

## Drag Becomes Them: Voices and Identities Beyond the Stage

Alec MacIntyre

### Introduction (In Which I Break Things)

On a Monday night in March 2014, I made my weekly trip to the Blue Moon to watch *RuPaul's Drag Race* in the company of the bartenders, performers, and other regulars. Though many of us could watch *Drag Race* at home or online, we gather at the bar to share commentary on the episodes and to see the live drag shows put on by a rotating cast of performers after the broadcast. This particular week, Moon Baby was set to perform after *Drag Race*, and she was also the guest bartender during the episode, in both instances as her invented character Ann Teak.

Ann Teak, as I have found out from seeing performances and asking Moon Baby, is a middle-aged woman from Pittsburgh's South Hills. She has a Ph.D. in Early American History and teaches at Point Park University, but the only subject that ever comes up in her classes is ghost stories. She wears oversized, mismatched clothing in bold colors and patterns, with big hair—at least compared to Moon Baby's primary drag character—and "Urkel" glasses with thick lenses. She drinks a *lot* of white wine. (Moon Baby drinks PBR and Yuengling.) But the most striking feature of the Ann Teak character is her voice. The first time I heard Ann Teak, the night she was guest bartending, my hearing was that Moon Baby was doing an impression of drunk Carol Channing. While this first impression was partially correct—there *is* some Carol Channing in Ann Teak's voice, and Ann Teak *is* drunk most of the time—my first hearing missed that this is all filtered through a strong Pittsburgh accent, flattening vowels and resonating words through the nose. Combined with the drunken slurring of words, malapropisms, and mispronunciation of consonants (à la Carol Channing), this Pittsburgh accent renders Ann Teak's speech mostly unrecognizable as English.

---

Alec MacIntyre (PhD in Ethnomusicology, University of Pittsburgh). This essay is based on his dissertation, *Singing is a Drag: Gender, Voice, and Body in Drag Performance*, in which he proposes new theories of the relationships between voice, body, and identity based on several years of ethnographic fieldwork with drag performers in Pittsburgh, PA, and other American cities. In addition to his interests in voice studies and gender studies, Alec works on film sound and popular music in pre-Revolution Cuba.

On the night in question, Ann Teak's butchery of language was especially apparent during her performance in the post-*Drag Race* live show. She sang a version of RuPaul's "Can I Get an Amen?" over the commercial recording, drowning out the existing vocal parts with her own interpretation of text and melody, sometimes attempting to sing along with RuPaul and sometimes speaking back to the recording as though it could respond. Throughout the performance, she would latch onto single words in RuPaul's lyrics, using those words as starting points for digressions. In the first line of the song, for example, RuPaul sings, "Giving all you could to the relationship/ Like a full-time job."<sup>1</sup> Ann Teak sang, "RELATIONSHIP! ...Full-time job! ...You have to work...at your job...nine to five!"<sup>2</sup> She proceeded through the first chorus and second verse in this manner, occasionally syncing up with the recording for a word or two. During the second chorus, Ann Teak began to speak back to RuPaul's words, answering the titular "Can I get an Amen?" line with, "No!...I'm not typically religious." My immediate response to this was laughter. It is funny, silly even. But, true to the tradition of camp drag, it also raises very serious questions with its silliness: who is singing? And where is the voice?

At first, "who is singing?" seems a silly question. The body on stage is producing the sounds we hear. But whose body is on stage? Roland Barthes might tell us that the sonic component of Ann Teak's singing—the "voice" as he calls it—is sounding a singular, unique body without a name or cultural context, while the linguistic component is sounding a subjectivity, Ann Teak's mind inside a nameless body.<sup>3</sup> This model presents a problem in that Ann Teak is a character created by Moon Baby and only exists when Moon Baby allows her to. So is it really Ann Teak's subjectivity being sounded here? Or is it Moon Baby's? If it *is* Moon Baby's subjectivity being sounded through Ann Teak, what are we to make of the several different voices Moon Baby uses when playing herself in drag, herself out of drag, Ann Teak, or her other stage persona Becky Punkrock? Where is subjectivity? *Who* is singing?

Suzanne Cusick's theory of gendered voices—her contribution to *Audible Traces*—is equally unsatisfying when applied to Ann Teak's performance. In her chapter for *Audible Traces*, Cusick understands the singing voice—with or without language—as directly sounding a gendered subjectivity. Cusick's view of gender

---

<sup>1</sup> RuPaul Charles and Lucian Piane, "Can I Get an Amen? (feat. Martha Wash)," on *Born Naked*, RuCo, Inc., released 24 February 2014.

<sup>2</sup> This was, of course, filtered through Ann Teak's drunken Pittsburgh accent, making it nearly indecipherable in real time. Fortunately, a video recording of the performance exists, and this has enabled me to transcribe Ann Teak's words after the fact.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image, Music, Text*, Stephen Heath, translator (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

in this piece is, in name, shaped by Judith Butler's model of gender as performative, but, in practice, simply reiterates and reifies patriarchal tropes that collapse the masculine/feminine, culture/nature, and mind/body binaries onto each other.<sup>4</sup> Despite Butler's arguments against doing so, Cusick links gender directly to the body and, with no irony whatsoever, describes masculine singing as using the voice in "unnatural" ways to embody masculinist "mind over matter" philosophy, while feminine singing embraces the "natural" sound of the voice.<sup>5</sup> So, if Cusick were to experience Ann Teak's performance, she might tell us that Ann Teak's singing enacts a masculine subjectivity because the body sounding Ann Teak was assigned male at birth and is rejecting "natural" male vocal sounds. But that reduces Moon Baby to her anatomy, collapses gender identity onto the body, ignores gender expression, and does not tell me who is singing. Who is singing?

Judith Butler might answer with "who indeed?" She would understand Ann Teak as a fictional character—which she is—but Butler would understand Moon Baby the same way, and this poses more of a problem. For Butler, subjectivity is a constant performance, enacted through repetitions of speech-acts governed by rules of intelligibility.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Ann Teak performs herself into being, but so does Moon Baby. Neither is more "real" than the other because both are constructed claims on some sort of social position that happen around a (somewhat incidental) body. While Butler's theory is helpful in understanding how identities take shape in social contexts, her insistence on looking at social constructions *around* bodies sidesteps the materiality of the body on stage producing sounds that I hear. So Butler is very interested in how the "who" happens, but not so much in the singing.

---

<sup>4</sup> Cusick's analysis here is carried over from the theory advanced in her 1994 article, "Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem," in which she argues that a feminist musicology must embrace the stereotype that women are closer to their bodies and to nature. The language of her critique in the 1994 and 1999 pieces echoes language used by Sherry Ortner in "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture," (in *Woman Culture and Society*, Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974). But Cusick's use of the mind/body and nature/culture binaries in connection with feminist theory does not share Ortner's somewhat barbed criticism of the woman-as-closer-to-nature trope. Ortner's observations show equations of female-assigned bodies with nature to be tropes invented to perpetuate masculine domination. Thus, it is curious that Cusick would want to preserve these tropes as a supposed service to feminist theory.

