Article

Under Her Eye: Digital Drag as Obfuscation and Countersurveillance

Harris Kornstein

New York University, USA
harris.kornstein@nyu.edu

Abstract

Among drag queens, it is common to post screenshots comically highlighting moments in which Facebook incorrectly tags their photos as one another, suggesting that drag makeup offers a unique method for confusing facial recognition algorithms. Drawing on queer, trans, and new media theories, this article considers the ways in which drag serves as a form of informational obfuscation, by adding “noise” in the form of over-the-top makeup and social media profiles that feature semi-fictional names, histories, and personal information. Further, by performing identities that are highly visible, are constantly changing, and engage complex forms of authenticity through modes of camp and realness, drag queens disrupt many common understandings about the users and uses of popular technologies, assumptions of the integrity of data, and even approaches to ensuring privacy. In this way, drag offers both a culturally specific framework for conceptualizing queer and trans responses to surveillance and a potential toolkit for avoiding, thwarting, or mitigating digital observation.

Introduction

When particular surveillance technologies, in their development and design, leave out some subjects and communities for optimum usage, this leaves open the possibility of reproducing existing inequalities... [But] could there be some potential in going about unknown or unremarkable, and perhaps unbothered, where CCTV, camera-enabled devices, facial recognition, and other computer vision technologies are in use?

—Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (2015: 162–63)

Around late 2014, I began to take note of a curious social media phenomenon: drag queens were posting screenshots to Facebook to highlight instances in which the platform’s predictive facial recognition algorithms incorrectly tagged their photos as one another. Generally, these images were posted as humorous quips, both playfully reading other queens’ appearances through queer modes of sass and shade (think: “is this a read?” and “clearly it’s trying to tell you something”) while also collectively poking fun at Facebook’s technological failures. Sometimes, these moments of AI-induced confusion reflected resemblances that, to a human viewer, were quite canny. However, more often, the queens in the photographs seemed to bear little facial similarity to one another and were often mistagged as performers of different races, genders, ages, or styles; many even found their names incorrectly attached to celebrities, printed photographs or illustrations caught on camera, and even inanimate objects. As a drag queen myself, I experienced these software fails personally on numerous occasions—including being mistagged as friends, celebrities like drag queen Lady Bunny and director George Lucas, and a face painted on a mural (see Figure 1)—and joined in the critical commentary by posting my own reactions on a variety of threads.

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Figure 1: Screenshots of images that were each incorrectly tagged by Facebook as the author. Pictured in each photograph, from top-left: internationally recognized drag queen Lady Bunny, television still; San Francisco Bay Area drag queen Mama Celeste (original photo by Erin O'Neill, makeup by Sue Casa); former San Francisco District Supervisor Jane Kim (in drag for event, original photo by Shot in the City photography); San Francisco drag queen Moni Stat; film director George Lucas (original photo by Jonathan Scott Shensa); a face painted on a mural (original photo by Abby Davis).

The timing of these observations was not wholly coincidental: while Facebook began offering automated tag suggestions for photos in December of 2010, it was in 2014 that Facebook rolled out its improved DeepFace algorithms, claiming an accuracy rate of greater than ninety-seven percent in identifying faces “in the wild” (Taigman et al. 2014; Mitchell 2010).¹ That same fall, I helped initiate the #MyNameIs campaign in San Francisco to challenge Facebook’s so-called “real names” policy, which won policy changes and restored the accounts of drag queens, trans youth, Native Americans, and others who were blocked from the platform or had their legal names exposed—often as the result of targeted, malicious reporting by other users (for background and analysis, see Lingel 2017; MacAulay and Moldes 2016; DeNardis and Hackl 2016; Hot Mess 2015). As a result, my own Facebook network was biased toward drag queens. Yet, I realized that I saw few, if any, mishaps with names or facial recognition from non-drag friends. In that moment, I began to think of both examples of procedural breakdown as offering a glimpse at the inner workings of Facebook’s otherwise black-boxed systems. That is, this pattern of glitches gestured not only toward their makers’ failures to account for a diversity of users, but also toward the possibility of drag queens further exploiting the platform’s bugs in the spirit of queer mischief and countersurveillance.

¹ While Facebook published information about its DeepFace system in June 2014, it is impossible to know exactly when Facebook rolled out its updated algorithms, or for whom; Facebook frequently releases updates iteratively to segmented groups of users to test new features before a global launch. This black-boxed approach not only to technology, but also to policy and enforcement, poses one of the challenges of investigating a proprietary system like Facebook.

Rather than merely fighting for reforms to make a highly problematic platform more inclusive or user-friendly to queens, queers, and others, I began to think about what possibilities might exist for drag queens to throw off tracking algorithms with our fabulously messy identities—or for all users to pollute Facebook’s data by using the platform more like drag queens (see also Hot Mess 2018).

In this article, I offer a more sustained and discerning look at drag queens’ participation on Facebook in order to propose drag as both a conceptual framework for rethinking assumptions about the users and uses of popular technologies, as well as a set of practical techniques for managing one’s identity and avoiding, thwarting, or otherwise mitigating the harms sustained by data-driven forms of surveillance. Specifically, I position drag as a social performance practice that disrupts binaries not only of masculinity/femininity, but also of disclosure/concealment, transformation/stability, and truth/fiction. In so doing, drag queens further disavow concerns with privacy, authenticity, and clarity in favor of tactics of hypervisibility, mutability, and ambiguity—and always with a knowing twinkle in the eye. Similarly, from a privacy and surveillance studies perspective, I argue that drag offers a unique approach to data obfuscation—which Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum (2016: 46) define as “the production of noise modeled on an existing signal in order to make a collection of data more ambiguous, confusing, harder to exploit, more difficult to act on, and therefore less valuable”—by adding a lot of embellished or decorative information, while at the same time complicating the presumption that “signals” are inherently genuine and “noise” is diversionary. In this way, drag itself can be understood as a technology, interfacing with Kara Keeling (2014) and Wendy Chun’s (2011) respective discussions of queerness and race as technologies, particularly in embracing strategies and aesthetics of deviance and non-normativity, such as ambiguity, ephemerality, and play (Barnett et al. 2016).

