



**Drag Me To Boston: Race, Culture, Economics,
and the Politics of Queer Nightlife**

Student: Jayden Luu

BA in Political Science and Sociology

Tufts University

Supervisor: Dr. Kareem Khubchandani

Professor in Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies

Tufts University

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Abstract

The social worlds of drag cannot be fully understood through performance alone. Drag operates as cultural pedagogy, labor, and queer world-making, shaped by the spaces, relationships, and material conditions that make these worlds possible. This research examines Greater Boston's drag scene, examining queer nightlife's accessibility and inclusivity to performers of color, particularly Asian and Asian American drag artists. Amid limited scholarship on queer Asian and performance studies, dominant understandings of queer performance center whiteness, overlooking how race, culture, socioeconomics, politics, and location shape drag performance.

Inspired by ethnographic studies including *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (2008) and *Geisha of a Different Kind* (2015), I conducted ethnographic observational fieldwork across nightlife and Pride-related spaces, 12 semi-structured interviews with drag artists and venue owners, and volunteer work with a Boston nonprofit supporting emerging youth drag artists, supplemented by a scholarly literature review.

I found that closures, redevelopment, gentrification, local regulations, pandemic disruption, and shifting business models have transformed Boston's queer nightlife infrastructure, constraining venues, professional networks, and entry points for performers. While drag has adapted by expanding beyond gay bars into restaurants, theaters, universities, and public spaces, more stages do not necessarily produce greater accessibility, equitable representation, or preservation of queer-owned spaces. For Asian and Asian American performers, drag's capaciousness creates possibilities for negotiating racialization, gender, and culture.

Ultimately, drag's growing cultural and commercial value exists alongside increasing precarity. Examining the experiences of Asian and Asian American performers reveals how the subversive potential of performance, gender, and identity provides a lens into broader systems of colonialism, heteronormativity, racialization, and minoritarian politics that continue to structure queer nightlife. This research seeks to contribute to future drag scholarship by affirming the importance of queer Asian voices in queer culture and illuminating the diversity and complexity of marginalized queer experiences.

“You told me about your story, how you had to work extra jobs to make money for yourself and your mom and you have always just been a hustler. And so from your perspective it’s like, oh, they’re gonna know who I am. And then to us performing together, like it just shows like when you are confident in yourself or when you have ambition or when you have goals for yourself, like you can achieve that. Like you’re just, you just have always been a go getter” — Candace Persuasian

It’s 9:00 p.m. on a warm, exciting Saturday evening, August 30, 2025. A little gay Asian boy all the way from Fort Smith, Arkansas sits criss-cross in the corner of this densely packed, dimly lit room. It’s his first time in Boston, having moved here for college. He eagerly waits to watch his first ever live drag show: “Jumbo’s Got Drag” featuring local Vietnamese drag performer Candace Persuasian.

He does not know Candace yet. And Candace couldn’t even see him in the crowded room.

He does not know that exactly one year later, he will sit across from her in her apartment as a researcher, listening to her experiences in Boston’s drag scene. He does not know that eventually they will share a stage together, resonate in their upbringings, or that he will begin developing a drag persona of his own with Candace as one of his mentors. For now, he is simply watching.

That little gay Asian boy was me.

I first discovered drag when I came across the television show *Rupaul’s Drag Race* at age 13 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Born and raised in the conservative south while simultaneously being raised by strict, gendered, and traditional Asian customs, my gay, American, and Asian identities all coexisted in conflict with one another. During those months of isolation from the world, I would lock myself away in my bedroom, playing with makeup collected from drug stores, playing in my mom’s heels and hoping to figure out the impulses that made me so “different”. I vividly remember discovering the premiere episode of season 11 and the shock, curiosity, excitement, and surprise all mixed into a sensation of awe when I saw these men dressed up as these beautiful women.

Then, unexpectedly, the fourth queen entered the werk room with a message that made me feel seen, “Xin chào các bạn, tôi là Plastique Tiara của Việt Nam”.

She was Vietnamese.

In that moment, it felt as though the world had somehow heard my little gay Vietnamese prayers asking it to explain what was “wrong” with me and answered by giving me one of the greatest gifts I could have received: drag queens.

Prior to watching *Drag Race*, I had never been introduced to the concept of gender identity or expression, nor did I have a community that I could relate to or express myself within. Drag

showed me that other worlds were possible through the life that I was already living — it showed me that I can be multifaceted, that I could have depth to my character and still be unapologetically *myself*, contradictory and complicated.

Fast forward six years later, sitting in that crowded ballroom watching Candace, I felt *alive*.

Drag is a ferocious artform. It's a talent that is ambitious, demanding, passionately creative, and is all encompassing of expression, messaging, and entertainment. There is something undeniably special about not only being able to command the presence of a room, but to also celebrate with one another. The air of the JCC ballroom was filled with movement: bodies dancing, strangers cheering, laughter roaring, and people celebrating alongside others whose names they might never know.

At a moment when queer and trans lives—and the act of drag itself—are increasingly subjected to political scrutiny, queer joy should not be dismissed as frivolous. Queer gathering, visibility, and celebration are profound. Some of the most powerful acts of resistance are to occupy a space in unity, be bold with the movement of our bodies, and to create worlds in which we experience pleasure, community, and possibility.

This past year, my relationship to drag transformed from audience member, to researcher, to participant, and eventually, drag queen. This is when Jayda Fantasy was born. She has taught me that drag is capacious in its art form — a medium expansive enough to hold humor, politics, culture, fantasy, critique, and joy all at once.

I've learned that drag is so deeply relational. I entered Boston with an upbringing in which the possibilities of queer and gender expression felt foreign to me, and now I've experienced new meanings of identity, something capable of holding multiple truths at once. I also carried the resourcefulness instilled in me through my immigrant family: to work hard, persevere, and to always chase after my goals.

Yet none of these realizations were encountered alone. Through Asian and Asian American drag, mentors, aunties, and supporters, I emerged through the people who let me watch, taught me how to move in the scene, painted my face, taught me dance, helped me get dressed, and welcomed me into their community. The same relationships I entered Boston hoping to understand as a researcher ultimately transformed my own understanding of what it means to belong, to feel *seen*.

As my lovely auntie LaWhore Vagistan concludes in "Decolonize Drag", she leaves us with a simple challenge: "Go on! Do It!".

And so, this is me doing it.

Introduction

Since the 1970s, Boston has been home to a populous queer subculture defined by movements of liberation and community-building, yet remains a site of social, economic, and political precarity, where queer opportunity and accessibility are continually negotiated through minoritarian politics of race, gender, sex, class, lifestyle, and gentrification. Bars, clubs, and other nightlife gathering spaces have made room for marginalized individuals with opportunities to experience freedom, community, and expression in a world indicative of repressive modes of homophobia, transphobia, racism, classism, and sexism (Frank 1998). Contemporaneously, in the 21st century, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, mechanisms of gentrification, rezoning, increasing rent prices, and shifting business models have increasingly threatened the sustainability of gay, lesbian, and queer (GLQ+¹) spaces across the United States. (Smith 2025). Confronted with closures and heightened economic pressures, many surviving GLQ+ spaces have reoriented their business models towards an increasingly heterosexual clientele, displacing the LGBTQIA+ community to organize, adapt, and pivot toward alternative forms of queer spaces and practices.

However, offset by the intensifying mainstream and global success of the popular “elimination-style drag queen reality television competition”, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2009-) has transformed the profitability, visibility, and integration of drag artists into gay popular culture, revitalizing nightlife with gay bars² and queer spaces through drag-themed and drag-hosted events such as *Drag Race* watch parties, drag brunches, bingo, trivia, karaoke nights, and storytimes (Branton and Compton 2021, Smith 2025). Historically, drag queens and female impersonators have occupied a highly stigmatized position within gay male culture, as their defiance of gender conformity and association with femininity often subjected them to further marginalization in an already marginalized population (Newton 1972, Rupp and Taylor 2003). With the commercialization of drag culture and its aesthetics, the cultural field of queer nightlife (Ghaziani 2025) has provided the drag community with expanding professional opportunities while allowing for broader participation and accessibility to queer nightlife, negotiating political, racial, economic, and infrastructural challenges within the neoliberal³ relationship between sexuality and urban space. (Branton and Compton 2021)

Existing Scholarship on Drag Performance and Asian Identity

José Esteban Muñoz, a foundational queer theorist whose work, *Cruising Utopia* (2009) conceptualizes ‘queerness’ through futurity, hope, and capaciousness, informs my understanding of drag and queer identity as complex sites of possibility. Resistant to any singular or definitive characterization, drag can broadly be understood as a capacious form of queer performance art that explores and plays with gender expression while engaging with the intersectionalities of

¹ Gay, Lesbian, Queer

² Queer-Inclusive spaces in nightlife

³ Political-economic logic characterized by emphasis of profitability, branding, and competition

race, politics, gender, class, and disability. Its possibilities for hope, survival, love, joy, and community care can be felt through its effect of lip synching, dance, costuming, and comedy, rendering alternative ways of imagining identity while critiquing the social and political structures that constrain queer life and visibility (Muñoz 2013, Paslow 2024).

