artists than we thought. As RuPaul so famously says: "We're all born naked, and the rest is drag."

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