Drag also offers actionable tactics for disrupting digital platforms through its own social practices and traditions, from the ways drag names, personas, and families extend beyond both heteronormative social norms and databases’ coded conventions, to the face-shifting makeup techniques that confuse computer vision software. In this way, drag serves as a collective, culturally-situated, and low-tech form of James C. Scott’s (1987) notion of “everyday resistance” often invoked within surveillance studies in contrast to many of the privacy-based frameworks that tend to valorize individualized threat-modeling and prioritize technologically, financially, or educationally inaccessible strategies (Gilliom and Monahan 2012; Gilliom 2005; Marx 2003). To be clear, most queens do not engage these practices specifically to avoid surveillance but rather in concert with the craft or social conventions of drag performance. However, drag users are often aware of how their use of the platform differs from standard affordances or expectations, particularly when seemingly benign queer content is flagged as inappropriate, when they feel that pre-determined options exclude them, or when information is shared out of what Nissenbaum (2009: 2) refers to as “contextual integrity,” such as when queens maintain separate profiles in their drag and legal names to distinguish what they share with friends or fans versus family or coworkers (Lingel 2017). Indeed, the need to mitigate these social risks, including being harassed or falsely reported by homophobic and transphobic users, highlights that for many queens (and women, people of color, sex workers, survivors of sexual violence, and other marginalized users) the potential harms and threats that social media pose come not merely from the state or corporate actors, but also in the “social surveillance” (Marwick 2012) or “participatory surveillance” (Albrechtslund 2008) conducted by other users of these platforms.

Performers’ uses (and misuses) of Facebook often highlight their neglect as edge cases at the hands of those designing digital technologies, who too often try to categorize the complexities of bodies and behaviors into neat databases that presume individuals to be coherent, consistent, and quantifiable users. In an early article on data surveillance, gender, and virtual bodies, Kathryn Conrad (2009: 385) notes the innately conservative nature of prediction through data analysis, in which models “cannot take into effective consideration randomness, ‘noise,’ mutation, parody, or disruption unless those effects coalesce into another pattern.” Several other queer and feminist scholars have noted the problematic nature of attempting to surveil or classify non-normative users in a variety of contexts, with many highlighting these design, policy, or otherwise systematic oversights as potential flaws to be exploited, as in the observation by Simone Browne (2015) in the epigraph (Beauchamp 2019, 2009; Magnet 2011; Ball 2009; Ahmed 2004). In an era in which

LGBT identities seem to be under increasing pressure to be defined and included technologically—from dubious attempts to use big data to identify gay people based on Facebook likes (Chen et al. 2017) or to determine sexuality or gender in faces (refuted in Leuner 2019 and Keyes 2018) to seemingly user-friendly gestures by companies like Facebook to add over fifty gender identity options (Herbenick and Baldwin 2014)—drag offers a unique conceptual framework and tactical approach that revels in obfuscatory ambiguity and is historically rooted in queer and trans experiences but is ultimately accessible to anyone willing to try it on.

In what follows, I begin by offering an analysis of drag as a queer and trans performance practice,² rooted in stylized transformation, with a long history of playfully challenging not only social conventions, but also state and corporate power that seeks to categorize and criminalize queer and trans bodies. By considering drag within the context of digital media use—particularly as a form of obfuscating data from other users—I aim to move beyond a strictly gendered theorization of drag to examine its potential for disrupting the classification and assumed veracity of information more generally. In the second half of the article, I draw on fieldwork with drag queens in San Francisco (including my own performance and participation in social media) to offer concrete examples of how drag’s particular aesthetics and strategies might be repurposed in the context of digital technologies to serve as unique tactics for countersurveillance.

Noisy Queens: Drag as Obfuscation

Drag is an evasive concept that, much like its practitioners, resists neat explanation; indeed, much of its strength and intrigue comes from being a capacious practice that can produce as many definitions as there are performers. Most scholarship on drag has focused on its gendered elements, often theorizing and historicizing it alongside other gender non-conforming practices, like female impersonation or identities that today might be understood as transgender, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century when slippages between terms like drag queen, transvestite, and transsexual were more common (Rupp and Taylor 2015; Underwood 2004; Garber 1997; Chauncey 1995; Baker 1994; Russo 1987; Newton 1979). Still, even scholars who have analyzed drag on its own terms have tended to theorize it as a primarily gendered practice (as intersected by race, class, nationality, and so on) rooted in queer and trans communities that engages aesthetic modes such as camp, exaggeration, appropriation, satire, understatement, and melancholia, and tends to highlight and subvert the ways that social norms are constructed and regulated (McGlotten 2015; Bailey 2013; Muñoz 1999; Halberstam 1998; Butler 1999). Similarly, in my fieldwork, queens frequently cited gender in their explanations of drag, but most also conceived of drag as an opportunity to play with both cultural stereotypes and individual appearances more broadly,³ as well as to conceive drag as inherently oppositional or political.⁴

² I refer to drag as both a *queer* and *trans* practice throughout the paper to both reflect the self-ascribed identities of performers who have contributed to my research, as well as drag’s changing and contested positioning within both gay and transgender communities and scholarship. San Francisco’s drag scenes include performers of all gender identities (though female- and trans-identified performers face unique obstacles), and my sample included performers who out-of-drag identify as queer, heterosexual, cis men, trans men, cis women, trans women, and non-binary—all of whom consider themselves drag queens. Theoretically, I use both terms in line with the queer politics envisioned in Cathy Cohen’s foundational “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens” (1997), and with Susan Stryker’s expansive notion of “transgender critique” (2006: 8)—both of which privilege destabilization and oppositional politics over identification with LGBT identities. While a full discussion of the differences between terms is beyond the scope of this paper, it is certainly not my intention to categorically conflate these identities, particularly of trans women and drag queens.

³ It is worth noting that the term drag, in gay slang and other colloquial uses, is often modified to refer to any type of social costume—from “office” to “military,” “religious” to “leather”—implying an ability to adopt diverse forms of identity through simple acts of changing clothes, or, I might add, by painting one’s face, altering one’s voice and mannerisms, or going by a different name (Baker 1994: 17; Rodgers 1972: 67–68).