Contemporary scholarship on drag queens and female impersonators has been built upon foundational ethnographic work by scholars including Esther Newton (1972) and sociologists Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor (2003), whose work generated feminist and lesbian perspectives into the study of drag, gender, and sexuality. Their work examines drag as a form of “political and social protest” (Berkowitz and Belgrave 2010) foregrounding themes of drag origin, transgender and gender expression sexuality, and labor, exploring the cultural and political productions that are created through the capaciousness of performance. Within the broader theoretical foundation of queer, gender, and performance studies, Judith Butler a core feminist and queer philosopher, through her influential book *Gender Trouble* (1990), highlighted the understanding of gender as a form of performativity that has the ability to relay political and social critique and messaging through bodily inscriptions. This framework has worked to destabilize the binaries of gender by facilitating a critical close reading into drag performance and gender performativity as a form of subversion or cultural practice, (Halbertstam 1997, Spruill 2008, Berkowitz and Belgrave 2010, Zhang 2016) crucial to my intentionality behind observing drag and movement.

In tandem, the bodies through which drag is performed are simultaneously racialized, gendered, and politicized, marking queer studies expansive to probe into the multifaceted disciplines of marginalization through ethnic, postcolonial, economic, and gendered studies (Manalansan 2003). The racialization of bodies is entangled with histories of pathologization, exoticization, eroticization, and exploitation that disproportionately affect the most marginal identities (Khubchandani 2023). Kareem Khubchandani’s *Decolonize Drag* (2023) investigates how colonial and racial epistemologies and structures dictate what aesthetics of drag performance are made legible, legitimate, and valued as “drag”. Drag can therefore possess the power to make visible and to destabilize racial stereotypes inscribed onto bodies. The conventions of desire are attached to racialized expectations of masculinity, femininity, beauty, and culture (Manalasan 2003, Khubchandani 2023).

For Asian and Asian Americans in particular, Chong-suk Han (2009) and Erique Zhang (2016) provide a deep explication into how Asian bodies are arbitrated and stigmatized through sociopolitical stereotypes of exoticism, femininity, submissiveness, and physicality drawn from deeply problematic hegemonic white and heteronormative frameworks that model masculine epistemologies of gender (Manalasan 2003, Han 2009, Ge, et al. 2025). Asian men in Western contexts, in particular, are often considered to stand in conflict with several uneven axes of power where racialization, masculinity, sexuality, and desirability position gay Asian men against dominant constructions of masculinity and gay male desirability (Zhang 2016).

Following Martin Manalansan's *Global Divas* (2003) and C. Winter Han's *Geisha of a Different Kind* (2009) were particularly instructive to this study providing an informative paradigm into the queer experiences of Asian and Asian Americans' histories of migration, diaspora, postcolonialism, race, and sexuality. This conceptual framework offers a foundation into understanding cultural identity, desirability, and visibility within the drag scene in Boston.

In this essay, I'm interested in the importance of the drag scene in Boston and how queer nightlife has been made accessible and inclusive to performers of color, particularly Asian and Asian American drag artists, with careful attention to drag as a form of political critique, labor, and cultural practice within gay and queer culture. I position racial and gender identity as pivotal entry-points into queer nightlife. As queer nightlife venues across the United States face closures due to increasing rent prices, intensified political scrutiny particularly targeted towards the trans and drag communities, the dichotomous relationship between the proliferation of drag alongside a shrinking number of spaces in which to perform has contributed to an increasingly saturated drag economy (Frank 1998, Kearnan 2017, Parslow 2024). Within this cultural and sociopolitical context, this essay demonstrates the uneven contours of drag as a profession, naming the inequalities of access to performance opportunities, visibility, and resources necessary to participate in drag, inseparable from the minoritarian politics of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

Data and Methodology

The social worlds of drag⁴ cannot be fully understood through observing performance alone. Drag operates as cultural pedagogy, a form of labor, and a subculture of queer-world making that requires attention to the spatial practices, relationships, and material conditions through which these worlds are possible. Drawing on theories of *worlding*, Roy and Ong (2011) challenge singular epistemic frameworks of understanding urban life and instead attend to the heterogeneous social interactions, practices, and relations through which urban populations are being continually constituted. Manalansan (2015) urges us to think beyond the rigidity and emphasis of Western ideologies that feed into Euro-centric and hegemonic productions of politics and capitalism. Roy and Ong further contend that there are "a multiplicity of aspirations, speculations and sensibilities" of class, race, politics, and culture that carry diversity across urban life (Ray and Ong 2011, Manalansan 2015).

Place and locality, then, are not incidental to drag, rather they are constitutive of it. Boston, in particular, offers a compelling urban landscape through which to study this relationship. The city is characterized by its rich and contested political and queer history, while its diverse drag scene has also reached mainstream visibility with various performers having gone on to compete on *Drag Race*. Yet, despite Boston being a major U.S. city, the city has been challenged by an actively shifting political, economic, and cultural landscape of queer nightlife, including the widespread closure of gay bars and queer gathering spaces (City of Boston 2022, Smith 2025).

⁴ Contemporary and sociological productions of drag performance

When considered alongside other major gay cities such as New York City, San Francisco, and Chicago, the national visibility and success of Boston's drag scene exists in tension with the increasing precarity of its local queer spaces. To fully understand the social worlds of drag, I found it integral to immerse myself in the scene and to participate in the communities I sought to understand. With immersion as an essential pillar of my research, ethnographic fieldwork became central to entering and understanding the social milieu through which Boston drag is performed, produced, and sustained.

Inspired by *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (2008), a landmark sociological drag and queer study as well as *Geisha of a Different Kind* (2015) an ethnographic examination of race, identity, and marginalization, I participated in immersive ethnographic fieldwork and collected interview data between May 2026 and August 2026. This study was approved by the Tufts University Social, Behavioral, and Educational Research Institutional Review Board (SERB-IRB). To best understand the interdisciplinary scenes of drag and queer nightlife, I utilized multiple qualitative methods including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and a literature review encompassing scholarly literature, archival materials, public documents, and online media.

Research Sites

Observational study was conducted in the greater metropolitan Boston area including Cambridge, Somerville, Arlington, Dorchester, South Boston, and Downtown Boston. I regularly attended drag brunches, themed parties and club nights, and pride-themed events, with particular observations and field notes during Pride Month in June. Rather than limiting my observations to gay bars and nightclubs, I had to get creative with how and where I encountered drag, following it across various commercial, cultural, and community spaces. Field sites ranged from nightlife events including Shore Leave's *Pride Below Deck* drag show and DESI Pride event and ManRay's *Houseboi* Pride event and weekly "Heroes" night, to drag brunches at Summer Shack and Blend Boston. I also observed drag within mainstream theatrical and public shows including the Huntington Theatre's *Spotlight: The Electric Chapel*, an AAPI cultural event at Suffolk University, and Boston's FIFA Fan Festival for the World Cup. I also pursued large-scale queer public gatherings attending Massachusetts' LGBTQ+ Youth Day on the Hill and Boston's and New York City's Pride parade and festivals.

Moreover, my fieldwork extended beyond attending and observing performances as an audience member through my volunteer work with Verna Felton, a Boston-based 501(c)(3) non-profit that provides drag materials for aspiring drag artists. Serving within their outreach and communications team, I took part in conducting digital outreach and social media communications, I recruited individuals for the organization's 'Verna Girls' initiative, and supported community programming through events such as Mother's Day Drag Brunch and tabled at a queer vendor market. This involvement offered a unique lens to observe and

experience the organizational, economic, and accessibility challenges that underlie drag performance and labor that are negotiated beyond the stage.

Despite Boston being home to a plethora of colleges and universities, with over 93,000+ undergraduate students (City of Boston 2022), the city poses significant barriers to accessing nightlife spaces for those between the ages of 18-21. With nightlife often organized around the sale and consumption of alcohol, young adults face a peculiar threshold: legally recognized as adults, yet excluded from gathering spaces through which performance and community are frequently produced — especially for queer communities. Being 19 during the time of this research, I fell under this challenging threshold myself. The limitations of my age made them become a central point of inquiry into accessibility, while simultaneously shaping as well as obscuring the field of nightlife I could observe and enter. The prohibitive nature of my age determined which performances I could observe, which venues I was able to enter, and the dimensions of Boston's queer nightlife that were available to me as a student researcher.

Data Collection

I modeled this research and data collection with a naturalistic approach to sociology by building meaningful rapport, trust, and candid conversations with various drag performers, entertainers, queer venue workers, and queer academics (Berkowitz and Belgrave 2010, Gubrium and Holstein 1997). When I initially began this study, I approached the field with an ethos that to truly understand the community I was studying, I would involve myself in the discourse and relationships that create it rather than remaining solely an outside observer. Pivotal to this approach was an ethic of reciprocity. As an outsider new to the drag and overall local life in Boston, seeking access to the knowledge, experiences, and care of the community, I continually considered how I could meaningfully contribute from my own position rather than solely inquiring for knowledge. In doing so, I prioritized listening to and learning from local voices to truly understand what it means to belong in the first place.

The findings presented in this study derive from a sample of 12 open-ended semistructured interviews, nine of which were conducted in-person across Greater Boston, while three were conducted privately over Zoom. Participants were recruited through institutional referrals, digital outreach, and community connections. Prior to each interview, participants reviewed an “Informed Consent Form to Participate,” which outlined potential risks and discomforts, benefits of participation, privacy protections, and procedures surrounding data collection and storage, after which verbal consent was obtained. Given the relatively few gay bars in Boston, “attempts to anonymize these venues would be ineffective” (Smith 2025). Still, participants were given the option of being identified by their preference in which all performers included in this study elected to be identified either by their stage names or a pseudonym. Interviews were all audio-recorded for transcription and coding for thematic analysis. Interview questions prompted

participants to reflect on socioeconomics, the political climate, social and cultural experiences, racial and gender identity, and questions of accessibility specific to Boston.