<sup>5</sup> Suzanne G. Cusick, "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex," in *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music*, Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley, eds. (Zürich: Carciofoli Verlagshaus, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). See also: Butler, *Excitable Speech*; Butler and Gayatri Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State?*.

Barthes, Cusick, and Butler fail to provide a satisfying explanation of who is singing in Moon Baby's Ann Teak act because they either reduce the voice to the body or ignore the body completely. The former model does not account for the complex networks of social meanings surrounding the voice, while the latter focuses too closely on the social and loses the material. A theory of voice that works for Ann Teak's performance must account for the materiality of sound and how it fits into constructed networks of meaning. Bernard Stiegler's theory of voice as prosthesis (in *Technics and Time*) does this. If Stiegler were to see and hear Ann Teak perform, he might tell us that her voice is simultaneously of the body and man-made.<sup>7</sup> The body shapes the material qualities of the voice: Ann Teak sounds like Ann Teak because of the physical properties of the body producing and resonating the sounds. But those sounds are not a "voice" until they are understood as such through the act of being heard—by the body making them or by another body. In this respect, "voice" is man-made. So how does this help us to answer the question of who is singing?

Stiegler's theory of voice is based in Deleuzian ontology and does not differentiate between mind and body, nature and culture. This is important because Barthes, Cusick, and Butler use versions of Cartesian ontology, in which there is a mind/body split and subjectivity exists in the mind. Removing the mind/body binary, as Stiegler does, removes the question of subjectivity. Because mind and body are one substance, thought, affect, and sensory experience are also one. So, instead of subjectivity, being is bodily experience without being reducible to the body, and it is constantly in flux because experience is cumulative.<sup>8</sup> So, though Stiegler understands the "who" in "who is singing?" differently than most of us have been taught to understand it, his answer can tell us more about what Ann Teak's voice does than could Barthes, Cusick, or Butler.

Using Stiegler to listen more closely to Ann Teak, we can say that her body shapes the material qualities of the sounds she makes, and her choices about how to use her body to shape the sound—and our unconscious categorization of the sound when we hear her—are filtered through the cultural apparatus in our brains. And the brain is part of the body.<sup>9</sup> This means that Moon Baby's knowledge of cultural codes surrounding body, gender and voice—the codes that inform how Ann Teak looks and sounds—does not just exist in her mind. (That

---

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time: The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> This is "becoming." (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1975. See also: Amy Cimini, "Baruch Spinoza and the Matter of Music"; Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*.) Cartesian subjectivity is fixed, and "becoming" (or "process" for Whitehead) is not. This lack of fixity is what is important and is where Spinozist ontology intersects with Butler's critique of subjectivity.

<sup>9</sup> This, I think, is the key point separating Stiegler from Butler.

is not possible in Deleuzian ontology.) This knowledge exists in her body<sup>10</sup> and allows the construction of all her identities, including Ann Teak. But this knowledge also exists in the brains, eyes, and ears of her audience, allowing them to read the humor and social commentary in the ways she uses her body as Ann Teak. So, when Ann Teak sings, we are hearing detailed knowledge of cultural codes around body, voice, and gender manifesting as a silly character for the purpose of social commentary. Knowing this, we can begin to ask questions about how Ann Teak and her audiences share the knowledge necessary to create and understand the humor in the character, and this has to do with what the Blue Moon is as a space.

### Queer Space, Busted Aesthetics, and Intelligibility of Signs

If we were to take Ann Teak and place her in any other drag venue in Pittsburgh, the humor and social commentary in her performance would not be as intelligible as they are in the Blue Moon because of what the Blue Moon is. The Blue Moon is not a “gay bar,” at least not in the commonly understood sense of the term. There *are* a lot of gay men who frequent the Blue Moon, but the bar does not define itself as a gay space. Andy, the manager, works very hard to make the Blue Moon a safe haven for *all* members of the queer community, especially trans and other gender non-conforming people. Because of this inclusive definition of queerness at the Blue Moon, the clientele is far more diverse<sup>11</sup>—and far more queer—than at other “gay bars” in the city.

The inclusion of all varieties of queerness in the Blue Moon’s clientele means that many of the people in the bar on a given day are well-versed in the practical applications of gender theory because they need it to explain their identities to people in everyday life.<sup>12</sup> This base of knowledge, in turn, allows drag at the Blue Moon to make pointed social commentary that references critical theory. Ann Teak’s version of “Can I Get an Amen?” is part of this socially critical drag. In mangling RuPaul’s melody and lyrics while speaking back to RuPaul’s recorded

---

<sup>10</sup> Amy Cimini, “Baruch Spinoza and the Matter of Music: Toward a New Practice of Theorizing Musical Bodies,” PhD diss., New York University, 2011. See also: Stiegler, *Technics and Time*; Whitehead, *Process and Reality*.

<sup>11</sup> Despite the diversity of queer identities in the Blue Moon, its population of performers and patrons is overwhelmingly white. However, there is ethnic diversity within the whiteness, which is important in the larger historical and geographical context of Pittsburgh’s ethnic neighborhoods. Blue Moon performers are also aware of their own whiteness and will occasionally make it the butt of a joke in their stage acts.

<sup>12</sup> Gender non-conforming people experience a near-constant stream of micro- and macro-aggressions aimed at invalidating their identities. Survival and sanity depend on learning how to talk and think about gender in ways that are affirming.

voice, Ann Teak challenges RuPaul's iconic status and the hegemony of aesthetic and gender norms put forward by *Drag Race*. But this critique is only intelligible because it takes place in the Blue Moon, in front of an audience with the cultural apparatus to understand all the levels of the joke.

The cultural literacy required to understand Ann Teak exists within the larger context of Blue Moon drag articulating a queer politics in opposition to homonormativity.<sup>13</sup> This manifests through a deliberately "busted" aesthetic: Blue Moon performers reject the beauty norms of mainstream drag, embracing looks and sounds associated with amateurish inexperience. This aesthetic of cultivated "busted" drag changes with performers and show themes, but Blue Moon queens (and their audiences) harbor a fairly consistent level of disdain for "boring" drag focused on the transformation from "handsome" man to "pretty" woman.<sup>14</sup> Rather than reproducing the gender binary and normative standards of beauty, Blue Moon drag is trashy, ugly, silly, messy, and it makes use of voices in ways that break with both conventional drag and conventional ways of understanding how voices attach to genders and bodies. Moon Baby is but one node in the network of Blue Moon performers whose art demands new ways of thinking about voice. For context, it is necessary to consider other artists and their approaches to sound.