⁴ Of course, in practice, not all drag is liberatory. There are numerous examples of performers and performances that perpetuate racism, transphobia, and other oppressive forces—or which simply might be described colloquially as

In considering drag's potential as a response to surveillance, then, I want to gently tuck gender away as much as possible (though it remains difficult to ignore) in order to propose drag not merely as a theory of performance or identity but also as a theory of information.⁵ In doing so, I build off of the ways that drag destabilizes the presumed binary nature of masculine/feminine to consider how it also triangulates other seemingly dichotomous concepts of transparency/concealment as they relate to visibility, transformation/permanence to identity, and truth/fiction to authenticity—concepts which are as relevant to contemporary discourses of surveillance and media as they are to gender and performance. That is, in an era of intensified neoliberalism, in which political control is decentralized and administrative (Galloway 2004; Deleuze 1992), the extraction of data plays an increasingly key role in generating value and structuring the economy (Zuboff 2019), and individuals are encouraged to be branded and entrepreneurial (Banet-Weiser 2012), drag offers an alternative approach to self-presentation in which data is hardly discrete or dependable enough to be owned or exchanged but rather is always constructed and must be interpreted in specific contexts. Or, put more simply, drag queens model a form of nuanced communication that is neither fully transparent nor completely opaque, but instead withholds aspects of personal information not intended for public consumption while at the same time presenting themselves as glaringly visible public performers. Particularly through aesthetics that rely on constant metamorphosis and cunningly blending elements of fantasy and reality, drag performers casually render information about their lives difficult for observers to consistently identify, verify, or believe.

In this way, drag serves as both a unique example of the obfuscation of information as well as a case that pushes the limits of how obfuscation has been theorized, particularly upending assumptions about the ontological differences between signal and noise. While drag may commonly be thought of as a form of gendered camouflage or transformative masking more similar to a technical process of encryption—in which information is concealed by locking it away or scrambling it into something that looks completely different and requires a key to decode—such an assumption relies on a rather conservative notion of gender and a literal reading of drag performance. Obfuscation, on the other hand, is a tactic that generally leaves private information out in public but makes it difficult to identify, parse, or make use of. In *Obfuscation: A User's Guide for Privacy and Protest*, Brunton and Nissenbaum (2016: 1) describe it as “the deliberate addition of ambiguous, confusing, or misleading information,” generating noise that is similar enough to the original signal to seem plausible or at least make all of the data appear random. Brunton and Nissenbaum (2016: 8, 9, 17) further highlight a number of recent and historical examples including: metallic chaff that impersonates military aircrafts in order to overwhelm radar detection; Twitter bots that coopt popular hashtags, thereby drowning out legitimate political discourse within inconsequential chatter; and instances in which many people all claim the same name or identity, such as non-Jews donning yellow stars during the Nazi Holocaust to allow Jews to blend in with their neighbors. Similarly, Jessa Lingel (2017) discusses military dazzle camouflage techniques, which were used during World War I to paint ships in optically-illusory patterns that, rather than concealing their presence, made it difficult for adversaries to accurately assess their size or movement—a metaphor she extends to other forms of queer counter-conduct that parallel my own arguments about obfuscation.⁶ More colloquially, obfuscation is often understood as “hiding in

“basic.” Still, at the risk of romanticizing drag's resistant potential (and without more room for a proper discussion), I tend toward a queer definition of drag that ontologically incorporates at least some form of social disruption beyond a simplistic gender inversion. In this case, more problematic forms may more accurately be described as cross-dressing, female impersonation, or even minstrelsy. Or, to cite a recent social media drag trend of posts and memes claiming that “if you're not [wearing nails, wearing wigs, lip-syncing, etc.] ... you're not doing drag,” perhaps “if you're not challenging the status quo, you're not doing drag.”

⁵ I do not mean to suggest that gender is irrelevant to surveillance; indeed, as numerous scholars have shown, intersectional approaches to gender, identity, and media are undertheorized (e.g., Chakravarty et al. 2018; Noble and Tynes 2016; Dubrofsky and Magnet 2015; Nakamura and Chow-White 2011). Rather, it is to theorize drag in a way that leaves it both “about” gender and not (as any sharp queen might suggest), and which allows drag to be abstracted to consider its many forms of destabilization.

⁶ Lingel uses dazzle camouflage as a framework to describe queer aesthetics of anti-surveillance counter-conduct in a theorization similar to my own, including a discussion of drag queens' techniques of reading each other. Many thanks to Bo Ruberg for directing me to this work, and to Jessa Lingel for generously sharing a draft of her paper

plain sight,” or to adapt a question from poet G. K. Chesterton, one might ask, “Where does a wise queen hide a sequin? On a ball gown” (original quoted in Brunton and Nissenbaum 2016: 45).

Drag thus serves as an excellent example of obfuscation, in which facets of performers’ everyday lives are strategically positioned within elements of performed exaggeration and excess. On a surface level, drag is a primarily additive craft, from the application of makeup to layers of padding, wigs, costumes, jewelry, and other prostheses that temporarily augment performers’ faces and bodies while overwhelming audiences’ senses. Additionally, on a deeper level (and as I discuss in greater detail below), complex and meaningful aspects of performers’ lived identities, experiences, and desires are often seamlessly embedded within elements of fantasy and fiction designed for the stage, whether through aesthetics of camp and appropriation commonly associated with drag or through more subtle approaches to earnestness, understatement, or “layering” that Jack Halberstam (1998: 239, 259–60) describes specifically in drag king performance, but which is also often present in other forms of drag too. In obfuscatory terms, drag does not merely scramble or substitute one signal for another, but instead situates diverse signals within a cacophony of visual, aural, and informational noise.

And yet, to conceive of drag as merely extraneous noise also reduces the complexity and integrity of the information that may be found in noise itself, suggesting that distinctions between signal and noise in all forms of information may be suspect. Similar to how drag undermines the concept of an originary gender in Judith Butler’s (1999) theory of gender performativity, drag also destabilizes the primacy of signal as somehow more valid or valuable than noise in the case of information obfuscation. Or, to paraphrase Susan Stryker (2006), humans are inherently noisy, such that seemingly superfluous noise in one context may be a sincere signal in another, or vice versa.⁷ As I elaborate in the subsequent sections on visibility, identity, and authenticity, drag queens’ identities and performances often present information—from their genders, to names, relationships, and opinions—that is selective, in a state of flux, and contradictory, yet which can still be made sense of by community members who are familiar with the craft and its cultural contexts.