The 12 participants represent overlapping positions and various socioeconomic backgrounds within Boston's GLQ+ scene including three Drag Queens, two Drag Kings, three Drag Performers, one Burlesque Entertainer, one DJ, two events coordinators, and one venue owner. However, several participants noted that they often occupied multiple roles and categories as both performers and producers, organizers, or other nightlife positions showing how these categories shouldn't be seen as mutually exclusive, reflecting the multiplicity of queer nightlife labor.

My interview sample emphasized diversity and particular emphasis of the experiences of Asian and Asian Americans, transgender, and gender-diverse individuals. Racial and ethnic backgrounds represented within the sample included three Vietnamese participants, one Chinese participant, two Filipino participants, two Korean participants—including one participant who identified as Black and Korean—one South Asian and white participant, and three white participants of European descent. Participants also ranged in gender identities, including three cisgender women, one transgender woman, one transgender man, three cisgender men, and three nonbinary individuals.

As a student researcher at Tufts University, a highly accredited private research institution, I recognize my responsibility to acknowledge my positionality within this research. Putting myself into the equation, my identity as a gay Asian student surrounded by the resources and institutional support offered by Tufts, provided me with privilege and access that shaped how I engaged with Boston's drag and queer scene. My institutional affiliation connected me with community members through academic and professional networks while also equipping me with the language, credibility, and capital of academia and as a researcher. At the same time, while my positionality and affiliation with Tufts afforded me with opportunity, my age, relative newness to Boston, and status as a newcomer presented its challenges in integrating into local networks and spaces. So, I adopted a critically integrative and reflexive view of fieldwork. "Rather than attempt to minimize my role [in the community], I actively embraced my role while keeping in mind" (Han 2009) that "gender, sexuality, race, and class can both obstruct and deepen understanding and rapport" (Berkowitz and Belgrave 2010).

Experiencing gender expression, research, and college for the first time, my immersion in Boston's drag community also took on a deeply personal relationship in which the boundaries between researcher and participant became increasingly complicated as I began developing my own drag persona: Jayda Fantasy. Developing Jayda Fantasy required me to understand and negotiate my own relationship to race, gender expression, and cultural identity. Through makeup, costuming, mentorships, community relationships, and performance, I encountered firsthand the material costs, interpersonal networks, labor, and vulnerabilities involved in entering the drag

scene. I do not suggest that my individual experience is representative of the Asian drag experience or conditions of accessibility in which this study aims to explore; rather, my participation offered an additional perspective through which I could understand the questions of accessibility, labor, visibility, and interpersonal relationships that helped guide this research. “I believe that my own experience as a member of the group being studied led to a richer understanding of the phenomenon being explored” (Han 2015).

Origins

Ghaziani uses Bourdieu to explain queer nightlife as an interdisciplinary cultural field that offers a scene of endless possibilities for queer artistry, life, expression, and music (Ghaziani 2025). This scholarship captures those who play with gender, occupy sexual minority identities, and experience queer sociality through states of pleasure, intimacy, creativity, and movement (Adyemi, Khubchandani, Rivera-Servera 2021). Drag is particularly significant for its spatial potency of “gender, sex, and social power” (Hankins 2014) and its transgressive power to rework binaries (Charrett 2019). In this article, I situate drag within an analytical framework attentive to how performance and sociality are differentially mediated through racialized bodies, gender, desire, sexuality, and institutions of power. Through this framework, I’m interested in examining the origins and purposes through which drag performers, queer nightlife workers, and other stakeholders have entered and sustained their visibility in Boston’s queer nightlife scene, focusing attention to how identity, labor, and expression intersect within a Euro-Western capitalist economy (Adyemi, Khubchandani, Rivera-Servera 202).

The social and professional dimensions of queer nightlife extends far beyond the venues themselves. An interconnected network of graphic designers, venue workers, security guards, bartenders, event producers, club owners, DJs, and entertainers collectively produce nightlife. There are a myriad of reasons as to why one enters this multidisciplinary field and how they’ve leaned into the overlapping skillsets. Though making money certainly is a motivation, for many drag performers, it seems to be more of a “cherry on top” to this queer performance art that often demands greater material investments which can often outweigh the financial returns. Across my interviews, participants shared about their origins of how they began doing drag, involvements within nightlife, and their motivations that help to support their work. Various accounts in conversation across different positions within the nightlife ecosystem demonstrated themes of community, identity, opportunity, and visibility that converge to create queer nightlife.

Comparatively, these accounts embody different pathways into nightlife practices. Yet, no matter the particular route participants took into nightlife, their origin stories reveal recurring themes of early exposure to queer culture and performance, community, and exploration that contribute towards a pre-professional pathway into nightlife. For many drag performers, the “drag phase” begins “usually in their late teens or early twenties” (Newton 1972) as early adulthood is a particularly formative period for self-discovery. Anx, who has been performing since 2018,

talked about how fashion and reality TV media like *Drag Race*, Tyra Bank's *America's Next Top Model*, and *Project Runway* were influential during their youth and how they were always engrossed in queer culture growing up. Candace Persuasian, a premier drag performer in Boston, similarly discussed her introduction into the LGBTQ+ culture through "Gay Kingdom", a segment on the Tyra Banks show in which members of the LGBTQ+ community had to assign hierarchical roles. Candace mentioned how the drag queen was assigned last within this hierarchy and reflected on the complex stratifications and history of how the gay community has often relegated drag queens. For both performers, media functioned as an entry point into experiencing representations of identity.

RuPaul's Drag Race (2009-), the most popular queer television show, has "played a pre-eminent role" in presenting queerness and bringing drag into mainstream media (Mikko 2025). The show has skyrocketed the visibility of drag not only within mainstream audiences, but also among emerging performers who encounter drag through media—which is becoming increasingly available to younger audiences before even entering the physical spaces in which drag is performed. The mainstream success of the drag competition has possessed "significant impact in both reflecting and challenging cultural norms around gender, race, class, dis/ability, and sexuality" for its viewers (Ramnarine 2025). However, even though *Drag Race* has "undeniably popularized drag" (Ramnarine 2025), the show often resorts to characterizing its queens through racialized and gendered stereotypes, prescribing expectations of cultural differences to be more palatable and marketable for mainstream audiences (Zhang 2016, Hellmuth 2024, Ramnarine 2025). Although the show has undoubtedly expanded the visibility and influence of drag, its success does not make it exempt from continued critique for more equitable, expansive, and honest representation.

For others, early encounters with artistry and the possibilities of playing with gender occurred beyond the screen, taking material shape through live performance and communal participation. Tuck Bokki and Aseena Dahl, both well-known drag performers, enrolled in Jayden Jamison's drag king program, *Kingdom*. The program is a five-week intensive training where students learn makeup, performing masculinity, and professionalism within the drag community, with workshops at the Foundry led by members from Boston's local drag king community. At the end of the program, the students make their big debuts as the "next generation of baby kings" in Boston. Programs such as *Kingdom* illustrate how drag is fostered through community networks, where mentorship provides emerging performers with technical knowledge, professional leadership, and the connections to craft their drag identities.

Similar to the *Kingdom* babies, other participants developed familiarity with nightlife through early formative introductions to music, dance and theater. A DJ at Club Cafe shared how his experiences with dance and music in high school sparked his interest in nightlife and eventually led him into a career DJing. Dee Dee de Rey, resident performer at Carrie Nation's drag brunch,

entered drag with an existing background in musical theater and choreography during her time in college. Similarly, Candace traced her origins as a performer in college, where she was able to experience dance and explore her onstage presence.

These patterns represent a broader trajectory in which the artistic development, interests, and skills that eventually become enhanced within queer nightlife often begin long before entry into the scene itself. This is rather paradoxical, especially since many of the formative experiences of my interviewees occurred during adolescence and emerging adulthood, while the context of Boston's nightlife scene is particularly exclusive and remains restricted for many young people. If participation is necessitated through local regulations and cultivated through city dynamics, how does Boston's nightlife structure support access and community in the scene?

Boston's Historical Nightlife Infrastructure

"Boston's history of gay bars spans back at least to the 1920s, but the rise of the internet, dating and hookup apps, and a changing political environment all contributed" (Bahoosh 2021) to the decline of overall queer nightlife venues. In addition to the neighborhoods that Barney Frank documents, "neighborhoods of Bay Village, Washington Street, Beacon Hill, and Scollay Square," Downtown Boston, Fenway Park, and Chinatown have also housed significant queer venues.. These areas all used to be home to a boisterous amount of clubs and bars that gay men and lesbians frequented (Frank 1998). Yet within the past 50 years, these geographic areas have continually undergone demographic and economic transformations. Boylston used to house "minorities, elderly people on fixed incomes, and college students" (Tavares 2020), while by the mid-1960s, Fenway had developed a reputation for late-night cruising, sex work, and crime alongside a burgeoning hot spot for gay nightlife (Tavares 2020). Notably, Playland Café, Boston's oldest gay bar established in 1938 located in Downtown Boston, drew in an "eclectic crowd [of] age, class, race, and dress size" (Frank 1998) before shutting down in 1998. Nearby was also the Napoleon Club, once a prohibition speakeasy that transitioned into a gay bar, as well as the Punch Bowl which emerged as another popular gay bar in the 1950s and 1960s before its demolition. At one point, this concentration of queer gathering allowed for hubs of many drag queens, transgender individuals, and "gay people [to] socialize at almost twenty different establishments", including not only bars and clubs, but also bathhouses, theaters, hotels, and restaurants around the Bay Village/South Cove areas and Broadway and Carver Streets. However, gradually these spots became destroyed as a result of urban renewal plans, rezoning, redevelopment, and gentrification (Frank 1998, Smith 2025).