Though she is no longer a regular performer, Amy Vodkahaas is an important figure for the Blue Moon's aesthetic, especially as it relates to voice. In opposition to contemporary drag performance practice—especially to the performance practices put forward on *Drag Race*—Amy often sings live when on stage. Because she was classically trained as a countertenor, her singing maintains clear separation between modal register and falsetto, and the different ranges and their associated timbres create multiple gender expressions within a single performance. When Amy sings, she usually starts the song in falsetto, a conscious vocal caricature of stereotypical femininity that sounds like exactly what it is: a cartoonish distortion of vocal gender norms. Within a few lines, though, she drops into her modal register, controlling the timbre very tightly so that the octave drop in pitch sounds like a husky-voiced cabaret singer rather than a macho baritone. Throughout the rest of a performance, she alternates between falsetto and modal register, switching octaves to add non-linguistic emphasis to particular lines of text. By using her voice in this way, Amy is playing on assumptions about how gender attaches to

---

<sup>13</sup> For a definition of this term, see: Laura Kacere, "Homonormativity 101: What It Is and How It's Hurting Our Movement," *Everyday Feminism*, published 24 January 2015. The larger question of performance aesthetics articulating queer politics is discussed in my dissertation, in relation to the concept of affective tone. (Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010.)

<sup>14</sup> Laurie Norris, "Of Fish and Feminists: Homonormative Misogyny and the Trans\* Queen," in *The Makeup of RuPaul's Drag Race: Essays on the Queen of Reality Shows*, Jim Daems, ed. (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland, 2014).

pitch ranges and bodies—assumptions that are quite familiar to the gender non-conforming audiences in the Blue Moon.

Cherri Baum is also an important figure in understanding the aesthetics of Blue Moon drag because of the way politics intersect with her art. Cherri's drag frequently incorporates elements of surreal performance art, fitting with the general rejection of beauty norms at the Blue Moon, and, when she is not doing high-concept drag, her performances take an overtly feminist tone. On several occasions, Cherri has dressed as Gloria Steinem and lip-synced to songs poking fun at misogynist double-standards around professional behavior and sexuality. In both types of performance, Cherri is enacting serious commentary that retains the excess of camp drag while taking a darker approach to its humor. This darker, more serious drag stems from Cherri's relationship to gender on- and off-stage. Unlike typical drag queens,<sup>15</sup> who have male gender identities in everyday life and play female characters on stage, Cherri identifies as a woman all the time. Thus, the distinction between Cherri the person and Cherri the character is in the surreal qualities of her high-concept drag and in taking on the appearance of a feminist icon for overtly political pieces. Cherri's use of pre-recorded voices in her stage act is, at once, a decision with an immediately practical justification—Cherri is not confident in her singing abilities—and a way of playing on the drag trope of separation between one's "inner self" and the character on stage. By taking on the appearance of Gloria Steinem and lip-syncing to a voice that is neither hers nor Gloria Steinem's, Cherri enacts an overly literal parody of normative drag that is only legible as parody because the audience knows her as a person and a performer.<sup>16</sup>

With the context of Cherri and Amy, we can return again to Moon Baby and Ann Teak as challenges to aesthetic and gender norms in drag and in society at large. Like Cherri, Moon Baby is more than a character; she exists on- and off-stage. And, like Amy, Moon Baby often sings live in performance, sounding her gender fluidity with deliberate choices in register and timbre. Ann Teak is one of these choices: her drunken slurring and butchery of language are instances of the Blue Moon's "busted" aesthetic that pokes fun at fixed, binary gender and mainstream drag. Though Ann Teak is binary-identified—a self-professed biological woman—Moon Baby is not, and it is a masterpiece of queer social commentary that Moon Baby's binary-identified character cannot speak or sing intelligible words.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Especially on *Drag Race*. (Norris, "Of Fish and Feminists".)

<sup>16</sup> For a full analysis of this performance, see my dissertation: *Singing is a Drag: Gender, Voice, and Body in Drag Performance* (University of Pittsburgh, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> This is a meta-level subjectivity joke. Usually, queer subjectivities are the unintelligible ones, (Butler, *Gender Trouble*.) but, by having Ann Teak destroy language, Moon Baby is making the normative subjectivity incomprehensible. (Subjectivity is displayed through language as evidence of thought/interiority.)

The remainder of this article discusses nuances in the vocalization of identity across Moon Baby's stage personas. Each identity—Moon Baby, Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock—is differentiated visually and sonically, and each is an expression of a particular gendered identity that is or has been important to Moon Baby. Moon Baby's ability to move between these personas while fully inhabiting them provides a working model for understanding identity and voice as fluid and performative. And, because Moon Baby, Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock exist outside performance venues, they also push on boundaries between real and fictive spaces, thus bringing fluid identity out of the theater and into everyday life. This last is important because, if taken seriously, it presents a radical challenge to current socially- and state-sanctioned definitions of identity as fixed to the body and fixed over time.

### **Multiple Personalities**

Moon Baby's stage acts are focused on embracing and becoming all parts of herself, even when she takes on the personas of Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock. This is because Moon Baby (the primary artistic identity), Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock are ways of playing with social identity categories through distinct visual and vocal presentations that are or have been part of the artist known as Moon Baby. Moon Baby, Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock, while nominally fictional characters, are representations of real people as Moon Baby experiences them. By inhabiting multiple identities, especially through the voice, Moon Baby provides a radical queer commentary on existing constructions of identity and on how identities are spoken and sung into being.

Moon Baby has created Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock, in addition to her primary artistic identity, to explore and give voice to all parts of herself, meaning that Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock are not entirely distinct from Moon Baby, though all three personas look and sound different. Moon Baby voices herself, Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock in different registers and with different speech patterns, inflections, and accents. The three personalities also have distinct musical tastes: they sing different songs and relate to musical sounds in their own ways. These different vocal and sound worlds, corresponding to each of Moon Baby's personalities, show how each personality perceives and moves through the world, as well as how each personality represents itself to the world. In addition to this, Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock—the secondary personalities—show how Moon Baby perceives and represents the people they are based on. In other words, Moon Baby uses Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock to make sense of parts of herself that might otherwise be difficult to reconcile. Ann Teak is based on Moon Baby's mother, while Becky Punkrock is based on teenaged Moon Baby. Moon Baby as the primary identity is a queer, gender fluid alien, an aspirational figure for the



human artist embodying all these personalities, while Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock are relationships she is working through.<sup>18</sup> The latter two personalities are part of Moon Baby, but the Moon Baby identity is the most comfortable one for the artist.<sup>19</sup>

The different voices for each of Moon Baby's identities are also telling case studies supporting Stiegler's argument that voice is a prosthesis.<sup>20</sup> Though Moon Baby, Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock exist in a single body, the sounds each respective identity makes through that body are not the same. The differences in each character's vocal personality help to perform age, gender, education level, location, and mental state, as well as being a form of campy, satirical commentary on the ways voices are heard to perform identity more generally. In other words, Moon Baby, Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock are detailed studies in how identities are made legible within the existing cultural framework for interpreting visual and auditory signs. As with other forms of drag, these studies of identity in practice are presented in a way that is simultaneously serious and comical. Moon Baby's performances are funny because she manages to present absurd combinations of words, sounds, gestures, and images in ways that seem to logically fit with the identities of each character she performs. But the same elements are also serious critiques of the way identity functions in the current social climate, and this is done through Moon Baby's intimate knowledge and strategic mobilization of visual and vocal shorthand for particular physical and social characteristics.