Visibility and the Drag Closet

At the heart of drag is a unique play between epistemologies of transparency and concealment: on the one hand, drag queens are highly conspicuous entertainers, known for over-the-top looks and loud personalities, and on the other, their transformative and fantastical nature alerts audiences to the possibilities that they are always withholding information, not exactly who they say they are, or declining to tell the whole truth. Drag is often theorized as a mode of masquerade or disguising identity, indicating tension between what is presented on the surface and what is presumed to be an underlying, interior, or off-stage reality, including details like their “real” names, genders, voices, and personas. Of course, differences in the presentation of self are hardly shocking in contemporary social media, in which users are increasingly self-aware as they present curated versions of their lives, reflecting distinctions that have been theorized at least as far back as Erving Goffman’s (1959) distinction between “front” and “back stage” (Marwick 2013). However, drag is distinctive in that it foregrounds these discrepancies through what Roger Baker (1994: 13, 157) describes as a mode of “false disguise” in which audiences collude in the ruse, voluntarily suspend their disbelief, and indulge the pleasures of drag’s tantalizing reveals and strategic “tells” that dispel any notion of perfect illusion. As such, drag’s obfuscatory approach to information relies more on tactics of controlling the direction of the observer’s gaze, overwhelming them with excessive amounts of information, and making them want to believe, rather than on keeping data close at hand.

“Dazzle Camouflage as Queer Counter Conduct” with me as I finished the final draft of this article. For a summary available at the time of publication, please watch a video of Lingel discussing dazzle camouflage (Annenberg School for Communication 2019).

⁷ I want to acknowledge Stryker’s contributions to my thinking throughout this section based on a presentation she made during the 2014 Symposium on Obfuscation at NYU. Although I was not in attendance in 2014, several of her comments were shared with me at the subsequent 2017 Workshop on Obfuscation (obfuscationworkshop.org), particularly by Seda Guerses and Finn Brunton, as well as in personal emails and conversations with Stryker.

Drag also occupies spaces of both profound hypervisibility and invisibility in queer and mainstream cultures. For example, drag queens are often mythologically credited with being at the forefront of historic events such as the Stonewall or Compton's Cafeteria riots, are frequently used as quick visual shorthand to signify queerness in multicultural marketing, and have occasionally taken on celebrity statuses, particularly with cult figures like Divine and the rise of the *RuPaul's Drag Race* empire (e.g., Gossett, Gossett, and Lewis 2011; Silverman and Stryker 2005; Duberman 1994). And at the same time, drag is generally positioned as a subcultural form of entertainment, historically occurring in ghettoized neighborhoods and out-of-sight gay bars, many of which favored architectural features like covered windows or tactics to manage interior sightlines (Boyd 2005: 126–27). In historical contexts in which queerness was criminalized and stigmatized, drag and its cross-dressing cousins have served as some of the most visible figures—particularly within queer spaces and under the watchful gaze of police—and have enabled queers to express desires and social critiques that might otherwise be forbidden, as well as deflect attention from more vulnerable members of their communities. However, drag has also often been downplayed in mainstream gay and lesbian social scenes and movements, often on the grounds that it is too visible, promotes undesirable traits of male effeminacy and gender inversion, or otherwise undermines respectability politics (Boyd 2005; Garber 1997; Baker 1994; Russo 1987; Newton 1979).

Such an interplay between a life in both the shadows and the spotlight complicates early discourses of queer activism and scholarship that often focused on coming out of the closet and recuperating queer histories in narrative media (e.g., Russo 1987; White 1999; Gross 2002). In particular, drag complicates Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1990: 3) *Epistemology of the Closet*, a foundational text in which she posits the simultaneously protective and claustrophobic nature of the closet—in which disclosure is “at once compulsory and forbidden”—as a central organizing principle not only for queer identity, but for society as a whole. As scholars like C. Riley Snorton (2014: 4) have argued, however, such a theorization of the closet presumes an inherently white scopoc regime that fails to account for the ways in which queers of color often find themselves in a “glass closet,” marked by simultaneous confinement and spectacle. Drag might then suggest the possibility of an open closet, whether otherwise transparent or opaque, implying that coming out or other forms of public truth-telling are not one-time, all-or-nothing acts but rather a series of reveals that are just enough to satisfy audiences without giving too much away. As Esther Newton (1979: 23–37) notes, historically many drag performers maintained highly private and otherwise normative lives outside of drag, often avoiding gay culture outside of their performances. In this vein, the closet is less a site of concealed data, and more a complex space of informational possibility that selectively enables its laundry to be aired, or as Oscar Montero (1988: 40) puts it, “the drag [queen] has no closet: she is wearing it.” Further, as I elaborate in the following sections, through practices of shapeshifting and satire, drag also suggests that the closet may not be a site of truth or authenticity, but rather a space in and from which to try on myriad fantasies and realities.

Shifting Identities

Drag is also largely defined through its forms of transformation: the imitations, impersonations, and illusions through which performers often experiment with multiple looks, styles, and personas across a single performance, as well as over the span of a career. While such mutability may seem unremarkable in postmodern and digital cultures—and perfectly in line with early conceptualizations of the internet as a space for identity experimentation (e.g., Turkle 1997; Stone 1995)—in the enclosed realms of the contemporary corporate-dominated Web, users' identities are generally expected to remain singular, stable, and verifiable, as exemplified by Facebook's policies that prohibit having more than one account and CEO Mark Zuckerberg's infamous statement that “having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity” (Helft 2011). Moreover, the corporate dataveillance that makes social media profitable (and forms of social surveillance possible) relies on being able to recognize individuals based on numerous identifiers that are assumed to be generally unique and unalterable: names, emails, faces, and other behaviors and biometrics that can be quantified or analyzed as patterns (Fuchs 2011). In contrast, drawing from early theoretical scholarship on drag that describes it as a form of “radical contingency” (Butler 1999: 175), “a site of a certain ambivalence” (Butler 1993: 85), and instigating a “crisis of ‘category’ itself” (Garber 1997: 32), I suggest that drag offers a cultural model of identity that is obfuscatory in that it is always subject to

change and open to varying interpretation, while still retaining a sense of authenticity and shared meaning in context.

