

CAMPUS

POLITICIZING QUEERNESS: AN EXAMINATION OF THE CURRENT DRAG SCENE AT TUFTS

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Art by D. Gateño

A beloved class returned to Tufts last fall for the first time since spring 2018: Critical Drag. Professor Kareem Khubchandani—also known as their drag persona LaWhore Vagistan—taught this course under the Theatre and Performance Studies Department, culminating in an end-of-semester showcase. The course's description **noted** that it offered students the chance to create individual drag personas and performances that consider the “intersections of gender, nationality, race, class, and disability to understand the implications of putting gender on the body, on stage, and in everyday life.” The course has inspired an enthusiastic interest in drag for many students, as well as the creation of the newly-formed Jumbo Drag Collective.

Ashton Gerber, a sophomore who took Critical Drag last semester, spoke on how the course exposed students to the art of drag and performance, with everyone in the class being “new to drag in some capacity.” Gerber added, “The first month was so stressful... You needed a name for your character, a concept for your character, et cetera.”

Despite the initial stress that came from taking a course that pushed them out of their comfort zone, Gerber quickly found the act of creating a drag persona to be incredibly meaningful. “My character's name is Hyacinth, and... I describe her as if an alien saw the

concept of womanhood, and then [that concept] just gets refracted through a lot of mirrors... I've also described it as a doll character," Gerber said. They also described how their drag persona has become a way of reclaiming ownership over their body, explaining, "For me, the image of the doll is something [being] manipulated, but also [represents] coming to life and coming into a movement, and a perspective of its own rather than being controlled."

The course was split between performance-based exercises and examining drag through a critical lens. Mac Irvine, the teaching assistant for Critical Drag and a third year PhD student in the TPS Department, explained, "[One question] I know Kareem was trying to integrate [into the course] was how drag [can be] a critical intervention that can take on systems of power beyond gender. Kareem recently wrote a book called *Decolonize Drag* as part of a series of books thinking about a variety of subjects [through a decolonial lens]... It's meant to be an accessible teaching tool." Through the use of Khubchandani's book, Critical Drag aimed to situate drag in relation to broader conversations about race, queerness, gender, and class.

In the US, drag has a rich and long history; what many now associate with contemporary drag ball culture originated from queer Black performers and other queer performers of color. The first self-proclaimed drag queen in the US was **William Dorsey Swann**, who was born into enslavement in the 1860s and began hosting underground drag balls in the 1880s and 1890s. Swann's drag balls, which were attended mostly by formerly enslaved men, became early sites of queer prosecution and resistance, as police frequently raided and arrested participants.

Many Black drag queens continued to face frequent prejudice in interracial drag balls in the 20th century, leading to **the emergence of ballroom houses** in the 1970s in Harlem, New York. Ballroom houses, which function as a type of family unit led by house "mothers" or "fathers," became a crucial site of security for Black and Latinx queer and trans performers who refused to participate any longer in Eurocentric drag balls. In a **HISTORY article**, Julian Kevin Glover, an assistant professor of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies and Dance and Choreography at Virginia Commonwealth University, explained houses provide "the basic kind of kinship structure and also [demonstrate] alternative possibilities for what kinship can look like. Moving away from this reliance on one's biological family, and complicating ideas of a family of choice."

The opportunity for drag-born kinship and community was powerful for students in the Critical Drag class and impacted how they viewed the broader queer community at Tufts. For many, Critical Drag was the first opportunity to be in a close community with other queer people at Tufts. “I think that I found a new community on this campus that I never would have found if I hadn’t done critical drag,” said sophomore Jordan Monk, who took Critical Drag last semester. “By the end of the semester, [the class] was like a drag family.” Julian Hammond, a Resumed Education for Adult Learning senior, described Critical Drag as “a once in a lifetime opportunity” and one of the best things they’ve ever done in their life.

Not only did students find a queer community within the course, they were also able to explore aspects of their gender identity and challenge hegemonic notions of gender. Monk said, “Being in Critical Drag, I got to explore parts of myself that I’d never gotten to explore before. Not only performance-wise, but also identity. I would like to say that the class is actually what pushed me into coming out as non-binary, which is something that I’m so happy to do now.” They explained that seeing how others in the class interpreted their own gender identity influenced new understandings of their own. Gerber expressed a similar sentiment, saying, “There was so much uncertainty since the [class] focus was on exaggeration, gender performance, and gender fluidity rather than any individual person’s actual identity... so you got a non-binary reading of everyone.”