The 21st century introduced digital sites. "The rise of online hookup sites and mobile apps" like social media have provided new avenues through which LGBTQ+ individuals could locate one another, access queer communities, and form relationships without entering a physical space such as a gay bar or nightclub (Kearnan 2017, Bahoosh 2021). Traditionally, gay establishments

provided essential mediums for queer people to find one another; yet the creation of digital platforms have “supplanted gay gathering spaces” and weakened a “cohesive-feeling gay culture” (Kearnan 2017). These digital networks, while diversifying the methods of socialization for queer people to explore their identity, has also consequently affected the physicality of queer gathering.

This shifting pattern of queer sociality is also further elicited by material transformations. Rising property costs, and the systems of gentrification have displaced the city’s “working class and ethnically mixed neighborhoods” into increasingly affluent residential and commercial districts (Frank 1998, Tavares 2020, Bahoosh, 2021, Smith 2025). This shift in nightlife and gay urbanity was also reflected in my interviews. During a sit down conversation with a worker from Club Cafe⁵ they addressed that, “in the early 2000s, there was a discussion around Club Cafe that was for like rich white gays, because that’s where it was, like the gays that live in the South End. They got the money, but now not as many live here.” Club Cafe pointed out an important detail that gay communities in Boston have become dispersed in relation to the changing urban geography of the city.

They also emphasized how despite Boston being a large city, it lacks a notable clubbing district, “you could walk to Legacy from here, you could walk to Dani’s [Queer Bar] from here. Like we get cross-pollination, each way. But it’s still, it’s not like Providence where there’s like 10 gay clubs all within 2 blocks of each other”. Spatial proximity is integral to the cultural livelihood of sustaining a nightlife ecosystem in which patrons, performers, and establishments operate in overlapping social circulations rather than in isolation (Branton and Compton 2021, Ghaziani 2025). Unlike the historic placement of queer venues throughout Bay Village and the South End, Boston’s contemporary queer nightlife is comparatively limited in its density and dissipating.

⁵ Schretzmayer, Caelan. “Tiny Story: Club Cafe.” *Boston Preservation Alliance*, 8 June 2024, <https://www.bostonpreservation.org/news-item/tiny-story-club-cafe>.

Map of Gay Drag Bars/Clubs with Drag, 2010-2026

Circle: Gay Drag Bars/Clubs with Drag

1. Club Cafe
2. Icon Nightclub
3. Legacy
4. Royale
5. Dani's Queer Bar
6. Jacques Cabaret
9. Diva Royale
12. ManRay (19+)
13. Crystal Ballroom
20. Blend Boston

Circle: Gay Bars

7. Cathedral Station
10. The Alley Bar

Square: Restaurants with Drag

8. Carrie Nation
11. Shore Leave
21. Summer Shack
22. Vera's
23. Trophy Room

Triangle: Closed Venues

15. Machine (2020)
16. Boston Eagle (2021)
17. Paradise (2018)
18. Buzz Boston (2010)
19. Playland (1998)

Upside-Down Triangle: Venues with Drag

24. The Foundry
25. Spontaneous Celebrations
26. Midway Cafe
27. Huntington Theatre
28. Dorchester Brewing Company
29. The Rockwell
30. Trident Booksellers
31. Aeronaut Brewing

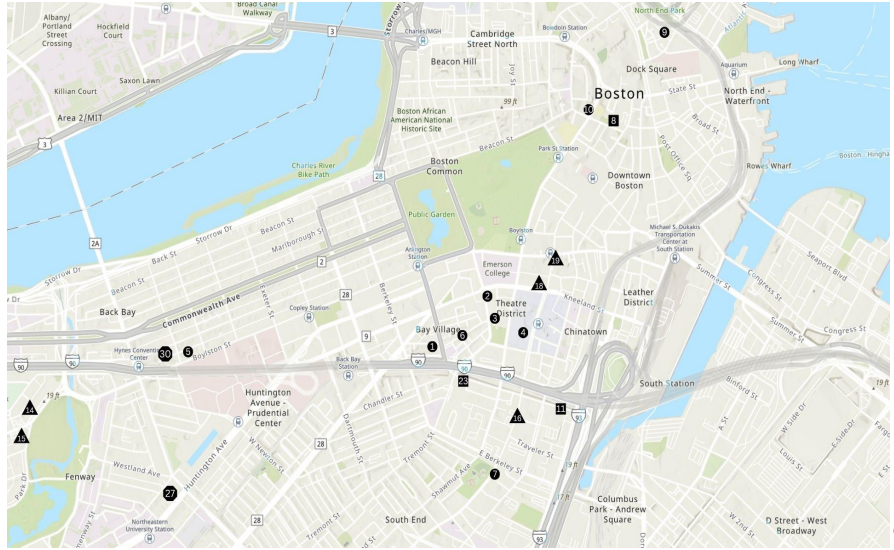


Figure 1

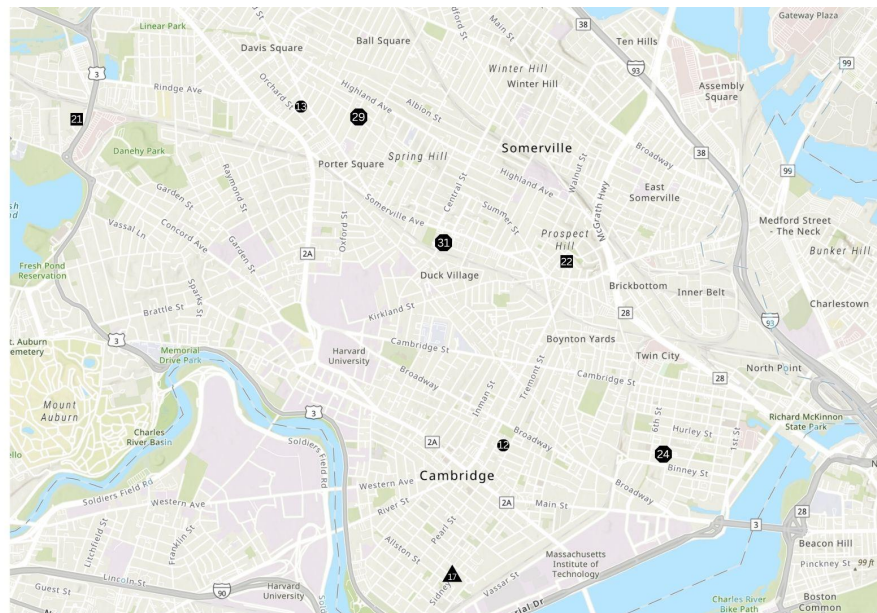


Figure 2

⁶ Bahoosh, Tessa. "Mapping Boston's Former Gay Bars." *ArcGIS StoryMaps*, 25 Apr. 2021, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/2fcd968126e245788b94b3a57a1dfb55>.

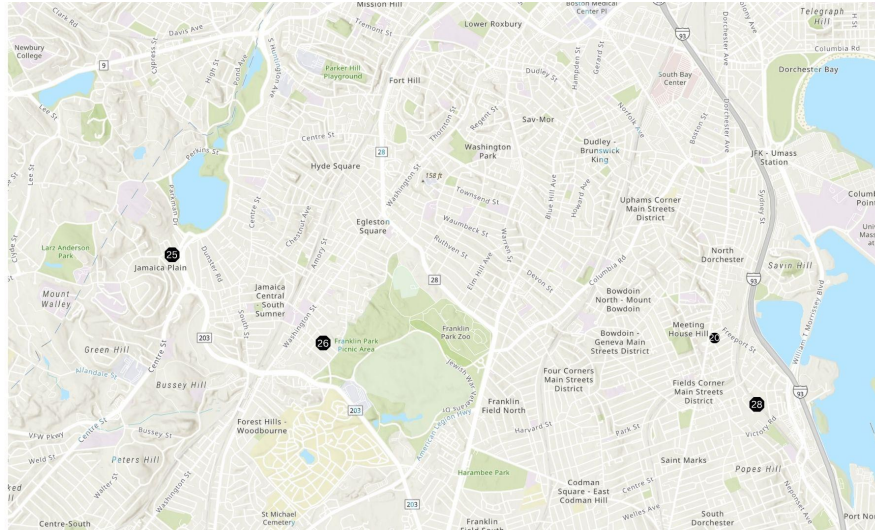


Figure 3

I drew on information from various sources including interviewee sharings, public articles, and conversations with local participants in nightlife, to compile maps of LGBT bars and clubs in Boston that host drag in order to understand the impact of urban renewal, closure trends, and city nightlife infrastructure. As seen in **Figure 1**, the centrality of queer nightlife in Boston has remained prominent in Boston’s Downtown and South End. **Figures 2 and 3** represent the comparatively few queer-accessible nightlife spaces in Somerville, Cambridge and Jamaica Plains which are areas often considered an extension of Boston’s nightlife scene due to their proximity to the city and large college-student populations. While at first glance it might appear that there is a substantial amount of queer bars and clubs, my figures do not account for the “89 nightlife establishments open in downtown Boston” (City of Boston 2022) and must be understood in context within the broader nightlife economy. Challenges of rising property costs, gentrification, and urban politics create systemic barriers in the overall nightlife infrastructure, yet is particularly more prohibitive for queer-owned and operated venues.