A similar theoretical attention to perpetual, tactical, and non-teleological transformation is also present in several recent works of trans, and particularly trans-of-color, scholarship. For example, Snorton (2017: 5–7) employs the concept of transitivity to describe a condition marked by inherent changeability—what he describes as “partial and ephemeral, subject to change, and altered by changing conditions”—that retains a sense of possibility and emergence, even at the same time that black and trans bodies are constantly made and remade through gendered and racialized logics of capitalist exchange. Similarly, Halberstam (2018: 4) cites transitivity in rejecting the colonial foundations of modern classification systems and including an asterisk in the term trans*, arguing that the use of this Boolean wildcard operator offers an inclusive approach and “refus[es] to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity.” This echoes Halberstam’s work elsewhere on ambiguity and illegibility as a productive form of queer failure, as well as with interlocutors Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013: 19) on their poetic theorization of the undercommons, in which they write: “Every time it tries to take root, we’re gone (because we’re already here, moving)” (Halberstam 2011: 9). Finally, micha cárdenas (2015: 2) also echoes a sense of transitivity within digital culture in her conceptualization of “the shift” that trans women of color strategically practice as a form of survival, by actively modulating perceptions of their identities to pass as trans or cis, much like the fading or flickering properties of media. She further notes “the performative utterance of making one’s body be read in a certain way reveals both its mutability and reveals that one’s body can be a sign with more than one signifier, like the digital image.”

However, images and identities function differently in digital culture: while images and other forms of media may be subject to constant remixings and repurposings that enable multiple meanings, identity is generally expected to remain stable and verifiable in most corporate digital platforms. Thus, while an ability to quickly embody perceptual shifts may be a mode of strategically avoiding state or interpersonal violence for trans women of color, for drag queens, and others who may not face such immediate physical threats, it can also open up a broader space for aesthetic or social disruption. That is, playing with various forms of bodily and behavioral modulation—the shape of one’s face, the way one walks and talks, the background details of one’s character, the way one interacts with others, and so on—not only alters how queens are perceived by others, but also make them hard to pin down by surveillant actors, whether data brokers, immigration authorities, or abusive family members. Similarly, it is worth considering that, in addition to individual acts, many queens’ transformations also resemble one another; indeed, as a tradition, drag often encourages forms of diva worship in which many queens may impersonate the same public figure. Particularly with the contemporary popularity of makeup tutorial videos and “Instagram queens,” many queens end up looking quite similar, and as trends circulate, this mutability of identity applies not only to drag performers individually, but also on a communal level. Of course, drag queens may be hailed or targeted through the more stable aspects of their identities, but these constant transformations add an additional obfuscatory barrier to potential observers—particularly by offering a certain degree of temporary deflection or deniability for any individual action or data point—and ultimately call into question the veracity of all data collected.

The Lie that Tells the Truth

Drag also incorporates a novel approach to informational authenticity in often presenting seemingly contradictory details, particularly through the aesthetic strategies of camp and realness. These rhetorical and performative forms originate in different historical and cultural contexts: camp is often associated with effete white gay men à la Oscar Wilde, though such exclusive historiographies have been challenged in recent years (for example, Clements 2018; Manatakis 2018; McMillan 2014), while realness is a vernacular term emanating from the runway categories performed at primarily black and latinx trans and queer balls, first brought to mainstream attention in Jennie Livingston’s documentary *Paris is Burning* and subsequently via platforms like *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and Janet Mock’s memoir *Redefining Realness*. Still, both terms gesture toward a complex intertwining of truth/fiction, reality/fantasy, and denotation/connotation in which information either should often not be taken only at face value or should not be assumed to be any more

profound than it appears on its surface. In contrast to digital databases that require data points to be as discrete, straightforward, and legible as possible to be parsed and processed, camp and realness's "lie[s] that tell the truth" (Meyer 1993: 103) serve as a reminder that information is always meant to be interpreted in context and often by particular interlocutors who are already in the know.

Susan Sontag (1999: 53) similarly describes camp as "a private code," drawing an implicit connection between semiotic forms of encoding and decoding meaning, along the lines of Stuart Hall's (2007) work in cultural studies and computational forms of encrypting or obfuscating information. Moe Meyer (1993: 10–12) makes this more explicit, defining camp not as a form of cliquish exclusivity but a response to oppressive power regimes, in which camp's "altering [of] signifying codes" actually exploits the invisibility of queers in order to convey information to likeminded audiences while remaining undetectable to the normative logics and grammars of those in power. In the context of drag performance, this is often accomplished through wordplay like double entendres, gestures that indicate alternative connotations for what is being said or done, and references to pop culture texts that subtly shift their meanings; historically, such drag and camp techniques offered some of the only ways that queer relationships or desires were able to escape explicit or implicit cultural censorship (Russo 1987). Additionally, scholars like Andrew Ross (1989: 151) have often conceived of camp as forms of performing excess, recuperating cultural waste, and "re-creation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labor." In an informational context, such surplus does not merely constitute superfluous noise (or Sontag's insistence on style over substance), but rather adds contextual and often metatextual information that both obfuscates and enhances possible interpretations, depending on who is paying attention, while also casting doubt on the possibility of a singular reading in the first place.

