

DRAG ME TO BOSTON: RACE, CULTURE, ECONOMICS, AND THE POLITICS OF QUEER NIGHTLIFE

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, Boston has been home to a vibrant queer subculture shaped by movements of liberation and community-building, yet also marked by social, economic, and political precarity. Bars, clubs, and other nightlife spaces have provided marginalized communities opportunities for freedom, expression, and belonging amid persistent homophobia, transphobia, racism, classism, and sexism. More recently, the commercialization of drag culture and its aesthetics has expanded drag beyond traditional gay nightlife, creating new professional opportunities while transforming the cultural field of queer nightlife (Ghaziani, 2025).

This research examines Greater Boston's drag scene and asks how queer nightlife has been made accessible and inclusive to performers of color, particularly Asian and Asian American drag artists. I approach drag as not only performance, but also a form of labor, political critique, and cultural practice shaped by race, gender, sexuality, class, economics, and urban space. **Moving beyond the glitz and glamour of the stage, this research examines the uneven contours of drag as a profession: Who gets access to the stage? Who becomes visible? Who has access to the resources and networks necessary to participate? These inequalities reveal how opportunities within Boston's changing drag landscape remain inseparable from broader negotiations of race, gender, sexuality, class, and belonging.**

METHODS

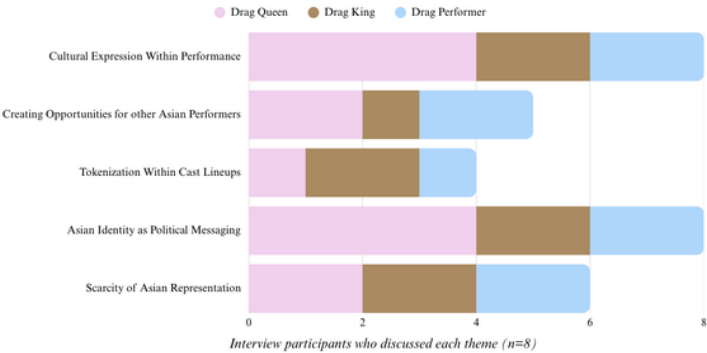
Ethnographic Participation: I immersed myself in ethnographic observation as an audience member at 12 different drag-themed shows and events, with particular field notes during Pride Month in June 2026. At 19, my limited access to 21+ queer nightlife became part of the research itself; I found other ways in: building relationships, fieldwork, and developed my own drag persona becoming Jayda Fantasy, moving from observer to participant and deepening my understanding of how race, gender, age, and identity shape access and belonging.

Interviews: I conducted 11 semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 60 minutes, with drag queens, kings, artists, burlesque performers, venue owners, DJs, and event organizers. Questions invited participants to reflect on how their socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, social, cultural, and political backgrounds shaped their experiences of access, participation, and belonging within Boston's drag scene.

Literature Review: I reviewed 45 pienes of scholarly literature, archival materials, public documents, and online media across drag studies, queer nightlife, Asian and Asian American studies, and urban development. This interdisciplinary review situated Boston's drag scene within broader histories of race, gender, sexuality, class, and place while identifying limited scholarship centering Asian and Asian American performers within local drag communities.

RESULTS

Recurring Experiences of Asian & Asian American Drag Artists' Relationship with Race and Performance



"The lack of scholarship on queer Asian drag representation in media perpetuates Western interpretations of drag that continue to center Whiteness" (Ramarine 2025).

"In terms of gentrification, you see drag events being held at 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 other 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." - ANX

"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. - PETAL

"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." - Mango

"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 PERSUASION

CHALLENGES IN QUEER NIGHTLIFE ACCESSIBILITY

- COVID-19 accelerated existing nightlife precarity. Pandemic closures and restrictions disrupted physical gathering and destabilized venues already facing economic pressures; by 2022, downtown foot traffic remained 40-55% below pre-pandemic levels (City of Boston, 2022)
- Venue loss reshapes performers' opportunities. The cumulative effects of closures, redevelopment, and pandemic disruption have reduced queer spaces and, with them, important entry points, professional networks, and opportunities for drag performers of color
- Gentrification and rising property costs disproportionately challenge queer-owned venues. Boston's spatially dispersed nightlife further complicates the density and community infrastructure that sustain local drag scenes, particularly when compared with nearby populous cities such as New York City
- Local Policy Regulation and transportation constrain nightlife accessibility. Massachusetts' stringent liquor regulations—including a 2:00 a.m. closing time—intersect with MBTA subway service ending around 1:00 a.m., creating a gap between nightlife hours and accessible late-night transportation (Smith, 2024)
- Drag operates in informal economies, where the costs of costumes, makeup, transportation, photography, and performance materials often outstrip earnings. All 8 drag performers interviewed, relied on employment outside of drag as their primary income, making time, energy, and financial resources inseparable from performers' ability to sustain new acts, remain visible, and secure bookings

HOW ASIAN & ASIAN AMERICAN DRAG ARTISTS RESPOND

- Alternative Drag as a Boston Spotlight: Informants characterized Boston's drag scene as particularly inclusive of "alternative drag," supporting expansive forms of queer artistry beyond a singular drag aesthetic—including queens, kings, creatures, burlesque entertainers, and androgynous performers
- Intentional programming creates visibility and opportunities for Asian and other BIPOC performers to celebrate racial and cultural identity; however, informants described Asian-centered programming as disproportionately concentrated around AAPI Heritage Month, raising questions about whether visibility translates into sustained representation throughout the year
- Performance as Political Possibility and "Queer World Making": Informants differed on whether drag is inherently political. Some interpreted public queer performance as political, while others resisted requiring drag to carry an explicit political message. Yet across these perspectives, Asian performers described their racialized bodies as carrying meanings beyond their intentions onstage, revealing an important distinction between political intention and political legibility. Drag therefore remains capacious enough to entertain, experiment, critique, teach, and create what Meredith Heller describes "worlds of transformative politics and possibilities."

CONCLUSION

This research reports on Boston queer nightlife and the greater LGBTQ+ community, contributing to an overall lack of "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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LaWhore Vagistan & Jayden



Jayda Fantasy

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