Spatial organization is vital and becomes visible when Boston is compared alongside other large and/or cities with prominent nightlife scenes. Providence, Rhode Island, despite its smaller population, sustains a populous drag and nightlife scene within close proximity. New York City has queer nightlife across gayborhoods such as Hell’s Kitchen, the West Village, and Chelsea. Drawing upon these comparisons suggests that proximity, density, and community all mobilize nightlife to become an economic and social infrastructure.

Within this past decade alone, *Paradise* (2018), *Ramrod* (2020), *Machine* (2020), and the *Boston Eagle* (2021) have been four longstanding pillars of the gay nightlife scene that have faced shutdowns. In particular, *Machine*’s closure was a significant loss felt within the gay and drag scene in Boston. Several participants recalled how *Machine* was their first introduction into

queer nightlife, in part because the venue housed 18+ club nights on Fridays, an uncommon point of entry within Boston's otherwise predominantly 21+ nightlife scene. Since the closure, no dedicated queer venue has adopted this form of accessibility for young adults under 21, besides ManRay, an alternative underground nightclub which has 19+ nights. However, ManRay also faced closure at its original location in Central Square in 2005 amid urban redevelopment plans, before returning nearly two decades later in Cambridge. ManRay's 2023 reopening⁷ represents a rarity of revival. In conversation, ManRay's owner touched on the complexity of attracting former and newer audiences, "You can't just open the doors and expect everybody to start flowing back in because the older people have either married or they just don't go out anymore. And the younger people are like, ManRay, what's that?". ManRay's history⁸⁹ demonstrates the temporal consequences of queer venue closures. During the club's absence, one generation matured from the nightlife scene while another generation entered into an already precarious nightlife landscape. This recognition of queer nightlife infrastructure shows that queer community is reliant on the transmission of memory, familiarity, and continuity.

Compared to state counterparts, Massachusetts and Boston operate under "notoriously stringent liquor regulations" (Smith 2024). "Happy hour", the time-specific discounted sale on alcohol, has been banned in the state since 1984. Liquor regulations are enforced by the Massachusetts Alcoholic Beverages Control Commission (ABCC) and the Boston Licensing Board which prohibits the sale of alcohol until 2:00 a.m., enforcing bars and clubs to close by 2:00 a.m. accordingly. This regulation intersects with Boston's transportation system that further complicates nightlife accessibility. The MBTA subway service line ends around 1:00 a.m., creating a gap between nightlife operating hours and accessible late-night public transportation—a predicament one of my participants expressed. These conditions particularly affect students, nightlife workers, drag performers, and others dependent on public transit. Remaining out later may require alternative transportation, such as rideshare services, introducing an additional barrier materialized as cost to nighttime participation. The challenging structure of Boston nightlife was further affected by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2020, further destabilizing an already precarious commercial nightlife

⁷ Kohli, Diti. "A Night at the Resurrected ManRay, 18 Years After the Counterculture Club Closed." *BostonGlobe.Com*, The Boston Globe, 20 Jan. 2023, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/01/20/business/night-manray-18-years-later/>.

⁸ Andersen, Travis, and Emily Sweeney. "ManRay, Legendary Cambridge Nightclub That Closed in 2005, Will Reopen Saturday." *BostonGlobe.Com*, The Boston Globe, 13 Jan. 2023, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/01/13/metro/manray-legendary-cambridge-nightclub-that-closed-2005-will-reopen-saturday/>.

⁹ Kohli, Diti. "A Night at the Resurrected ManRay, 18 Years After the Counterculture Club Closed." *BostonGlobe.Com*, The Boston Globe, 20 Jan. 2023, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/01/20/business/night-manray-18-years-later/>.

infrastructure on an unprecedented scale. The pandemic abruptly interrupted physical gathering, venues were forced to close, restrictions were placed on public assembly, and social interactions were indefinitely suspended. As of 2022, “downtown foot traffic remains ~40-55% below pre-pandemic levels” (City of Boston 2022), demonstrating diminished patronage and declining social activity. COVID therefore, became an accelerant of conditions already impacting Boston’s nightlife.

Where are the Queer Spaces For Drag?

The cumulative effects of closures, redevelopment, and pandemic disruptions have caused not only these queer venues to pivot in their business models, but has presented challenges of entry points for performers seeking opportunities within the drag scene. The aggregate losses and challenges of queer spaces significantly impacts the performers and professional networks whose labor depends on them. Tuck Bokki describes the deficits of queer nightlife directly:

“In terms of gentrification, I’m nearly positive that there were a lot of clubs that closed, especially like Machine...Even like 10 years ago, things were just completely different. So I think now we’re in a position where we, [drag artists] have to just fit wherever we can. And it’s disappointing because also I think a lot of those other spaces and clubs created more opportunities for drag artists of color.”

Tuck’s description of having to “fit wherever we can” illustrates the spatial shift within Boston’s drag performance spaces. Drag has increasingly migrated into establishments that are not explicitly organized around queer communities, rather, several performers described that drag has taken space in increasingly heterosexual spaces including restaurants, breweries, coffee shops, theaters, libraries, and other spaces that have become alternative stages for drag (Branton and Compton 2021, Smith 2025). Anx says:

“You see drag events being held at like breweries, coffee shops, libraries...because it’s like a lot of drag performers have to kind of outsource to these outside, not typically like queer spaces to be like, we want to have drag events here. So I think that more could be done in terms of queer specific spaces...it’s great to outsource in the other, local places and places that aren’t typically like queer establishments to host queer events, but that’s like a result of the fact that we don’t have enough queer spaces to do drag in.”

During my fieldwork, I witnessed this drag sprawl as I participated in drag as an audience member. I encountered drag across restaurants, theaters, college campuses, cultural events, and even at the Massachusetts State House. At surface level, the proliferation of drag beyond the typical gay bar can indicate increased visibility and accessibility; however, the availability of spaces willing to host drag should not be conflated with the availability of queer-produced spaces

themselves. Queer-friendly establishments can temporarily accommodate drag performances, but not necessarily operate on the inclusivity of queer social infrastructures.

Similar to a story that Blaine Smith had experienced at a non-gay bar, at one of the restaurants I attended, I had the opportunity to help a queen prepare for her number backstage — but the backstage was simply the office space that also doubled as an alcohol storeroom. For the sake of anonymity, I'll call her Petal. In the densely packed backroom, with no mirror or designated dressing area, Petal balanced with one hand against a rack of alcohol while using the other to adjust her heel. Nervously assisting her with her zipper, she said "Just go for it". Riddled with panic across my face as I worried that I might damage or disappoint her, her simple call-to-action reminded me of how various other drag artists are expected to improvise and make do within these infrastructures that weren't necessarily built to accommodate their labor. As Smith similarly observed, non-GLQ+ bars, restaurants, and clubs, often are "eager to profit from drag performances [yet] are often ill-prepared to host drag shows in terms of staffing, spatial layout (e.g., lacking a stage and/or dressing room), and audio/visual infrastructure" (Smith 2025).

Tuck Bokki similarly acknowledges that "people are trying to do drag wherever they can" and that not many venues are not suited to accommodate drag. Even Jacques Cabaret, Boston's oldest operating gay bar, which Tuck described as "suited decently well to be a drag bar in terms of how the building is set up," remains constrained by its older infrastructure, limited capacity, and cabaret-style layout. Accessibility in this sense encompasses the conditions necessary to prepare, perform, and work safely in these environments.

Anx maintained appreciation for these spaces, yet addressed the lack of attention to support queer nightlife economies while questioning why comparable resources have not been directed toward queer-specific establishments.

"It's great that like we can have queer events in typically non-queer spaces. Not even just in Boston, all over the country, a lot of queer spaces are closing down, not being able to maintain business. And that's just like a result of not having, not putting the resources and the money to keep those places alive."

Anx's insight on the distinctions between hosting queer performance and queer infrastructure itself is essential in understanding that the proliferation of drag across heteronormative spaces cannot be entirely equated as evidence that queer nightlife is expanding, rather visibility is more so granted.

I encountered this distinction when the FIFA World Cup returned to the US in 2026, which was last organized in the US in 1994. The World Cup tournaments and viewing parties were hosted across 11 major metropolitan cities including Boston, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, and San

Francisco. Part of the viewing and celebratory experience was “Fifa World Cup Fan Festival Cultural Showcases”. On June 20, 2026, Candace Persuasian and a K-pop dance crew based in Boston performed on stage for a diverse international audience. Seeing queer performers take the stage at one of the world's largest sporting events felt significant. Sporting spaces are not typically associated with LGBTQ+ visibility, yet here, there were drag artists and queer performers occupying that space unapologetically. When Candace wished the crowd a "Happy Pride," I was reminded that drag is not confined to bars, clubs, or explicitly queer venues. It can exist on global stages, reaching audiences who may have never attended a drag show otherwise.

The performance felt particularly meaningful within the racial context of Boston and this research. Seeing Candace Persuasian, a Vietnamese American drag queen, alongside a predominantly Asian dance crew at an international sporting event challenged many of my assumptions about where queer performance belongs. Their presence demonstrated that Asian drag artists are not only participating in Boston's queer community but are helping shape what queer visibility looks like on some of the city's largest public stages.