That Moon Baby makes this satiric commentary specifically through adopting the identities of people with personal importance to her is also an act of self-care and, therefore, radical queer politics.<sup>21</sup> Ann Teak, Becky Punkrock, and Moon Baby are entertaining personalities that make pointed commentary about gender, body, voice, and identity as constructed through hegemonic norms and philosophies. Ann Teak, Becky Punkrock, and Moon Baby are also negotiations of very personal attachments and conflicts, a way for a queer person to make sense of important figures in her life. At the same time that this is very personal for Moon Baby, the experiences that shaped her performance personalities are common experiences for queer people who have gone through a "coming out" process. Declaring oneself as LGBTQ to family and friends can sometimes lead to strained relationships or losses of relationships with people who had once been highly supportive. Because of these common experiences, seeing Moon Baby negotiate her

---

<sup>18</sup> Moon Baby, personal communications with the author, April 2015–November 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Stiegler, *Technics and Time*.

<sup>21</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Selfcare as Warfare," *Feminist Killjoys: Killing Joy as a World-Making Project*, published 25 August 2014, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/08/25/selfcare-as-warfare/>.

own family dynamics through funny stage acts can be a way for queer people to be emotionally present for one another in the Blue Moon.

Moon Baby's embodiment of Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock involves more than superficial changes. During shows featuring Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock, Moon Baby becomes<sup>22</sup> those personalities, fully inhabiting them and letting them shape how she uses her body. Much like the change in Chad Michaels<sup>23</sup> appearance when he becomes Cher for his stage act, Moon Baby's outward appearance changes when she becomes Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock, as does her voice. And, like Chad Michaels taking on Cher's recorded voice in a performance, taking on Ann Teak or Becky Punkrock's voice is transformative for Moon Baby. She moves, speaks, sings, dresses, and engages with social media differently when inhabiting each of her personalities, and performing from each of these different perspectives allows her to make social commentary that would be inaccessible if she were to only perform as Moon Baby. Becoming Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock lets Moon Baby temporarily experience the world through those identities, absorbing what she can from them, even as she critiques some of their aesthetic and political values.

### Ann Teak's Drag Show

As discussed above, Ann Teak is a middle-aged woman based on Moon Baby's mother, and Moon Baby has given her a very elaborate backstory. Ann Teak lives in a very specific location in Pittsburgh and has a very specific profession. She lives in the South Hills and teaches Early American History at Point Park University so that she can pursue her passion for ghost stories. But this backstory, while entertaining to locals who understand the significance of the South Hills and Point Park, is not the most important nor the most satiric part of Ann Teak. It is the way Ann Teak speaks and sings, especially when surrounded by queer people, that really shows Moon Baby negotiating ideas about voices, bodies, and identities.

Ann Teak hosts a semi-regular event at the Blue Moon, a clothing auction called Ann Teak's Drag Show. (This is, of course, a play on the television series *Antiques Roadshow*.) During these auctions, Ann Teak sells clothing brought in by volunteers (who model their own clothes) or from Moon Baby's surplus wardrobe, with proceeds often going to LGBTQ support organizations. As an auction, the format is relatively simple: a model comes out of the dressing room wearing the item up for sale and Ann Teak takes bids on it. But Ann Teak has developed her own language for narrating and taking bids at these auctions, a language that

---

<sup>22</sup> Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4/3: 469-488.

<sup>23</sup> *RuPaul's Drag Race* Season 4 and professional Cher impersonator.

confuses outsiders wandering into the Blue Moon as tourists, especially because Ann Teak's language has been picked up by queer Blue Moon regulars.



In addition to layering a thick Pittsburgh accent on top of mispronounced consonants in the style of Pandora Boxx's Carol Channing,<sup>24</sup> Ann Teak's style of auctioneering involves a great deal of drunken slurring and replacing the word "dollar" with one of several words she has made up. Which word she will choose as a monetary unit at a given moment is not governed by any sort of logical system; she seems to say "douche-douche," "dar-nar," "flar-dar," and "douche-dar" with approximately equal frequency. After she announces the start of bidding on an item, Blue Moon regulars simply adopt her most recent choice of word to bid on that item, and this process seems to confuse outsiders. At the most recent Ann

---

<sup>24</sup> See: *RuPaul's Drag Race* Season 2, episode 4.

Teak's drag show, I was seated next to a table of women who were obviously in the Blue Moon as tourists; they had to ask directions to the restroom and they came in with bachelorette party favors. During the auction, while regulars were shouting out bids in the full range of Ann Teak's words for money, this table of women tried to participate in the same way, but they only picked up on "douche-douche." After two or three rounds of this, Ann Teak rebuked the women for making fun of her speech impediment and refused to recognize any more of their bids. The women seemed affronted and muttered amongst themselves for several minutes, while Ann Teak kept auctioning clothes, now using the table of tourists as fodder for jokes. The tourists, however, could not understand the jokes because Moon Baby exaggerated Ann Teak's "speech impediment" for the rest of the evening so that she was only intelligible to regulars.

Ann Teak's defense of queer space in this moment was particularly pointed commentary about Moon Baby's mother. While I know relatively few biographical details about Moon Baby's mother—and, therefore, cannot comment on how closely that biography matches Ann Teak's—the impression I get of her personality (from Moon Baby) is that she would not understand the need for creating specifically queer spaces, nor the need to defend them. And, aside from this incident of policing the boundaries of queer space, the language Ann Teak uses around queer people and queer entertainment is a caricature of a well meaning middle aged person trying to accept LGBTQ people and keep up with queer language, but succeeding only in being tokenizing and condescending.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Ann Teak's calling out of intruders in queer space seems like a step out of character, but, reflecting on my conversations with Moon Baby about her relationship to Ann Teak, it makes sense that the latter would defend queer space in that particular way.

### **Ann Teak and Queer Space**

Moon Baby describes Ann Teak not just as a personality based on her mother, but as a way of making peace with her relationship to her mother.<sup>26</sup> This is why it makes sense that Ann Teak would police the boundaries of queer space in the way that she did. For Moon Baby to base a personality on her mother, who would not understand the importance of dedicated queer spaces, and then use that personality to defend queer space is a reparative gesture: Ann Teak's rebuke of the tourists in the Blue Moon is not something Moon Baby's mother would not necessarily

---

<sup>25</sup> See: Jamie Utt, "Intent Vs. Impact: Why Your Intentions Don't Really Matter," *Everyday Feminism*, published 30 July 2013, <http://everydayfeminism.com/2013/07/intentions-dont-really-matter/>.