Similarly, realness describes a complicated relationship between performing and being, in which authenticity is always already suspect if not impossible, and identity is a complex assemblage of fact, desire, appearance, and aspiration that one can temporarily claim simply by performing or looking a certain way. For example, in balls, individuals often compete in categories like Executive, All-American, and Butch or Femme Queen Realness, in which they walk runways presenting carefully constructed looks meant to emulate particular gender presentations and cultural trends.⁸ As bell hooks (1992: 149, 156) comments, such categories often melancholically reify an upper-class and white yearning, and she cautions against an overinvestment in fantasy rather than "using the imagination creatively to enhance one's capacity to live more fully in a world beyond fantasy." However, as other scholars have demonstrated, realness, for competitors, is not merely an artificial illusion or impersonation of something outside of oneself. Rather, similarly to camp (and yet also different from it), realness refers to a deeply felt performance that often coalesces into embodiments of trans identity, social relations, and networks of care, as in the house and family systems that diverge from biopolitical norms (Bailey 2013; Butler 1993). That is, from an informational perspective, realness does not necessarily imply that an identity, relationship, or name is false or insincere; instead, it undermines the very prospect of authenticity itself by suggesting the possibility of multiple truths, including a reality that is apparent only to those who know how to see or participate in it. In practice, then, realness holds contradictions that strict databases cannot, between any number of presumed incompatibilities or ambiguities, such as between one's assigned sex and lived gender, between working a shitty job by day and being a legend by night, or between being called one name by a biological mom and another by a drag or house mother.

Digital Drag: Names, Families, Faces

I now turn to present examples from my research of the ways in which the digital aspects of drag queens' performances directly engage these discourses as obfuscatory tactics that might confuse or thwart

⁸ It is worth noting that, while drag queens often participate in ballroom culture, many ballroom performers do not identify as drag performers, and instead identify as trans or femme queens (among other terms). However, I include ballroom performers here as something like kissing cousins to drag queens in order to highlight similarities in their highly-stylized and sartorially-driven performance practices, through which they both enact and undermine social constructs.

contemporary surveillance technologies, albeit often unintentionally. In doing so, my aim is partly to highlight their cultural specificity, but also to suggest tactics that could easily be engaged by anyone: queers, queens, or otherwise. While there are many innovative artistic and activist projects that use forms of makeup or masking to counter surveillance and draw attention to its harms—such as Adam Harvey’s *CV Dazzle*, Zach Blas’s *Facial Weaponization Suite* and *Face Cages*, and Leo Selveglio’s *URME Project*—these often rely too heavily on novel but inaccessible technologies like 3-D printing, and result in outputs that are wholly uncanny and aesthetically out of place in most settings (Monahan 2015). However, while drag certainly does not integrate seamlessly with normative everyday life, I propose that its lasting presence as a subcultural art form and its relatively low financial and skilled barriers to entry—particularly as expressed in social media environments—provide a more practical example of Scott’s (1987) conceptualization of “weapons of the weak.”

In my case studies, San Francisco serves as both an exemplary and exceptional site for understanding the form, as it is home to a particularly diverse history of drag scenes and aesthetics. Traditions there range from glamorous Barbary Coast-era female impersonation to post-WWII drag shows in the emerging gay bar circuit around North Beach; the service-oriented Imperial and Ducal Courts, “genderfuck” and hippie Cockettes, and (sac-)religious parodying Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, which began in the 1960s and 1970s; and the emergence of drag king shows and “alternative” drag clubs like Popstitute and Trannyshack in the 1990s (and later) that favored artistic, punk, filthy, and otherworldly aesthetics (Sears 2014; Boyd 2005; Mullens 2005; Weber and Weissman 2002; Gorman 1998; Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, n.d.)—as well as cross-over between audiences and styles. Additionally, San Francisco’s proximity to Silicon Valley certainly impacts drag performers’ engagements with technology. While most queens around the world use social media to promote themselves and complement their performances—and, in some cases, as their primary platform—performers in San Francisco do so while also participating in public discourses around the local impacts of the biggest tech corporations being in their backyard, including gentrification, rising costs of living, and the disruption of industries. The queens I work with often explicitly connect local frustrations with their sense of being undervalued or underserved as users and the power these companies have to shape global culture by restricting and regulating various types of speech and behavior—even as they express their complaints or organize on corporate platforms like Facebook.

To begin, most drag queens assume stage names that differ from their given or legal names, with common tactics for selecting names including: 1) assuming names that include a pun or wordplay, reference a celebrity, or otherwise provide some form of social commentary, for example, Trangela Lansbury, Suppositori Spelling, Yves St. Croissant, Cash Monet, Landa Lakes, Mona G. Hawd; 2) being gifted names by friends or drag family or taking on the name of one’s house, for example, Rahni Nothing More and VivvyAnne ForeverMORE!, both part of San Francisco’s legendary House of More; or 3) blending elements of one’s given name or basing a name on elements that have personal or cultural relevance, for example, Dia Dear, Gina LaDivina, Persia Socrates, LeMay. From a digital privacy standpoint, using a drag name or other pseudonym on a platform like Facebook inhibits profiling that immediately ties the user back to their legal identity. Yet, in the context of big data, this may be rendered ineffective given the ease of de-anonymizing data based on even a small number of data points (for example, Narayanan and Shmatikov 2010; Ohm 2009).

However, using a drag name or other pseudonym may provide a certain amount of social cover or plausible deniability to users who are already the targets of disproportionate levels of surveillance by state or corporate actors by limiting the amount of data collected, rendering it unusable in legal proceedings, or simply adding extra labor for the watchers. Further, using a pseudonym can also protect vulnerable users from harms enabled by the social surveillance of stalkers, harassers, and abusers, as well as establish personal and professional boundaries, for example between healthcare workers and their patients or between drag queens and their biological families. Indeed, I have found that many drag queens maintain multiple profiles (which is prohibited on Facebook) specifically to connect with different people in their lives. However, most drag queens consider their drag name to be an authentic aspect of their identity, beyond merely a character or persona they perform on stage; indeed, many report that they use drag names (and often female pronouns)

to refer to drag friends whether they are in drag or not, and many mention that they rarely use their friends' legal names, if they have learned them at all. In this way, a fluid and context-specific identity may partially obfuscate one's legal name and hamper efforts to track data, particularly across profiles and platforms, while still enabling authentic and meaningful relationships and social interactions.