Canadace's performance illustrated the increasing engagement and visibility of drag, but the stage itself did not necessarily become or function as queer infrastructure simply because a drag queen performed on it. Queer performance and existence transiently travels and occupies non-queer spaces beyond queer nightlife, while the spaces that have historically sustained queer communities have increasingly become more precarious.

This spatial shift can also be attributed to the temporal and commercial shift with how drag is consumed. Candace Persuasian states, “post-pandemic, people moved from nightlife to brunch.” The brunchification of drag has become an increasingly popular strategy and alternative to nightlife “intended to make drag performance more accessible to heterosexual audiences” (Branton and Compton 2021) that has encouraged drag artists to be more intentional in making their performance style more palatable for mainstream audiences.

Accessibility and resources are further complicated by city efforts to expand and support nightlife. In the mayor's 2022 report on revitalizing Boston's downtown, “programs to expand nightlife downtown, ideally to attract new populations and demographic/socioeconomic groups” (City of Boston 2022) and funds to support existing and new BIPOC-owned businesses were addressed as a priority to preserve the inclusive and vibrant vision for downtown Boston's nightlife (City of Boston 2022). While the report acknowledges that “many of the strategies outlined in this report will take years” (City of Boston 2022), my participants' experiences demonstrate that expanding nightlife and sustaining queer nightlife are not synchronous goals. This reveals a paradox essential to understanding accessibility within Boston's drag scene. Performances in mainstream and heterosexual establishments can expand drag beyond 21+ gay bars, introduce queer performance to new audiences, and create additional opportunities for paid

work. Concurrently, this diversification of physical access is partly because performers have fewer dedicated queer spaces available to them in the first place. Yet access to a stage does not guarantee complete visibility or representation. As drag performers navigate an already constrained landscape of opportunities, socioeconomics further shape who is made visible and permissible to enter these spaces.

Rhinestone the House Down: The Hard Werk Behind the Fantasy

One of the stressors on Boston's drag, in addition to the changing infrastructure, is that drag is an extremely expensive and time investing project. The widespread popularity of *Drag Race* has transformed drag into a rather professionalized industry. The show places financial pressures onto its contestants to be able to showcase high-cost, expensive runway packages introducing the commodification of drag which "has inevitably intertwined the concept of what constitutes drag with a set of normative behaviours strictly related to market and the nature of reality TV" (Heller 2020), setting a social expectation of polish and what drag "should" look like.

Drag operates in informal economies, and it is not a sustaining profession. To provide a glimpse into the breadth expenses that it takes to perform, here's a list compiled from my informants: costumes, shoes, wigs, jewelry and accessories, makeup, lashes, custom-made music mixes, transportation to and from gigs, gas, parking, professional photo shoots, tights, body padding, [and] nails. In addition to the investments Smith documented, participants also mentioned expenses that appear less visible, but are a considerable accumulation part of their drag investments such as time, energy, resource, and sacrifice spent preparing for a performance. One of my informants articulates drag labor clearly: "It's one of, I think the only professions where you do not get back nearly like the amount that you've put in it. In fact, you're in a deficit."

Out of the 8 performers I interviewed, 6 had full-time day jobs while 2 were full time students with day jobs to generate their main source of income. For most, drag often functioned either as supplemental income, or in some cases, produced little to no income at all. Tuck Bokki emphasized how the financial commitments to drag are just as inseparable to sustainability in the artistry as are the time and energy required to perform it:

"It only really works if you do so much drag that you're like making a surplus kind of profit, which a lot of people don't have the time or energy to do, or maybe don't have the ability to get booked that often. The only way you can really afford to do full-time is if you're re-wearing looks, you're redoing mixes and choreo because also making new acts for every show. It's not sustainable. Like it's not possible if you're full-time. You just don't have enough time to do that."

Tuck encapsulates this tension of time as a resource and how not having enough of it can materialize as a hindrance to visibility — which in turn affects a performer's ability to book gigs. Extending Tuck's perspective, Ladyboy George offers helpful insight by comparing the flexibility available to some college students with the constraints faced by performers who work shift-based jobs:

“College students, they have a lot of time on their hands. They have a lot of expendable income. They can go to a lot of gigs last minute. They don't have to worry about taking time off work a lot of time. Obviously, not all students, but yeah. One of the big things that I think a lot of people don't think about is literally just taking time off of work. If you're somebody who has a retail job, I had a retail job that was shift-based, if you apply for a job, or sorry, apply for a gig and you're not sure if you're gonna get in, it's like, do you try and get that day off of work? Because if you get the gig, you're going to need that day off of work or you're gonna need at least to leave early or whatever. But if you don't get the gig, you miss out on a day of work and you don't give any money for it.”

Applying for a gig may require a performer to have to request time off from their day-job without the confirmation if they will ultimately be selected. In the event that they are rejected, they then risk earnings from their primary employment. Coextensively, a performer's availability for work and openness to gigs comes with its own opportunity costs shared both ways: the affordance of visibility vs consistent material payments.

In addition to time as a resource, social capital is highly indicative of being able to book gigs and to turn the performance art into drag labor. Joe Parslow addresses this phenomenon by saying how “the ad hoc and informal nature of the drag and cabaret performance field means that it often relies on a set of networks that can be exclusionary, or at the least, relies on performers having the time, energy and funds to go to shows and make friends with other performers and promoters in order to get booked”. Within drag operating as an informal economy, interpersonal relationships and a performer's *drag network* is imperative to the profession. Tuck Bokki talked to me about how they seize every opportunity to establish themselves within the drag king scene:

“The more shows you go to, like the more you put yourself out there, the more people recognize you and you recognize people, you're able to kind of just like know everybody. Which I think networking is like one of the most important parts of doing drag, genuinely, because that's how people know who you are and can book you, but also like can help you with your drag.”

Jayden Jamison describes the structure of his program *Kingdom* and the brotherhood that it helps to cultivate:

“The nice thing that I added to it [Kingdom] was that each participant in the class gets a big brother assigned to them who's gone through the program. And so I bring 5 alum that come back and they help mentor 2 little brothers. And that's helped achieve the

cross-class connection. And these are, their big brothers are people they look up to because they're the headliners in our shows in Boston.”

However, there is a caveat that is presented in drag social networks when it comes to the BIPOC community of color. Performers of color inhabit many intersecting marginal identities; drag occupies a marginal position within the broader entertainment industry, while many queer performers of color face racial hierarchies within LGBTQ+ spaces. Asian and Asian American drag entertainers in the Boston scene are a comparatively smaller represented racial group, which intrinsically, makes it harder to appear visible in the drag scene and to accumulate that social capital needed for recurring booking opportunities. Underrepresentation inevitably shapes who is visible and incorporated into professional drag networks, which is a racial dynamic that I attune to later in this paper. Important to note, however, is that many drag performers also often operate as producers of shows or lead events at particular venues, having the opportunity to create and circulate opportunities of representation.

Further examining drag brunch, the restaurants that they are hosted in are typically held in lucrative environments “intended to make drag performance more accessible to heterosexual audiences” and have become major sources of income for drag performers (Branton and Compton 2021). Drag brunch casts remain predominantly with drag queens rather than kings, and with largely white queens. In efforts to appeal to drag brunch audiences, largely occupied by white, higher-income, cisgendered individuals, BIPOC queens have often tailored their performance to be legible and marketed with some kind of undertone palatable to “whiteness” to appeal to what mainstream audiences recognize and consume as drag (Ramnarine 2025). Ramirez further draws out this phenomenon by returning to the idea that “Homonormativizing drag may also exacerbate unequal relations experienced by drag performers with lower economic and social capital” (Ramirez 2024). Though these inequalities, booking practices are not necessarily fully exclusionary. The informal organization of the drag community relies on trust, familiarity, and existing relationships in the drag economy. One informant addressed the recurring debate surrounding who gets booked:

“There has been a slight debate or slight topic that comes up. So people only book their friends. And I think at the end of the day, you are putting on a show and you want the most reliable people. And so sometimes your most reliable person is your friend. There are times where I've taken a risk and maybe that risk did not pay off well with other people, but also as an individual, what you put out is your resume, basically.”

From a producer's perspective, booking familiar performers can be a rational strategy. To have a successful show, there is discussion of reliance, preparation, and capability of delivering to audience expectations. This is when professionalization materializes; a drag artists' “resume” is built through a record of bookings, interpersonal relationships, and opportunities. But performers must first be afforded opportunities to demonstrate their talent and reliability before being actively exposed to higher-paying gigs. As noted by several interviewees, someone starting in

drag typically begins performing in tip spots and open stages where consistency in earnings from a whole night can range from “15 to 50 bucks”. Therefore, drag labor, economies, and networks represents a field in which time, hard work, and diligence grants social capital and representation.

Within a drag scene where performers of color are already comparatively underrepresented, disparities within race and socioeconomics further exacerbates that relationship. This raises one of my main questions about this research which is a deceptively simple, yet deeply personal question: What does Asian drag look like?