<sup>26</sup> Moon Baby, personal communications with the author, April 2015–November 2016.

have done, from what I understand of Moon Baby's mother. Having Ann Teak do it, then, is a way for Moon Baby to process feelings about her mother's ambivalence toward queer space.<sup>27</sup>

That Ann Teak defended queer space by telling the tourists to stop making fun of her speech impediment is also pointed commentary about marginality, language, and belonging. Ann Teak's "speech impediment," as she called it in this moment, is one of her defining features and not usually considered an impairment. As evidenced by queer Blue Moon regulars' adoption of Ann Teak's speech patterns, her particular way of relating to language has been somewhat normalized within the Blue Moon. It has become a form of queer code-switching for audiences familiar with Ann Teak as a personality and as a sonic presence in the bar.<sup>28</sup> A queer Blue Moon regular speaking like Ann Teak is not making fun of an "impediment," but signaling belonging to the space and the community. In contrast, the tourists who tried to adopt Ann Teak's speech patterns were appropriating queer code-switching, and Ann Teak's request that they stop making fun of her "speech impediment" drew attention to this without a lengthy discussion of queer space and cultural appropriation. This was strategic. It stopped the offensive behavior with minimal disruption to the queer social event that is a Blue Moon show. Focusing on the queer social event in queer space and refusing to devote time and attention to encroaching tourists closed the space to interlopers without centering their identities through direct confrontation.<sup>29</sup>

### Ann Teak Sings

Refusing to stop and explain queer space and cultural appropriation allowed Ann Teak to perform all of her planned entertainments without disruption. While she was waiting for the models to dress in between auctioning items of clothing, she sang and danced for the audience. Her backing tracks that night were eight-bit synthesizer renditions of pop songs from the last twenty years and, as she sang over the recorded synthesizers, the songs were only recognizable by the rhythm of Ann Teak's vocal sounds and the melodic hooks in the accompaniment. As with her performance of "Can I Get an Amen?," very few words were intelligible in

---

<sup>27</sup> Ahmed, "Selfcare as Warfare."

<sup>28</sup> For other examples of queer code-switching, see: Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972). The documentary films *Paris Is Burning* (1990) and *The Aggressives* (2005) also contain examples of queer code-switching, as does the occasional episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, though the latter seems to be making an effort to translate queer codes for straight audiences.

<sup>29</sup> See: Sara Ahmed, "Clumsiness," *Feminist Killjoys: Killing Joy As a World-Making Project*, published 4 September 2013, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2013/09/04/clumsiness/>.

Ann Teak's singing, and her interpretation of melodies was more or less monotone, with occasional inflection to imply punctuation. Relating to musical material in this way breaks the virtual space created by playing back recordings,<sup>30</sup> in keeping with the larger aesthetic of Blue Moon drag, but in Ann Teak's case, the breaking of virtual space is less interesting than how the breakage is accomplished.

As I will describe below, Moon Baby is a highly capable singer, but she does not carry this capability into the voice she uses for Ann Teak. Ann Teak's inability to carry a tune and form intelligible words is a commentary on how Moon Baby relates to her. Ann Teak represents a normative subjectivity: a straight, cisgender, "biological woman." When Moon Baby inhabits this position to become Ann Teak, she is musically and linguistically limited to monotone melodies and barely intelligible words. These constraints on pitch and language are plays on existing ideas about virtuosic singing, intelligible words, and identities.<sup>31</sup> Moon Baby displays her knowledge of these codes in the ways she voices Ann Teak. By making Ann Teak, her normative personality, unable to speak or sing intelligibly, Moon Baby makes normative subject positions unintelligible. This queer reversal reflects both the larger critique of normativity in Blue Moon drag aesthetics and creates new opportunities for resistive queer code-switching in Blue Moon regulars' adoption of Ann Teak's speech patterns.

### Becky Punkrock's Teen Angst

Becky Punkrock is a teenaged girl. She lives in Pittsburgh with her mother and occasionally leaves the city to visit a farm owned by her mother's "hot boyfriend Brian." Becky has a lot of rage for "the establishment," though she is not always sure what "the establishment" is.<sup>32</sup> Her YouTube show, sponsored by Dragaholic, features Becky speaking directly to the camera from her mother's house (primarily the roof and the bedroom) about what is and is not "punk rock."<sup>33</sup> Becky's obsession with punk rock comes from her mother's boyfriend Brian, who is in a punk band, and Becky seems to grasp the rage and protest at the center of classic

---

<sup>30</sup> Shuhei Hosokawa, "The Walkman Effect," *Popular Music* 4 (1984): 165-180. See also: Michael Bull, "No Dead Air! The iPod and the Culture of Mobile Listening," *Leisure Studies* 24/4 (2005): 343-355. Michael Bull, "Soundscapes of the Car: A Critical Study of Automobile Habitation," *The Auditory Culture Reader*, Michael Bull and Les Black, eds., (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003), pp. 357-374.

<sup>31</sup> See: Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice." Cusick, "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex."

<sup>32</sup> Moon Baby, personal communications with the author, April 2015-November 2016.

<sup>33</sup> See: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7RTXGOTVmkScy\\_hLJh533A](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7RTXGOTVmkScy_hLJh533A). This is the Tender Farms production YouTube channel with the first two seasons of *PNKT* (with Becky Punkrock).

punk rock;<sup>34</sup> it resonates with her teen angst and desire to set herself apart from the mainstream. But Becky's "punk rock" protests often end up feeding into the commodified forms of rebellion sold to teenagers via stores like Hot Topic and, thus, fall short of the full-scale rejections of normativity embedded in early punk rock.<sup>35</sup> This contradiction is intentional, even though Becky herself is not aware of it. In creating and developing Becky Punkrock as a character, Moon Baby references herself as a teenager, including her expression of angst through commodified protest. (In fairness, she did not know at the time that it was commodified.)<sup>36</sup> Bringing this angst, along with an adult's awareness of the irony embedded in the consumption of rebellion, to Becky's YouTube show and Blue Moon performances allows Moon Baby to voice multi-layered social critiques that simultaneously validate and poke fun at angst and rebellion.

Moon Baby accomplishes this complex form of social critique through her portrayal of Becky Punkrock, including clothing, makeup, accessories, hair, movement, and voice. Becky wears short skirts, combat boots, denim jackets, and plaid, a caricature of Avril Lavigne and a Hot Topic model. Her makeup is minimal, designed to appear as though she is not wearing any, a look Moon Baby accomplishes with neutral-tinted lipstick and very little contouring. Becky's hair is big and messy, a product of stacking several tangled, dirty wigs on top of each other in order to convey Becky's disdain for normative standards of feminine beauty. Becky also has her own, distinctive way of speaking and singing, reflecting her age and her desire to rebel against social norms. Her vocal inflection is simultaneously flat and emphatic; Becky is trying to sound nonchalant, even when she cares very deeply about the subjects she is discussing.

To convey her simultaneous apathy and interest, Becky's inflection consists mostly of variations in volume. In terms of pitch, her speech is close to monotone, but in a different way to Ann Teak's singing. Where Ann Teak's singing is an unintentional monotone—she thinks she is matching the song's melody—Becky's speech is an intentional one. She is tightly, audibly controlling the pitch of her voice to keep it low in her register, near the back of her throat, and unwavering in pitch. Instead of pitch-based inflections to indicate punctuation, Becky simply trails off at the ends of sentences, fading into a harsh vocal fry. This consistency of pitch holds even when Becky is animated about a discussion topic. Rather than inflecting with pitch changes, she simply gets louder and her words run together a bit.

---

<sup>34</sup> E.g.: The New York Dolls, The Ramones, The Clash, and the Sex Pistols.

<sup>35</sup> Ironically, the Sex Pistols voiced some of the most blatant and vulgar critiques of economic, political, and cultural establishments in classic punk rock despite being a band that was assembled strictly for economic gain. (Dave Laing, "The Sex Pistols," *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, online, 17 October 2016.) In this sense, the Sex Pistols were the forerunners of current forms of commodified protest.