Similarly, the types of data and content that drag queens share on platforms like Facebook often blend fact and fiction, sometimes reflecting a deliberately constructed persona or character with a unique history or life story, while at other times simply reflecting a misuse of various features on the platform. In this way, I want to briefly highlight three distinct areas in which drag queens' profiles and use of the platform often reflect this form of obfuscation: profile basics and likes, family relationships, and use of language. First, when creating profiles, many drag queens provide data that combines information about their legal or non-drag identities alongside more staged presentations of self, such as their birthday, hometown, education and employment, religious and political views, as well as the public figures, media, and other brands they "like" as interests. For example, many drag queens will use their actual date of birth while others will base theirs on their "drag birthday" or first time performing. Many also add fictionalized education information such as Landa Lakes's inclusion of her major in "Etiquette" from the Oswego College for Young Ladies and Dulce de Leche's similar notation of having graduated from Big Mommas Charm School for Plus Size Girls, or Sissy Payczechs, whose likes include ILoveMyCatholicFaith.org and the Billy Graham Evangelical Association, reflecting a washed-up conservative star persona a la Tammy Faye Baker. In my research, this is often true even of queens who do not have a consistent stage character, but may insert additional information into their digital personas in order to experiment with the affordances of the platform. For example, Mary Vice describes herself in her Facebook "Intro" as a "Southern boy/California girl," Miss Rahni lists her gender as "who is paying," and Trangela Lansbury describes her political views with the following: "My goal is the destruction of the last vestigial traces of traditional manhood."

Similarly, many queens also specify familial or romantic relationships in their profiles, many of which integrate biological relationships with the drag familial structures of drag mothers, sisters, and so on, though many are only listed on Facebook (especially, it seems, in designating romantic relationships). For example, legendary San Francisco drag queen Juanita More lists about thirty relations on Facebook (as of this writing), including relationships well-known to the community like drag children Dulce de Leche and drag mother David More (whose Facebook name blends Mr. David, his professional moniker as a designer, with her drag name Glamamore), as well as several lesser-known "sons," many of whom appeared as her branded "More boys" at her events over the past decade. More's profile also lists Danimal Oh as her husband, whom she "married" at a performance at the gay bar The Stud in 2013, as well as a local artist listed as "in an open relationship" with her. Sometimes these relationships provoke interesting responses from the platform itself. For example, in my own experience as a drag queen, I have been amused each year to receive a Happy Mother's Day message from Facebook.

Additionally, many queens also write posts with highly stylized language that reflects a particular persona, such as using all-caps or particular grammatical or stylistic devices, including ones based on gendered, raced, and/or classed stereotypes (in ways that can be read as problematic and/or as a self-reflexive form of drag, depending on context). Take, for example, the posts of the aforementioned Sissy Payczechs, who not only posts from the perspective of her persona as a washed-up conservative religious star, but makes use of unique grammatical quirks in punctuation and capitalization that are very different from her posts on her non-drag account:

I am a Survivor. I Survived Bad men, Bad Hair, Bad Eyeshadow, a Filthy Tenement on Saint Charles, and the Deaths of Several of my Vocal Idols. If you think I break Easily, if you Think you'll Destroy Me, if you Think I won't Stand on that Stage and give the Homosexuals a Show night after Night, let me Tell you something. My name is Sissy Terabithia Payczechs and I'm STILL STANDING. I've seen Trends come and Go, Lovers and Friends come and Go, I've WATCHED THE SEASONS come And Go, and I'm Still here. I won't Lay down and DIE and I Plan on Lip Syncing for my LIFE UNTIL

THEY PRONOUNCE ME DEAD!!!!!!! (personal communication [friends-only status update], Apr 14, 2016)

Or, as a more extreme case, Christeene's writing reflects her uniquely stylized live performances, with intentional misspellings, run-on sentences, digital vernaculars, and wordplay:

i luv how alllll da amazin creative fuckin peeeple i know got heart an been exxxpressin so much thank u an luv u an praise on each otherz wurk an help an guidance an spotlightin each others shit all over da place cuz egos will killllllllll an family is furst an bein surrounded by soo many beautiful (an mostly ugly) folks keeeeps da heart an hole pumpin too supply diz fukkked up wurld with da toolz it needz too fight da real enemies out derr. YALL FUKKIN RAWK ME HARD XXX (Vale 2016)

From a technical standpoint, these linguistic quirks may function to obfuscate stylometric analyses that are able to identify users based on their unique writing habits and authorial voices.⁹ Similarly, in all of the above examples, these drag queens potentially undermine both the assumed purity of data collected, and the very notion of authenticity that underlies its collection; such “polluted” data may negatively impact the integrity of Facebook’s user data in a legal or transactional context—by suggesting family relationships that are not legal or by leading to advertisements for products that are not of interest to the user behind the persona—but also often embody certain truths and social commentaries that are meaningful to performers and their communities.

Finally, returning to my opening, I speculate that drag makeup might be used tactically to confound facial recognition technologies, as the unintentional examples I have cataloged on Facebook suggest. Through soliciting examples from queens, I have documented and analyzed several images in which drag queens are mistaken for one another, as well as with people out of drag, celebrities (including drag favorites like Cher and Dolly Parton), drawings and paintings captured in the photograph, and even inanimate objects whose structure or shadows are somehow read by algorithms as a face. Again, in most cases these are reposted by drag queens to playfully “read” one another and poke fun at Facebook’s failures; however, in some cases, these automatic tags go unnoticed until a queen is alerted that she has been tagged in a photo and discovers it is not her or another user leaves a comment pointing out the error. Facebook does offer a Photo Review page wherein a user can review images in which they may have been automatically tagged using face recognition, though many queens seemed unaware of its existence. In a recent visit to my own Photo Review page, I found three photos in which another queen was incorrectly tagged as me and three photos of me that were correctly tagged (and interestingly, one of the latter was found in a right-wing meme critical of my involvement in *Drag Queen Story Hour*, showing some utility to me as a user for this feature.) It also seems worth noting that, since beginning this project, related examples have popped up in mainstream media, including two videos of drag queens putting on their makeup to “trick” the iPhone X’s new FaceID security system around its release in November of 2017 and reports that Juggalo clown makeup also undermines popular facial recognition technologies (Haskins 2018; Click.Click.Click by Mashable 2017; BuzzFeed News 2017).