Decolonizing Asian

“Sister, when is the next time you’re going to do drag? We need more Asian performers, there’s not many of us out there” - Candace Persuasian to Anx

In examining the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ Asian and Asian Americans (AAA), drag performers reveal an acute awareness of the opportunities and barriers that are predicated upon their positionalities within “race, class, migration, and colonialism” (Manalansan 2003, Khubchandani 2023). “Race, nation, language, religion are all salient parts of drag, as are the multitude of visual, literary, and media references cited by performers in their music, dress, movement, and makeup” (Khubchandani 2019). In the world of drag, drag creativity, (Upadhyay 2019) and performance can therefore be an iconoclastic and subversive mode of expression for performers of color through “cultural, artistic, and activist practice” within a drag scene that is “measured through global whiteness” (Khubchandani 2023). I am curious about how the *social identities* of AAA performers are constructed through “dimensions of race, gender, and sexuality” and these articulations make Asian drag visible, salient, contested, and expressed within Boston.

In the previous sections, I alluded to “Asianness” and gender as being inherently political, and produced by social constructions through histories of racialization, migration, colonialism, and gendered hierarchies. These histories are consequential in understanding drag where bodies translate art through technologies of makeup, costuming, music, language, movement, and performance (Khubchandani 2023). A decolonial approach to drag invites us to open our understanding of drag to be situated in modern local experiences by considering the racial, cultural, and colonial histories of performance and identity (Ramirez 2024, Khubchandani 2024). This approach recognizes the dissident power of drag which has regulated and denied many people of color’s access into the performance genre, being rendered illegible, peripheral, or “not real drag” (Khubchandani 2023). Decolonial approaches imagine accessible and copious ways that the “categories, aesthetics, and locations of drag” (Khubchandani 2023) create spaces for what Ramirez describes as invisibilized modalities of performance that “speak back, revise, and

critique” Euro-colonial and hegemonic binaries of gender, professionalism, and aesthetics (Sandhu 2019, Khubchandani 2023, Ge, Luther, et. al 2025).

Asian and Asian American bodies enter performance already racialized often associated with effeminate bodily characteristics (Manalansan 2004). In *Geisha of a Different Kind*, Han addresses the contradictory experience of Asian men within predominantly white gay spaces, particularly in how racialized femininity is valued differently when they are presented out of drag versus in drag. I concur with Han and Khubchandani that the “sexual capital” valued to Asian men within the broader gay community is diminished within dominant-white sphere, where racialized constructions of Asian gender expression are often considered as undesirable against hegemonic ideals of masculinity relative to its racial counterparts. While this scholarship provides an important understanding of how Asian bodies are racialized, my research attends to how Asianness becomes culturally salient, cited, celebrated, contested, and interpreted through the cultural dynamics of Boston’s drag scene.

Performing “Asianess”

“The lack of scholarship on queer Asian drag representation in media perpetuates Western interpretations of drag that continue to center Whiteness” (Ramnarine 2025). Stereotyped in media and further elicited in society, Asians are often portrayed as being “the socially awkward nerd, passive sidekicks ... with an unintelligible accent” often being reduced to effeminate and comedic tropes in the lenses of Western conceptions of gender and race (Lau 2015). Categorized within an all-American norm, “Asian characters are never the narrators, rather they are the narrated” (Han 2015). Bringing this framework into drag, performance for Asian drag artists can become an opportunity to seize and take control of the narratives surrounding Asian identity. For drag king Jayden Jamison, performance serves as a creative outlet that critiques the marginalization of Asians:

“I created a number in the sense that, you know, talking about the experience of being the Asian person in communities where you don't see much representation, you see you get overlooked...And so I set it up as a theme of, kid, super dorky, international student, no one understands him. He's trying to fit in with a different culture and stuff like that...And just us always wanting to for once be the hero in our story, right? And so I end up transforming into this, you know, K-pop star... we all want that experience of not feeling seen to transform me to being seen like, hey, you overlooked me and look where I've gone. And I feel that way with a lot of Asian people in our community that we've always been here. We've always been the rock stars. You just didn't know it.

Jayden’s performance deliberately addresses the caricatures through which Asian men have been prescribed in American popular culture. The socially awkward “dork”, the foreign international,

and the outsider. Yet, he transcends these tropes by taking ownership in his identity and transforms the narrative arc through his performance. Jayden's desire to "for once be the hero in our story" illuminates a throughline that Han articulates between those who narrate and those who are narrated. Drag enables Jayden to center his Asian identity from peripheral visibility by asserting presence in a glamorous reveal into a K-pop star, allowing him to stage "Asianess" in his own terms. K-pop drag performance is a way for "Asianizing queer aesthetics" that elicits "opportunity to change, transform, and transgress" the liminal status of performance (Oh and Oh 2017).

Though interacting with Asian stereotypes is not just fixed within American definitions. The presentation of "Asianness" on stage enables drag performers to be able to mediate their own preexisting relationships with their culture, ethnicity, and nationality. The stage is a site where "Asianess" becomes deeply personal in allowing for performers to decide which multicultural references they choose to embrace, exaggerate, or refuse. These negotiations are particularly important for Asian American performers whose drag is emulated at the intersection of multiple cultural identities and understandings. For example, Candace Persuasian brings her own Vietnamese identity into the conversation touching on her awareness of the the differing cultural perceptions of drag:

"I know some Vietnamese people, we're used to seeing drag performance as part of skits which is often referred as like comedy. So I don't think they necessarily see it as an art form to admire. I also don't know, I don't see a lot of spaces dedicated to Asian people as well. I will say more so in Boston, I think that I'm one of the few people who will have an all Asian show, whereas like New York, for example, they have a little bit more clubs that are Asian specific. And I don't think that we necessarily have that here. But that doesn't mean that we won't be able to have it."

Candace reflects her understanding of how drag is perceived in Vietnamese cultural contexts, often being relegated as comedy within entertainment rather than being appreciated as an autonomous art form. The quote above demonstrates that Asian drag artists find themselves negotiating more than their racialization within predominantly white spaces, but may also simultaneously encounter culturally specific perceptions of gender and performance legitimacy. Acknowledging this contestation, "Asian" and "American" cultural sensibilities cross-pollinate within drag performance, intersecting and informing the modalities through which drag can work to display the "contested understandings of culture, race, sexuality, gender, class, and nation" (Jabbar 2022).

Further reinforced by Candace, she captures the conspicuous gap of Asian drag representation in Boston as compared to cities like New York that intentionally give room to Asian-specific spaces. Representation for drag performance appears through bookings, cast line-ups, show

productions, and community efforts that make Asian performers visible and in turn, make their identities recognized as an integral part of Boston's drag scene.

Diversity, Inclusion, and RepresentASIAN

“The Boston drag community is a melting pot of all sorts of different drag styles... Working in the area, I've gotten to observe and learn from all kinds of drag; from super glamorous queens, to alternative drag artists, to non-binary artists, to drag kings...”
– Plane Jane¹⁰

Emphasized across many of my informants, Boston's drag scene is distinct for what Aseena Dahl describes as its embrative nature toward “celebrating alternative drag”. Rather than privileging a singular aesthetic of queer performance, Boston embraces expansive forms of queer artistry and expression by supporting creative personalities across drag queens, kings, creatures, burlesque entertainers, and androgynous performers.

At the same time, the plurality that distinguishes Boston drag is not necessarily translated across racial diversities, requiring attention into the exclusionary politics of the city's drag scene.

“White drag queens often hold privilege over Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) queens, both in visibility and commercialization” (Ramnarine 2025). Anx describes this disparity:

“I have seen things and not like drama, but I have seen some stuff on stories on Instagram of people being of their frustrations about not just casting BIPOC people, but also being able to pour the same amount of energy, resources, effort into BIPOC centered events. So we've come a long way, but there is still so much more left to do, specifically in terms of Asians.”

Anx draws an important point that inclusion equates to resources and opportunities for performers of color rather than just presence in the scene alone. After visiting several drag shows, numerous events were headlined by predominantly white casts with a singular BIPOC performer coined by several of my interviewees as the “tokenized person of color”. While drag performers already occupy a marginalized cultural, economic, and social position through their sexual and gender identities (Berkowitz and Belgrave 2010), this marginalization is disproportionately felt among the racial groups. Asian and Asian American performers experience a compounded marginality, being underrepresented not only within white casts, but also within the broader BIPOC community. In a sense, marginality within the BIPOC drag scene

¹⁰ Samara, Samara. “What Is Boston Drag?” *Substack.Com*, Boston Uncommon, 17 Nov. 2021, <https://bostonuncommon.substack.com/p/what-is-boston-drag>.

is rather stratified as AAA performers navigate an already-limited space afforded to performers of color. Tuck Bokki, being biracial, Korean and Black, addresses this delineation in their own experience with being casted for shows:

“People will be like, I don't want to see an all white cast to the point where show producers will put like one or two like token people of color. So they'll always make sure that there's at least one black person in every cast. That doesn't seem to happen with Asians. There's not even a token Asian in every cast. It's more like a pleasant surprise.”

Tuck's depiction of Asian representation as a “pleasant surprise” reveals a challenge within tokenistic diversity. Even though producers have developed a social awareness that an entirely white cast could indicate exclusion, the inclusion of “BIPOC” appearances does not necessarily equate to equitable visibility among the racial identities it encompasses. For Asian performers, Tuck suggests that their inclusion is rather unpredictable and less-so prioritized. To compensate for this uneven representation, predominantly Asian casts provide an alternative configuration of visibility. Several prominent Asian queens within Boston's drag scene including found opportunity in hosting weekly drag brunches at Carrie Nation, upscale restaurant and cocktail club. Dee Dee De Ray recalls the origins of drag brunch at the venue:

“At Carrie Nation they wanted to figure out a way to open on Sundays, bring in the crowd more awareness about this location...at the time, Drag Brunch shows weren't a thing in Boston, it was all nightlife. Jacques cabaret, Club Cafe, and then at clubs. You had the occasional drag brunch event, most of them were probably like fundraiser shows...I'm pretty sure we were the first regular, consistently programmed drag brunch in Boston.”