<sup>36</sup> Moon Baby, personal communication with the author, April 2015–November 2016.

When Becky sings, she stays at the low end of her register and, though she is not monotone like Ann Teak, her pitch range is limited; she approximates melodies rather than reproducing them note for note. At a Blue Moon show dubbed “Becky Request Live,” during which Becky Punkrock sang audience requests, Becky covered a wide range of material from American popular music of the last twenty years. While the request-based format of the show resulted in relatively little stylistic continuity across Becky’s repertoire, her singing voice was a unifying sound across all the songs she performed. Becky sings in a low growl, nearly eating the microphone, so that the sound distorts when it comes through the Blue Moon’s overtaxed speakers. This technological distortion, rather than any vocal device Becky uses, makes her somewhat unintelligible when she sings.

Becky Punkrock’s singing and speaking voices sound Moon Baby’s relationship to herself as a teenager and provide a sonic outlet for anti-establishment angst. While Becky does not always know exactly what “the establishment” is, Moon Baby does. Giving Becky Punkrock a voice allows Moon Baby to harness Becky’s rage to make larger points about hegemonic establishments, rebellion, and commodification. By becoming Becky Punkrock and (in the YouTube series) explaining what is and is not “punk rock” from the perspective of a middle class teenager, Moon Baby is able to satirize the commodification of specific types of rebellion for adults while seemingly making fun of Becky’s naiveté.

### Serious Critique Masked in Satire

In a particularly entertaining episode of the second season of *PNKT (With Becky Punkrock)*, Becky celebrates Gwyneth Paltrow for being “punk rock.” She insists that Paltrow is “punk rock” because “she cares so much about poor people, she only ate limes for a week!”<sup>37</sup> (This is in reference to Paltrow’s *Goop* newsletter about her participation in the “food stamp challenge,” in which people who receive no governmental assistance attempt to survive on a food budget equal to what is provided through food stamp programs.) Becky goes on to prove more of Paltrow’s “punk rock” credentials:

Gwyneth Paltrow taught me that I’m not straight-edge enough. You know what would be more straight-edge than no drugs or alcohol? No medication! Her and Tom Cruise must be conspiring because you know what I want? Influenza! I’m not gonna get a shot to prevent that! Because you know what? Gwyneth Paltrow told me, in her blog, that that’s unnecessary. And she seems fine. She writes books about what to eat with your quinoa!<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> *PNKT (With Becky Punkrock)*, Season 2 Episode 2: “Gwyneth Paltrow,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hU6ve9QSD0o>.

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



Including and in addition to what I have quoted, this short episode—the video runs approximately three minutes—is rich in satiric content because it takes on so many issues in so little time, none of which are related to Becky’s age or gender, though a superficial analysis might lead to that conclusion. The target of the satire here is not teenage girls, but, rather, consumers of media like *Goop* and their lack of awareness around their own privilege. In other words, Becky Punkrock does satirize a certain kind of naiveté, but it is one related to class privilege,<sup>39</sup> not to age or gender. This is further evidenced by the fact that Becky demonstrates real, non-satiric insight near the end of the video. Her last reason for why Gwyneth Paltrow is “punk rock” is the actress’s gender-bending role in *Shakespeare In Love*. Though Becky inaccurately states that *Shakespeare In Love* was the “first” film to include gender fluidity and queerness, her larger point that gender fluidity is “punk rock”—i.e. anti-establishment—is an instance of serious, in-earnest social critique embedded in a highly satiric format.<sup>40</sup>

Becky’s adoption of “punk rock” as shorthand for “subversive” or “anti-establishment” is another instance of serious social critique embedded in the satire of her YouTube show. While early punk bands like the New York Dolls, the Sex Pistols, and the Clash engaged with a range of anti-establishment political sentiments and sounded their protests through music,<sup>41</sup> punk has since become a canonized and commodified symbol of musical and social rebellion. The pop-punk of the 1990s and early 2000s (e.g.: Blink-182 and pre-*American Idiot* Green Day) centers middle class teen angst more than pointed political protest. This makes the combination of Becky Punkrock’s age, musical tastes, and developing politics highly ironic. Becky is an angsty, middle class teenager trying to be anti-establishment and identifying punk rock as a means to do so. She also seems to have a problematic misunderstanding of where the establishment is, but this is part of the “punk rock” joke: the satire is not Becky’s misunderstanding of “punk rock” politics, but the ways in which the narrative of punk rock’s subversion has been

---

<sup>39</sup> I would like to make the argument that Becky Punkrock is satirizing white privilege with middle class privilege, which would seem to be supported by the subtext of her explanations of “punk rock” fashion, art, and behavior. But Becky never specifically mentions race, which could also be part of the satire: Becky’s white privilege allows her to not see race, either through the dangerous trope of “colorblindness” or through literally never seeing a person of color.

<sup>40</sup> *PNKT (With Becky Punkrock)*, Season 2 Episode 2: “Gwyneth Paltrow,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hU6ve9QSD0o>. See also: Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Hélène Iswolsky, translator, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

<sup>41</sup> Allan F. Moore, “Punk rock,” *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed March 5, 2017, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/subscriber/article/grove/music/46257>.

changed from one of serious political dissent to middle class teen angst. Replacing the gender-bending of the New York Dolls, the nihilism of the Sex Pistols, and the proletarian critique of the Clash with middle class teen angst in the punk rock narrative does two things: it equates anti-establishment politics with teen angst and, in doing so, trivializes both. Becoming Becky Punkrock allows Moon Baby to critique the trivialization of teen angst—in this case, her own teen angst—while also commenting on hegemonic establishments around binary gender, medical care, social welfare programs, and cults of personality around celebrities (to name just a few of Becky’s targets). This is radical queer self-care in that Moon Baby’s teenaged self is being heard,<sup>42</sup> as well as highly nuanced, satiric, queer entertainment.

### Sounding Alien with the Moon Baby

When performing under her primary artistic identity, Moon Baby is not of this planet, and this is reflected in the way she looks, moves, and sounds. When I asked how to introduce her at a performance in 2015, she instructed me to call her a celestial deity. Fitting with this extra-terrestrial origin, Moon Baby’s looks and sounds have changed since she started performing, moving from an extremely “busted” presentation—perhaps imitating an extraterrestrial who has recently fallen to Earth and is unsure how clothing works—to something that could be an alien’s interpretation of the Earth Diva aesthetic that has been a part of drag since at least the 1960s.<sup>43</sup> This gradual move toward a more comprehensible negotiation of gender and artistic norms seems to reflect Moon Baby’s process of learning about Earth and negotiating ways to make herself intelligible to Earthlings without compromising the most important aspects of her identity.