One of the challenges of analyzing and presenting these malfunctions, however, is that one must often have familiarity with the performers in order to tell the difference between photos and make sense of these computationally mistaken identities. Like many automated or artificially intelligent tasks, facial recognition is ultimately dependent on human labor, both in the development of algorithms and their training with existing data as well as in determining their efficacy in the wild and correcting for exceptions and edge cases (for example, Gray and Suri 2019). And, to put it even more plainly, humans are still generally better at identifying faces, despite algorithms’ claims to accuracy, and the only signals most users have that the software is not working perfectly are when one of their own photos (or a friend’s) is mistagged or they find their account tagged in a photo that does not include them. For example, Moni Stat is a drag queen who is

⁹ Though I have seen no evidence that Facebook uses such an analysis itself, there is interesting research into how such techniques could be used to identify users across platforms (Vosoughi, Zhou, and Roy 2015).

frequently incorrectly auto-tagged and offers an interesting set of examples showcasing these failures, particularly with regards to race (and as researchers like Joy Buolamwini and Timnit Gebru [2018] have demonstrated, current facial recognition software is often most inaccurate at identifying women and people of color's faces). A queen of mixed Asian and Pacific Islander ethnicity, Buolamwini has often been tagged in photos of *RuPaul's Drag Race* contestants Kim Chi, who is Korean American; Jiggly Caliente, who is Filipina American; and Vanessa Vanjie Mateo, who is of Puerto Rican descent. She also notes that she is often mistakenly tagged in photos of RuPaul, who is African American. And in a personal example, a photo of Monistat was incorrectly tagged as this author, a white drag queen (see Figures 2 and 3 for more examples). While it might be possible to identify certain similarities in basic facial structures or makeup techniques between individuals, to most human viewers, any resemblance would likely be negligible beyond the fact of being drag queens.

Figure 2: Screenshots of images that were each incorrectly tagged by Facebook as the drag queen Moni Stat. Pictured in each photograph, from top-left: RuPaul's Drag Race contestant Vanessa Vanjie Mateo; RuPaul; Tyra Banks; Seattle-based drag queen Aleksa Manila; RuPaul's Drag Race contestant Kim Chi; RuPaul. Moni Stat noted that she is often mistakenly tagged for other Asian and Pacific Islander American drag queens, as well as in photos of RuPaul. In one instance, Moni Stat commented: "It does it all the time 🤖 when someone posts a picture of Ru i automatically get tagged. It was annoying for a while I've just learned to accept it now 😊" (personal correspondence [friends-only Facebook comment], March 2, 2018). Note also that Moni Stat has used different variations of her name over the years to creatively address requests by Facebook to use her "authentic name."

Because Facebook's algorithms are proprietary, it is impossible to know exactly how they work—but it is also not necessary to understand them completely in order to fool them. However, by studying these edge cases more closely, we can start to see some patterns emerge. For example, beyond basic measurements of and between the facial features that computer vision "looks" for to create a "facial signature" or "faceprint" (for example, Dou et al. 2015; Kroeker 2002), I would surmise that Facebook's algorithms primarily look

for matches within friend or friend-of-friend networks—hence the frequency with which drag queens, who are already connected on Facebook, are mistaken for each other. It is also possible that, depending on the machine learning methods, images of heavily made-up queens might in fact skew the model for everyone, encouraging algorithms to “look” for relationships based on makeup trends that would not be found in the general population (unlikely given the relatively few number of drag queens on the platform but still possible). Again, rather than seeking to make facial recognition more accurate for drag queens or others, these moments of failure open up the possibility for exploiting Facebook’s coded and corporate shortsightedness by continuing to constantly transform one’s body and behaviors in ways that exceed the norms.¹⁰ While I am engaged in further research through a portrait series aimed to identify whether there are particular techniques that might be more or less effective in intentionally provoking instances of misrecognition—such as methods of shading contour, outlining one’s eyes, applying lipstick, and so on—drag queens continue to push the envelope as part of a long craft tradition and its adaptations within emerging digital technologies and cultures.

Conclusion

When drag queens unintentionally “break the internet” by making creative use of popular social media technologies or simply by going about their noisy digital lives, they demonstrate technologies’ failures in attempting to reduce human bodies and behaviors to quantifiable and exchangeable data in the first place. That is, as Shoshana Amielle Magnet (2011: 50) deftly observes, failure in surveillance is not merely a set of technological malfunctions, but given that tracking tools like facial recognition are built on numerous problematic assumptions and a proneness to all sorts of errors, they are always already destined to “fail precisely at the task which they have been set: to read the body perfectly.” Drawing on Halberstam’s (2011) *Queer Art of Failure*, I would argue that drag might be understood as one of the many forms through which queer and trans ways of being—in the ways that resist not only corporeal normativity, but also the disciplining of seemingly deviant behaviors—both have been and can continue to be strategically weaponized to protect these communities from harm. Just as queer and trans people have historically been rendered both in- and hyper-visible by state, corporate, and other social actors, in a context in which data is increasingly a tool of harm and control, drag offers a playful toolkit for informational obfuscation. That is, drag allows users to be both noisy and shiny in virtual and embodied spaces, while still operating under the radar when it matters most.

Finally, in our current media and political climate that is more and more defined by misinformation and attempts to spin truth—that is, in which obfuscation can indeed be a tactic wielded by politicians, CEOs, and others with institutional power—I want to reiterate that drag as a form does not operate in lies, falsifications, and manipulation but rather demands cultural and media literacy in understanding context, nuance, and standpoint to make sense of information. That is, drag is quite distinct from both right-wing gaslighting of “alternative facts” as well as intentionally deceptive examples of what Lisa Nakamura (1995) calls “identity tourism” online. Rather, as a form of play, drag acknowledges the inherent artifice of presenting one’s identity (or information) and encourages performers (or users) to experiment with their own ways of being in the world while demanding that the community be in on the joke, not subject to it. For queens, the butt of the joke is generally those in power and the systems that hold them in place, and their eyes often betray their true feelings: an exasperated roll, a widened shock, or a shady read. But when it comes to sharing information about themselves, the most sincere gesture is a laugh and a wink of a heavily made-up eye.

¹⁰ To speculate further, I am also curious whether other features of drag might similarly obfuscate other biometric methods, such as whether shifting one’s walk in high heels (both determined by the shoe, and a stylized performance) might confound gait recognition, or modulations of one’s voice might throw off voice recognition.

Figure 3: An actual Facebook profile photo of Moni Stat. Used with permission.

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