Dee Dee's account cites Carrie Nation as an early pioneer in the brunchification of Boston drag, catering drag towards a more commercial and mainstream audience. Carrie Nation has become a recurring state upon which Asian performers are celebrated. Although not exclusively Asian, the majority of Carrie Nation's cast is Asian as Candace explains:

“With Carrie Nation, it is not an all Asian cast, but the majority of the cast is Asian. And that was just like, that wasn't even a thing that we're like, oh, like let's put all Asian people together. And we just all happen to be Asian.”

Carrie Nation's opportunity for drag is particularly significant in how Candace articulates that its racial composition is not intentionally constructed as an “Asian show” unlike identity-specific programming where Asianess and race become the explicit organizing theme for how performers are assembled and marketed. Within identity-specific programming, drag can operate as a form of cultural branding, where racial identity informs the relationship of performers, personas, and

the broader idealization of a show (Mikko 2025). Programming can foster intentional room for racial expression and visibility, accounting for Asian and other BIPOC performers' cultural identities to be celebrated. However, this form of representation does not seem to be commonplace in Boston as much of the Asian programming tends to occur explicitly in May, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage month, where predominantly Asian casts and shows are often highly designated—a kind of once-a-year spectacular.

During this temporal window in the calendar year, Asianess becomes highly visible and celebrated only when culturally relevant. Candace broadens this observation by explaining racial visibility to consider who is also responsible for producing it. Her annual AAPI show, *Blossom*, demonstrates the intentional programming for Asian performers within Boston's drag scene. At the same time, her experience producing such event reveals a broader reality that the responsibility of creating racially diverse shows often fall upon BIPOC performers themselves, while programmers at venues may only engage racial identity when culturally arranged:

“I think with the Boston scene, these spaces are created by the people of color themselves. And so if you want an Asian show, you're gonna have to put it on together. If you want an all black show, you're gonna have to put that on together. I do think that there are some venues that will take advantage of the holidays that align with those identities. Like May, there may be an all AAPI show or February will be like Black History Month or like a Juneteenth show. But similar to Pride, like it should go beyond all that. Like we should have a black show throughout the year. We should have an Asian show throughout the year.”

As Candace points out, inclusion becomes a labor in itself where Asians and other BIPOC have to assume a variety of roles as producers, organizers, networkers, and performers. This form of drag labor should not diminish the significance of identity-specific and led programming in contributing towards societal cultural production; shows like *Blossom* are important in celebrating community and cultural expression. Rather, Candace's critique focuses on the efforts that extend beyond these artist-led events. Asianess, for venues, can then become especially marketable and an opportunity to capitalize off of during May without necessarily having to commit to this form of representation throughout the year. Candace's comparison to Pride further illustrates this phenomenon beyond Asian drag much like queer visibility is often concentrated within June, racial visibility is tethered to heritage months.

Other Worlds are Possible

So far in this essay, I've touched on the ways nightlife is rendered accessible, what communities are granted that accessibility, and how those communities make their representation visible. Now, I want to turn to the *capaciousness* of drag and how the art form is deeply intimate, personal, and relational to the artists themselves. Meredith Heller describes it best when she describes drag

having the subversive power to make “worlds of transformative politics and possibilities” (Heller 2020). Drag brings together queer people, trans people, children of immigrants, and individuals from countless other marginalized and diverse identities to celebrate their differences. Drag’s subversive power strongly lies in its capability in engaging with “the politics of gender, racial diversity, and class” even within gay communities itself (Muñoz 1997).

One queen widely respected in Boston’s drag scene shares how her identity informs her drag persona and the art that she conceptualizes and materializes. For the sake of anonymity, I will refer to her as Mango:

“I always say that my drag is a love letter to my immigrant mother, you know, because I think that, like, There's something about, I don't know, you know, when I go back home, China's like my second home, right? And so I think, you know, having been born and raised in the States and then having a second kind of place to go back to has given me maybe, has definitely influenced my artistry because I think some of the ideas that I want to communicate have to do a lot with sort of being in a transient state at all times, right? Or being kind of a chameleon...and I think third culture kids, right? We experience kind of a lot of conflict because at home you might be raised with one set of ideals and then at school you have kind of have to learn a completely orthogonal set sometimes and then you know it's like you're walking around in society people are going to project their ideas of who you are onto your body, right? I think the power of drag is that it does give you that magical ability of self-determination.”

Mango’s account of her being a “third culture kid” is an identity that many of my informants resonated and empathized with. Her description of existing in a “transient state” captures an experience in which cultural identity is negotiated in the aggregate of home, family, nation, and social impositions. She also describes how drag is a projection of these concepts and how its aesthetics and message is understood externally in the way bodies are read and prescribed. Drag therefore can serve as intervention, where bodies are manipulated, dressed, exaggerated, and narrated to ultimately be legible to others.

Whether subtle or outright in their performance styles, Asianess, showing up as who they are, is a statement in itself. As Rupp and Taylor (2003) observe, “through their dress, gestures, routines, dancing, talk, comedy, and interaction with the audience”, drag can communicate the possibility that people, desires, and emotions cannot always be within prescribed categories. Drag’s capaciousness rests in its multiplicitness. Mango is not to be understood singularly. She is Asian and Asian American, connected to China and the United States, a child of immigrants, a student, and a performer. Mango reflected how these identities and its possibilities travel alongside drag:

“It's like drag queens are always carrying their, you know, their, their characters around them, these like big bags, right? It's like, to be able to do multiple people, that's like, I think that's what I've always respected.”

Drag's capacity to experiment and understand multiple identities allows one to do so without requiring one to supersede another.

Among my informants, there was less consensus over whether drag was necessarily or inherently political. Some maintained that publicly performing as a queer individual in drag is itself political, especially given the context of the current U.S. political climate and administration, while others resisted the prescription that drag must carry an explicit political message. Across these different perspectives, however, there was unanimous agreement that even if a performance is not *intended* to be political, inhabiting the stage as an Asian performer already carries racial meanings that are projected onto the body. This important distinction between political intention and legibility enables drag to perform its primary intention to entertain, experiment, critique, and to teach.

The possibilities that coexist within the capaciousness of drag makes the depth of multiplicity materially visible. As Mango conveyed:

“As a drag queen, I think one of the most important lessons you can teach people is that we all have depth and we all are capable of so much.”

Untucked: Conclusion

All the drag artists, nightlife producers, and academics of queer and racial scholarship whom I met, read, and encountered offered incredible insight into the realm that is queer nightlife and drag artistry. This research concludes that what appears on stage goes beyond the glitz and glamour of the performer and their stage alone. Drag is a culmination of politics, historical contexts, urban development, economics, cultural practice, interpersonal networks, and the multifaceted possibilities that lie within identity. “Drag has become an increasingly valuable commodity in Boston” (Smith 2025), yet its increasing cultural and commercial value has further produced precarity of the drag scene, alongside the people and spaces that are not only able to participate in it, but also responsible for producing it.

Behind every performance exists an ecology of producers, venue workers, dancers, audiences, friends, photographers, and community members whose labor and support make drag possible. Community care, therefore, shows up as a defining cultural practice through which drag and the wider LGBTQ+ community emulates. Mentorships, friendships, and interpersonal networks provide for opportunity and access in a scene where resource and visibility are unevenly distributed. This research prioritizes Asian and Asian American voices within Boston's drag scene, exploring the challenges, stories, and experiences of the community — performing “Asianess” is pluralistic and not meant to be understood singularly. For performers of color

within an already marginalized queer community, representation and visibility are challenges of access and complex workings of drag labor.

This essay reports on Boston queer nightlife and the greater LGBTQ+ community, contributing to an overall lack of “coverage on local drag scenes and the performers and culture that define queer New England.” (Samara 2021). Boston’s history of queer venue closures, gentrification, pandemic disruption, regulatory constraints, and shifting nightlife landscape has transformed the infrastructure of queer nightlife. In response, drag has proven adaptive, appearing in restaurants, theaters, universities, and public spaces that transcend the traditional gay bar. Yet, the proliferation of drag and spaces hosting drag performances should not be conflated with the accessibility of drag itself. Considering dimensions of race, class, gender, and age, more stages do not necessarily produce greater visibility, equitable representation, or the preservation of queer-owned and operated spaces. For Asian and Asian American performers in particular, these queens, kings, burlesque entertainers, and everything in-between work their heels off to continually create possibilities for one themselves and one another.

Ultimately, I argue that in examining the experiences of Asian and Asian Americans within Boston’s drag scene, the subversive potential of performance, gender, and identity provides a close read into broader systems of colonialism, heteronormativity, racialization, and minoritarian politics (Khubchandani 2019, Upadhyay 2019). Asian and Asian American performances should therefore not be undermined or reduced to questions of representation or visibility alone. Their “radical potentiality of aesthetic practices” (Ramirez 2024) emerges through their collision with the current cultural and political climate, imagining possibilities to critique and make effective the destabilization of neoliberalism, whiteness, and urban and social dynamics that continue to structure queer nightlife.

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