Visually, this has involved a transition from a highly “unprofessional” or “busted” drag look—tangled plastic wigs, broken shoes, and ripped t-shirts—to a more “polished” look with higher quality gear. Now, Moon Baby wears non-plastic wigs (still often styled to appear messy and tangled, if fuller than previous models) with non-broken shoes and a full wardrobe of jackets, dresses, skirts, blouses, leggings, and other feminine-marked clothing. Sonically, the transition has been more subtle. Moon Baby has consistently used a resonant, powerful head voice when singing at least since early 2013 when I first heard her sing. This register choice is distinctive because the timbre is different from falsetto and because a head voice allows for more intelligible diction than does a falsetto. Moon Baby’s head voice is full and round, and she has a great deal of control over it. She also makes great use of this register’s other advantage over falsetto: a smoother and

---

<sup>42</sup> Ahmed, “Selfcare as Warfare.”

<sup>43</sup> Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators In America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 97-111.

more gradual transition to the lower parts of the modal register, without the sudden change in timbre that happens when a singer shifts from falsetto to chest voice. But the most perceptible change in Moon Baby's singing over the last three years has been her gradual embrace of Euro-American tuning and scalar norms.

The first few times I heard Moon Baby sing, she intentionally detuned some notes, a feat which takes a high degree of vocal control and an excellent ear, but which goes unnoticed as virtuosity because it simply sounds "wrong" to most people who have been exposed to Euro-American musical sounds. (At the time, myself included.) After a few months of performing songs in this way and being met with confusion, if not open hostility, from audiences, Moon Baby stopped detuning melodic lines and, instead, focused on other ways of queering the norms of vocal performance. She does this by playing with register, timbre, voice leading, and regulations of musical time.

Moon Baby's consistent use of a clear, round head voice is a rejection of gendered narratives of vocal development for adult bodies. In their pieces on voice, body, and gender, both Suzanne Cusick and Alexandros Constantis reference the narrative of the male voice change and disallow the possibility of a male-assigned body continuing to train and use a head voice during and after this change.<sup>44</sup> For Cusick, such a rejection of the pubertal voice change—though its sound would be close to what she identifies as "feminine singing"—would simply reinforce a male-assigned body's male subjectivity because the singer is refusing to embrace "natural" changes to their body in a "mind over matter" gesture. Constantis simply does not allow that head voices exist in adult, male-assigned bodies; there is either chest voice or falsetto and nothing in between.<sup>45</sup> For my part, I find that both these explanations do an injustice to Moon Baby. Cusick's theory that Moon Baby's use of head voice is a masculine gesture—despite Moon Baby not identifying as male—is misgendering, an act of ideological violence often employed by cisgender

---

<sup>44</sup> See: Suzanne Cusick, "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex," in *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music*, Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley, eds. (Zürich: Carciofoli Verlagshaus, 1999), pp. 25-49. Alexandros Constantis, "The Changing Female-to-Male (FTM) Voice," *Radical Musicology* 3 (2008): 32 pars. 12 October 2014. <http://www.radical-musicology.org.uk>.

<sup>45</sup> I fear this might be a bit uncharitable to Constantis, despite it being a direct paraphrase of what he writes in his article. While discussing gender and vocal registers with Stephan Pennington recently, Stephan posited that what is often referred to as "falsetto" in adult male voices is, in fact, head voice and that there seems to be widespread confusion of the registers specifically in male voices. It could be, then, that Constantis is including head voice in the range he is calling "falsetto." In my own experiments with singing, I find that my falsetto is the region of my voice that was called "whistle register" before my transition and that I also have a head voice and a chest voice that are closer to each other in timbre than they are to falsetto. But this is for another project.

women keep trans feminine people out of women's spaces.<sup>46</sup> Constantis' theory makes Moon Baby a figment of someone's imagination, and I find it difficult to believe that I (or anyone else) imagined the very materially present body that sings on the Blue Moon's stage. Instead of adopting these analyses, then, I propose a different one: Moon Baby's use of head voice is a rejection of the pubertal voice change associated with male-assigned bodies and, as such, it is also a rejection of male identity.

In addition to being a rejection of male identity, Moon Baby's singing sounds her gender fluidity. Cultivating a head voice after puberty is something typically encouraged for female-assigned singers, while male-assigned singers are split into those who use their chest registers (tenors and basses) or falsetto (countertenors). For Moon Baby to train her head voice, then, is to use a vocal technique associated with femininity, but this rejection of her assigned end of the gender binary is not what makes Moon Baby's singing gender fluid. While the technique of using the head register is typically associated with feminine voice types, the timbre Moon Baby chooses for her own head voice, combined with its pitch range, does not fully adhere to aesthetic standards for female-assigned voices. The range and tessitura of Moon Baby's head voice most closely fits current the classification of a mezzo-soprano, but she sings with a timbre that makes her sound otherworldly and alien. Moon Baby's head voice, except when she uses voiceless fricatives ("s" and soft "c") or a voiceless stop ("t"), contains mostly the lower partials above the fundamental, even on vowel sounds that typically have distinctive formant regions. This density of overtones makes gendering Moon Baby's voice extremely difficult; the tone quality is over-saturated with clues that might be used to align the voice with encultured norms for male-assigned or female-assigned bodies singing in that range. By cultivating a vocal timbre and range that cannot be gendered with existing, encultured tools for associating voices with bodies, Moon Baby sounds gender fluidity.

Though not specifically related to gender, Moon Baby also uses voice leading and musical time to subvert expectations in her performances. Many of her recorded songs feature multiple vocal tracks, all of which she sings on overdubs. Rather than having specific parts that stay within limited ranges and have dedicated harmonic functions, Moon Baby's vocal parts are all in the same range and her melodic lines weave in and out of each other, crossing multiple times and mostly ignoring harmonic function. This is deliberate. Moon Baby has an extensive knowledge of pop culture and understands how pop music is "supposed" to work in terms of voice parts and harmony; she simply chooses not to do that. Likewise, her approach to meter and rhythmic organization plays with existing norms.

---

<sup>46</sup> See: Ronnie Ritchie, "'Women-Only' Spaces that Exclude Trans Women Lead Us Down This Awful Path," *Everyday Feminism*. 16 March 2015. <https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/03/cis-women-only-spaces-wrong/>

Many of her songs have drums and percussion in the backing track, but the vocals do not always align with the metric organization provided by the drums. In other cases, drums and percussion are so sparse that meter is difficult to hear. As with Moon Baby's approach to harmony, this is not due to ignorance or lack of training in the norms of pop music; these are deliberate choices based on the aesthetic values of Moon Baby as a celestial deity. Because Moon Baby is often billed and contextualized as a drag performer, these aesthetic choices are also political: Moon Baby is making queer art-pop (pop-art?) by rejecting the norms of mainstream, homonormative drag and mainstream pop music in favor of the sound aesthetics of a gender fluid alien.<sup>47</sup>

### Real and Fictive Spaces

While Moon Baby, Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock are stage personalities and, to some degree, expressly for entertainment, all three also live off-stage through various social media and video publishing platforms. In this sense, Moon Baby, Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock relate to other people in many of the same ways as Moon Baby's non-theatrical identity. Moon Baby posts from all four accounts—her legal name and all three stage personas—regularly, and each personality carries its own voice into the typed social media realm. Ann Teak's typing reflects her unintelligible speech and Becky Punkrock is extremely angsty. Moon Baby and the account under Moon Baby's legal name are more difficult to differentiate, which is consistent with Moon Baby's statement that this primary stage identity is generally comfortable for her on- and off-stage. Moon Baby is, in many ways, the everyday identity, even when posting from the profile under her legal name. Given this social media presence, it seems appropriate to ask where the supposedly fictional personalities end.