Recognizing the course’s impact, Hammond was motivated to find a way to keep the campus drag community they found alive and expand it to other Tufts students. They teamed up with senior Lee Romaker to create the Jumbo Drag Collective. Hammond and Romaker, who both study Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, decided to abandon their original individual senior capstone projects to create JDC as a means of cultivating a space that allows students to carry the same positive experiences they had in Critical Drag, outside of the classroom. This semester, the duo is hoping to lay the groundwork for JDC to become a TCU Senate-recognized club on campus. For now, JDC is meant to be a collaborative space for students to come together to learn about the techniques and practices of drag, with the hopes of allowing students to perform in some capacity by the end of the semester.

Discussing their intentions behind JDC, Hammond acknowledged the dissonance that emerges with the presence of drag, which is political in nature, growing at an institution like Tufts—which they see as “first and foremost a business.” It’s important to

recognize how drag is not merely an art form, but has **historically been** utilized as a political tool in the queer community. Speaking to the fact that drag has historically been a way of building community for queer people of color, Hammond said, “I hope [JDC] doesn’t just become a fun thing for middle and upper-class gay, white boys. It’s not that they don’t deserve fun, I just feel like there’s already so much danger of appropriation... and not knowing the history of [drag] as an art form.”

Simultaneously, in a year where nearly 14 different states have proposed **26 legislative bills** targeting drag in some form, it’s important that drag is able to continue to exist. However, there remains a need for drag on campus to not only entertain, but also retain its political roots.

Hammond and other Critical Drag students saw a contrast between the type of queerness that institutions like universities promote and the type of queerness they saw and desired within Critical Drag and JDC. Gerber said, “I think schools want to have a very sanitized [queerness], like ‘We have such nice gay people.’ Everyone in [Critical Drag was] lovely, but I don’t think nice gay people would be the first description I would have [for many in the class]... It’s a lot of people who are very political in their queerness.” With the idea of political queerness in mind, Hammond noted in a written statement to the *Observer* that, while it is important JDC becomes an official club, they recognize how JDC could potentially “lose some autonomy because you have to follow the rules of the university. I’d love to see JDC utilize drag as a tool for disrupting the normative status quo (in and outside of Tufts), but you trade some of that radical possibility when the institution is the one signing the checks... Do anything they don’t like and they’re liable to take away your funding.”

Despite these concerns, Hammond understands how JDC holds the potential to allow “experience[s] that don’t typically exist within a normative university setting” to occur, and create a space for opportunities “that otherwise would not have been possible.”

While there are fundamental questions and concerns as to what drag can look like and mean on campus, the desire among some students and faculty to see spaces of drag and queer visibility expand at Tufts has already resulted in promising efforts. Having spaces on campus for students to engage with questions of how political drag relates to their individual identities has the potential to promote real political and personal

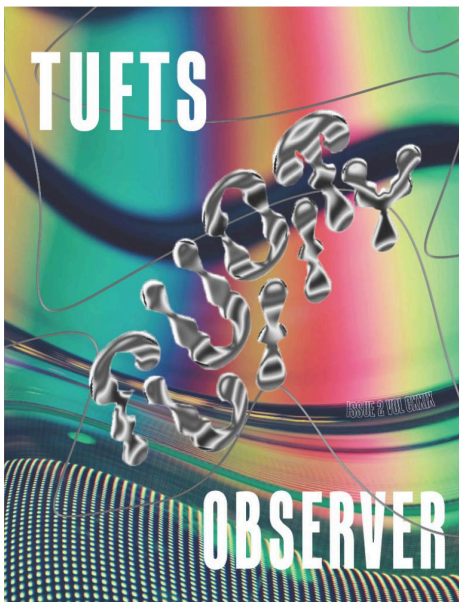
growth. As Gerber put it, “Drag pulls the most intense things out of you... I don’t think you can avoid it. Drag will change you in a very fundamental way.”



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