Moon Baby is able to move fluidly between herself, Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock, inhabiting a specific personality in order to make specific kinds of queer commentary. And, though Moon Baby's primary identity is the most comfortable for her, Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock are still important parts of her.<sup>48</sup> It would seem, then, that Moon Baby, Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock are not fictional at all, but, instead parts of a fluidly gendered queer person trying to negotiate a world that does not allow for fluidity. In a sense, then, Moon Baby is not

---

<sup>47</sup> N.B.: If this narrative sounds a bit like David Bowie's *Ziggy Stardust* period, that, too, is intentional. During the Bowie Ball 2016, Moon Baby gave a lengthy, off-the-cuff tribute to Bowie and his many stage personas, describing how his commitment to becoming his characters had inspired her. At the same time, Moon Baby is adamant that she, as a queer, gender fluid alien, is not directly related to Bowie's concept of a gender-less (androgynous) alien for the *Ziggy Stardust* album.

<sup>48</sup> Moon baby, personal communication with the author, April 2015-November 2016.

becoming a character when she speaks or sings as Ann Teak and Becky Punkrock; she is revealing her full self.<sup>49</sup> The existence of Moon Baby, Ann Teak, and Becky Punkrock on stage, off stage, and on social media demands new ways of thinking about “real” and “fictive” spaces and identities.

Drag venues could be described as carnivalesque spaces, in which the subversion of drag is allowed because it is understood as a joke and a fiction that does not extend past the physical boundaries of the bar. A drag show, then, is a space of fiction, where sensory experience cannot be taken seriously because to do so would threaten the worldview of homo- and heteronormative people consuming drag as exotic entertainment. The Blue Moon is a different kind of space, in which the subversion of drag is taken as serious queer commentary and the identities adopted by performers, staff, and patrons—regardless of whether medico-legal establishments recognize them—are assumed to be real. Because the Blue Moon is this type of queer space, it provides a safe environment for queer people to reveal themselves to each other in ways that would not be recognized as “real” or legitimate outside the walls of the bar. In this sense, the “real” world outside the Blue Moon becomes a space of fiction, in which queer people are often forced to hide the identities that make them most comfortable so that they can fit social norms and avoid physical and ideological violence.

Moon Baby, as well as others at the Blue Moon, chooses to reveal herself outside the bar, as well, but when she does this, the identities she reveals are treated as fictional by entities with power. Only Moon Baby’s legal name and birth-assigned gender are recognized as a legitimate identity by the state, and several other Blue Moon queens were forced to use their legal names on Facebook profiles for their drag identities because they were reported for violating Facebook’s “real name” policy. These acts of ideological violence treat queer identities as fictions because of the threats they pose to fixed, body-essentialist binary gender.

Queer spaces like the Blue Moon combat this ideological violence by affirming and nurturing queer people in the identities that are most comfortable for them, their real identities.<sup>50</sup> The safety of the Blue Moon provides a space in which

---

<sup>49</sup> See: Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

<sup>50</sup> I hesitate to say “chosen identities” when referring to expressions that make queer people comfortable because it seems reckless to even accidentally employ the discourse of “lifestyle choice” at this political moment. While queer people do have choices in how to be comfortable with their self-expressions, the feelings of discomfort with heteronormativity and binary gender that give rise to queer self-expression are not choices. In other words, queer people often feel at odds with hegemonic narratives of gender, anatomy, and sexuality and they have a choice of how much to express these feelings in their outward presentations. Choices about presentation are often influenced by environment and the

queer people, performers or not, can play with outward signifiers of gender and sexuality in the ways that work best for them on any given day. Having this space to experiment with expressions of identity in the presence of other queer people allows Blue Moon performers, staff, and patrons to become themselves and be recognized as themselves<sup>51</sup> in ways that would be more difficult, if not denied outright, outside of queer space.

## References

- Ahmed, Sara. *Feminist Killjoys: Killing Joy as a World-Making Project* (blog). <http://feministkilljoys.com/>.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Hélène Iswolsky, translator. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Grain of the Voice." In *Image, Music, Text*. Stephen Heath, trans. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. Pp. 179-189.
- Bull, Michael. "No Dead Air! The iPod and the Culture of Mobile Listening." *Leisure Studies* 24/4: 343-355.
- Bull, Michael. "Soundscapes of the Car: A Critical Study of Automobile Habitation." In *The Auditory Culture Reader*. Michael Bull and Les Black, eds. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Cimini, Amy. "Baruch Spinoza and the Matter of Music: Toward a New Practice of Theorizing Musical Bodies." Ph.D. Diss., New York University, 2011.
- Constantis, Alexandros. "The Changing Female-to-Male (FTM) Voice." *Radical Musicology* 3 (2008): 32 pars. 12 October 2014. <http://www.radical-musicology.org.uk>.
- Cusick, Suzanne G. "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex." In *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music*. Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley, eds. Zürich: Carciofoli Verlagshaus, 1999.

---

safety of wearing or doing certain things in particular spaces. This is why queer spaces like the Blue Moon are important. (See: Sara Ahmed, "Clumsiness," *Feminist Killjoys: Killing Joy as a World Making Project*, published 4 September 2013, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2013/09/04/clumsiness/>.)

<sup>51</sup> See: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 24-28. Intelligibility figures heavily in both Butler and Spivak's analyses of non-normative identities. To summarize both, being unintelligible means being a non-person. This is why recognition is important to identity formation.

- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1975.
- Hosokawa, Shuhei. "The Walkman Effect." *Popular Music* 4: 165-180.
- Kacere, Laura. "Homonormativity 101: What It Is and How It's Hurting Our Movement." *Everyday Feminism*. Published 24 January 2015. <http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/01/homonormativity-101/>.
- MacIntyre, Alec. "Singing Is a Drag: Gender, Voice, and Body in Drag Performance." Ph.D. Diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2017.
- Newton, Esther. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators In America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.
- Norris, Laurie. "Of Fish and Feminists: Homonormative Misogyny and the Trans\* Queen." In *The Makeup of RuPaul's Drag Race: Essays on the Queen of Reality Shows*. Jim Daems, ed. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014.
- Ortner, Sherry. "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" In *Woman, Culture, and Society*. Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974.
- Ritchie, Ronnie. "'Women-Only' Spaces That Exclude Trans Women Lead Us Down This Awful Path." *Everyday Feminism*. Published 16 March 2015. <http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/03/cis-women-only-spaces-wrong/>.
- Stiegler, Bernard. *Technics And Time: The Fault of Epimetheus*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4/3: 469-488.
- Utt, Jamie. "Intent Vs. Impact: Why Your Intentions Don't Really Matter." *Everyday Feminism*. Published 30 July 2013. <http://everydayfeminism.com/2013/07/intentions-dont-really-matter/>.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike International 4.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA