“Dragging Rights, Queering Publics: Realness, Self-Fashioning and the Miss Gay Western Cape Pageant”

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As a response to significant changes in social conditions for minorities, the Miss Gay Western Cape (MGWC) annual pageant started in Cape Town almost immediately after the change in rights for homosexual and transgendered people that came with the establishment of the new South African constitution in 1996. Over the past two decades, the MGWC has become the most publicly visible and well attended drag pageant in the Western Cape. In the article, I will trace how the pageant – whose aim is to provide a platform for queers of colour to perform in a secure environment without exploitation – entails a number of complex movements: across the urban landscape, between poorer peripheral suburbs (Cape Flats, Atlantis) and the predominantly white city centre; amongst and between gender identities, from a fluid and performative conception of drag to the intentional fixity of trans identities; from local performance contexts to the powerful influence of the global phenomenon *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, a US reality television programme in which performers compete for the title “America’s next drag superstar.” In doing so, I will set out the attendant methodological questions that have arisen in attempt to forge bridges between Western queer theory and South African articulations of gender identity and alternative sexualities, considering how the pageant and its myriad representations are determined by sexual geographies, the formation of queer publics, transnational drag cultures, styles and aesthetics and trans progress-to-rights narratives.[[1]](#footnote--1)

**Cape Town’s Queer Spaces**

Andrew Tucker begins his book, *Queer Visibilities: Space, Identity and Interaction in Cape Town* (2009) with a hike up to the top of Table Mountain, the defining geographical feature of the city. Tucker offers a cogent analysis of the ways in which different neighbourhoods and urban environments condition the performance of queer bodies in relation to somewhat different heteronormative practices in Cape Town. From the top of Table Mountain it becomes immediately evident how the city was divided and racially segregated under apartheid and spatially regulated by the state. In many tourist maps of Cape Town areas that have predominantly white populations with more expensive real estate are foregrounded, while the Cape Flats are seen from a distance that attests to their lack of interest for the tourist. Townships such as Khayelitsha – which is often misspelled, thus reinforcing the carelessness with which it is depicted and treated – tend to be the furthest away in tourist maps’ perspectives and frames, which suggest that these are exoticised and less geographically interesting hinterlands, only appropriate for the tourist for limited visits under the direct guidance of a tour operator.

After 1994, Cape Town successfully rebranded itself as a liberal, gay-tourist friendly destination. Though the tourist board advertises “Gay Cape Town” as a singular destination, what is in fact being offered is a tightly proscribed area of the city, a gay village that is promoted through depictions of privileged, white, overtly masculinized performances of gender, which can be positioned under Dennis Altman’s notion of “global gay” culture. There is of course some irony to the fact that Cape Town developed a gay village *after* the implementation of new constitutional rights. It is necessary to think in terms of a number of interacting discourses on sexuality, race and geography when considering queer identities in Cape Town that work beyond the confines of the gay village. What is evident through the mapping of the city in tourist guides and advertisements is the ongoing legacy of apartheid. The vast majority of queer coloured and black people continue to live in the same spaces designated to them under National-Party rule and are excluded from the gay village in a number of intersecting modes that include gentrification, the reinscription of racial boundaries through implicit but pernicious door policies, inflated pricing and limited access through inadequate and expensive public transportation.

Addressing the modes in which the circulation of gay capital impacts upon racial and patriarchal formations in the city, Sociologist Jill R. Williams concludes that “neither the political movement for sexual citizenship nor the resulting development of gay leisure space in Cape Town [has] created an inclusive gay and lesbian community.”[[2]](#footnote-0) Gay leisure space is rather “mapped onto the racialised spatial economy of segregation enacted by apartheid.”[[3]](#footnote-1) This position is also supported by Glenn Elder (2005) and Gustav Visser (2003), who have variously described the gay village as a coercive, homomasculine and exclusionary space.[[4]](#footnote-2)

Despite the protection under the law for sexual minorities authorized by the South African constitution – which prohibits discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation and other grounds – it remains dangerous to be publicly identified as queer, and particularly difficult, according to activist and scholar Zethu Matebeni, to be both queer and black in South Africa.[[5]](#footnote-3) In his study of queer visibility, Tucker analyzed the performance of homosexual and queer culture in the city centre, the Cape Flats and surrounding Townships and the ongoing exclusion of queers of colour from the gay village, which is embedded in the discourse of public space from the Cape Town carnival to the focus on Western “pink” tourism at local Pride events. Apropos of Tucker’s observations on the multiple forms of segregation at work in the city is cultural theorist Charles I. Nero’s theorization in “Why are Gay Ghettoes White?” of the rhetorical figure of the “black impostor,” who symbolizes the contradiction between the abstract notion of universal homosexuality and the concrete experience of many homogenous gay neighborhoods in ways that are comparable in Cape Town. As the political sphere in the early 1990s moved away from certain pro‐apartheid stances that posited homosexuality as an aberration and anti‐apartheid factions that imagined it as a perversity of white rule that contaminated African heteronormativity, there was a concomitant and problematic association established between gay identity and economic advantage that has implicitly favoured professional gay white males. In attending to the Miss Gay Western Cape (MGWC) pageant I wish to highlight the performance of non‐normative sexualities in the Cape Flats and townships that are largely excluded from the gay village, as well as the city’s Pride events that are almost entirely restricted to the village’s urban boundaries.

These debates find further shape in Tucker’s assertion that drag by white performers in Cape Town is read by audiences as highly theatrical and performance based, where men are “drag artists” that engage in parody that is safely bounded in theatre/cabaret/art venues, whereas “common drag” outside of these specific cultural and geographical demarcations indicates identities that are perceived as overly emotional, effeminate, unbounded and public. The MGWC problematizes these distinctions by placing performers that defy or undermine these stereotypes within the boundaries of the city centre. I aim to reflect upon how MGWC is shaping LGBTQI culture in the Western Cape by challenging the exclusionary racial and economic privileges of the gay village, which are re‐racializing forms of difference in the “Rainbow Nation” that prolong the inimical legacies of apartheid, while at the same time imposing rigid boundaries on gender identity.

**Queer Publics**

The area of Cape Town known as District Six developed in the nineteenth century as a racially mixed community of freed slaves, merchants, artists, labourers and new migrants, where diversity was valued. There is a very rich and significant history of cross-dressing in District Six, particularly in Hanover Street, though this spread into areas such as Woodstock and Salt River, which had a vibrant and visible queer culture. A touring review show in 1955 called the “All Male Non-European Revuette and Minstrel Show,”[[6]](#footnote-4) which travelled across South Africa, was directed and produced by Madame Costello, a prominent figure in District Six whose home was a frequent venue for “drags.” Drags were elaborate performances and celebratory events at private homes or hair dressing salons – where many of queer men in the neighbourhood were employed – that had their own complex rituals focused on glamour, style and femininity.[[7]](#footnote-5) Costello’s archive demonstrates how forms of cross-dressing are differently enacted dependent upon a binary of private and public. In the title of Madame Costello’s revue it also becomes evident how drag is associated with minstrelsy and the derision and the pejorative satirizing of racial identities. As Chinua Thelwell has argued, the language and references of American minstrelsy had become embedded in the British colonies in South Africa, and Cape Town in particular, during the nineteenth century.[[8]](#footnote-6) As a celebrated performance genre, blackface minstrelsy preserved, upheld and explained boundaries of racial difference. In Madame Costello’s revue, it is evident how the hierarchies of race, ethnicity and gender find their expression and corroboration in female impersonation.[[9]](#footnote-7)

The Moffie Queen Competition at the Kismet Theatre from this period is another evident predecessor of Miss Gay Western Cape, which also originated in Athlone (Cape Flats). Many well-known and admired “moffie queens” such as Kewpie Doll, Kaye Kendall and Piper Laurie participated in this pageant competition, which was carefully documented in the *Golden City Post*, a publication that had a national circulation and was primarily targeted at a coloured and black readership. As a result, cross-dressing queer men came increasingly to represent a form of symbolic autonomy and freedom in coloured society during apartheid that contrasted with both white and black communities.

District Six was labelled as a white-only area under the Groups Area Act and forced removals of people of colour began from 1966 onwards. Populations designated under apartheid law as coloured were primarily moved into the Cape Flats, an area east of the city centre that was largely uncontoured and desolate. “Persons of colour could enter the city to work, and in some instances to shop, but they could only live there if they satisfied the highly stringent pass laws and related policies of ‘influx control’.”[[10]](#footnote-8) This resulted, in effect, in a city of whiteness. Movement into the city centre from the Cape Flats was and remains complicated and expensive. One of the few instances when former inhabitants of District Six were allowed to occupy this space en masse between 1966 and 1991, when the Abolition of Racially Based Land Measures Act was passed, was during the Kaapse Klopse, a minstrel festival held annually on the second of January. The carnival parades included the participation of Moffie Queens, who were seen as figures of fun, exoticism and fantasy.[[11]](#footnote-9)

A stigma has been attached to this form of cross-dressing and female impersonation as a result of the public display of coloured men and boys parading flamboyantly along streets with painted faces and brightly coloured costumes, which was interpreted by some groups as perpetuating stereotypes of coloured people as ignorant, effeminate or buffoonish. By association, for some of the middle-class gay coloured men Tucker interviewed, cross-dressers indicate an antiquated expression of alternative sexuality that can be linked to their role in carnivals and pageants. Within this cultural context, cross-dressing has been read as a form of enacting perceived racial inferiority, while, in contrast, the very visible, commodified and masculinist white gay culture enacted in the city centre can function as a model to emulate. Such a problematic binary presents masculine performances of gender as the enactment of cultural and economic privilege while feminized performances become negatively associated with lower-working-class identities. Despite the proliferation of these pejorative associations, Graeme Reid recently argued that the “figure of the moffie […] remains a primary role model for gay Coloured youth growing in the Cape Flats.”[[12]](#footnote-10)

To complicate associations with cross-dressing further, Tucker has asserted that the public performance of cross-dressing is not seen as transgressing prescribed gender lines, and gay presence is tolerated in the Cape Flats as long as it remains entirely closeted. Indeed, social convention demands that effeminate or gay men should participate in cross-dressings so as not to subvert clearly demarcated boundaries between male and female. For some spectators, therefore, these derogatory or normative associations provoke a particular history of viewing drag performance that impacts on its subversive or liberational potentials.

Moving amongst these terms, female impersonation and cross-dressing strongly indicate the public sphere, inclusive of pageants competitions and carnival street performances, while “drags” are firmly located in the private sphere. In the former, the focus was on inter-public relations, the representation of coloured men outside of their designated communities. Crucially, this type of cross-dressing was primarily intended for heterosexual spectators. “Drags,” on the other hand, were what Nancy Fraser has might call “intra-public” events, specifically designed for the gaze and participation of queer people. Here, style and sexuality became a mode of self-celebration and erotic encounter. As opposed to the carnival, the “drags” reinforced and relied upon a clear binary logic of butch/femme relations. Many of the photographs of Costello’s drags in the Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (GALA) archive offer at first glance an impression of a normative heterosexual party. Only when placed in a queer context do the images attest to the enactment of new and dynamic forms of sexual citizenship expressly forbidden under apartheid law. The move from the private “at home” drag offers a particular brand of normativity, while the public sphere reshapes these performative modes into something fabulous, spirited and fantastical. Contrasting the carnival with the “drags” offers a new vantage point on clear distinctions between privacy that is valued (drags) and an experience of invisibility that is experienced in the public domain (carnival).

The public formed through the Miss Gay Western Cape pageant is expressed in composite forms. According to the published mission statement, “Miss Gay Western Cape attempts to provide a platform for persons both straight and gay (but especially gay) to showcase their talents, through a controlled and secure environment, and without exploitation.” The publicity for the pageant simultaneously evokes strong narratives about civil rights and affiliations with the “gay community.” There have, of course, been a number of disjunctures between experiences of liberation in relation to sexual identities and the creation of state sanctioned rights. For example, the fight for rights concerning sexual citizenship that was fought in the 1990s by the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (NCGLE) was successful in making sure the sexual equality clause was kept in the 1996 constitution, as well as securing further rights for gays and lesbians. Cultural geographer Natalie Oswin has critiqued the mode in which the NCGLE framed this political struggle, claiming that the umbrella organization “deepened community schisms” along class, race and gender lines rather than forming coalitional and cohesive bonds amongst various groups.[[13]](#footnote-11) The focus on legal rights and privileges disfavored grassroots approaches to political commitment and alliances. Alternatively, Miss Gay Western Cape is publicized as an enactment of constitutional rights that draws together communities in the Cape Flats with the broader gay and queer communities in the Western Cape. I tentatively side with Reid’s argument that gay beauty pageants in South Africa function as “counterpublics,” sites that are transformative and which knit together vocabularies of style and activism.[[14]](#footnote-12) My hesitation to side fully with this argument arises from the gender norms policed by and within the MGWC pageant, which I analyse later in this article, that challenge a counterpublic’s claim to a “poesis of scene making”[[15]](#footnote-13) that is not simply replicative of heterosexual norms and recognized binaries.

Both the advertisements for and the structure of the pageant, which includes a competitive round in which contestants are asked to produce a dress that represents their chosen social cause or charity, make an explicit alignment between performance, drag and activism.[[16]](#footnote-14) Former winners of the pageant, for instance, are tasked with developing annual community building events, which typically takes the form of organizing small local drag pageants in the participant’s home neighborhood.[[17]](#footnote-15) While the final performance of MGWC takes place outside of community spaces, one returns to the Cape Flats in order to “give back.” Pageant participants tend to be invested in the term *community*, particularly in relation to the “gay community.” A number of scholars in recent years have critiqued this imagined community of gays and lesbians, which obscures its historical association primarily with white men with disposable incomes. In *Glitterboys and Ganglands* (2011), Lauren Beukes’ documentary on the MGWC, a white American who worked for an NGO in South Africa commented that the judges were looking for sincerity, or “sincereness.” This judge referred to the participants as “women who give back to their community.” While this reference to community appears at first to suggest the Cape Flats, the judge quickly qualified that he means the “gay community.” It is important to remember that this is not an organic collection of people but a mediated public. One participant interviewed by Beukes claimed, “Being part of a gay community – through this pageant you find out what it is.” Not only does the pageant act as an attempt to strengthen a connection to the existing “gay community,” it also realigns the highly circumscribed notion and representation of such a body offered in De Waterkant. This area is already shaped by the fact that it is largely a space for consumerism and not a residential area. It has been a playing field of contested and contentious understandings of queerness and homosexuality. Far from producing harmonious collectives organized around common belief systems or shared values, I side with gender and economic theorist Miranda Joseph, who suggested the abandonment of the notion of “community” altogether. Joseph is suspicious of the connotations of “community” and particularly attentive to the modes in which it can shut down rather than mobilize collective action. While community might suggest “cherished ideals of cooperation, equality and communion,” Joseph demonstrates how communities can also be “disciplining and exclusionary,” and the imagined “gay community” is not only *not* an exception but a primary instance of such exclusionary bounds.[[18]](#footnote-16) Indeed, the political agendas of the South African NCGLE (National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality) is a significant example of how the establishment and understanding of “community” can be distinguished from progress-to-rights narratives and enactments. One of the fundamental problems with the separation between sexuality as inherently the *private* domain private of the individual and the assertion of equal rights in the *public* sphere that is not predicated on individual experience but remains at the level of the law is that racism, homophobia and sexism, which are experienced in private everyday realities, become excluded from the political agenda or at least distorted. Of necessity is the way in which racism, sexism and violence have been central to the establishment of nations and liberal states as communities, and critics’ fetishization of community as a predetermined good obscures “the enactment of domination and exploitation” predicated on the constitution and organisation of society as community.[[19]](#footnote-17)

**Realness, Glitterboys and Ganglands**

The racist logic of the Cape Town tourist map is reaffirmed in Beukes’ documentary *Glitterboys and Ganglands*. The first thing to notice is the problematic positioning of identification and location engendered by the film’s title. Firstly, “Glitter*boys*” already demarcates gender in a normative and derisional manner, predetermining the viewer’s understanding and expectations of gender in the pageant. Secondly, the designation ‘ganglands’ as a stand in for the Cape Flats is legitimated by a comment from one of the pageant participants early in the documentary, who observes that “gangsterism, poverty and drug abuse is rife in my community.” The Cape Flats are then emphatically rendered as a location of violence and territorialism, which eclipses positive connotations of home, or affirmative understandings of diversity and cultural production in this area of Cape Town. This is done so that Beukes is able to position the MGWC pageant as a space *separate* from the Cape Flats that offers solutions *to* these social problems. Throughout the documentary, neighborhoods of the city are placed in a hierarchy of desirable and objectionable sites, which implicitly reinforces the ideology of the Cape Town tourist map.

Only one of the participants Beukes documents – Kat Gilardi – lives in a more affluent suburb of the city. In interviews, close-ups on Kat and her white boyfriend are intermingled with shots of expensive textiles and objects in their house that testify to their comparative wealth. The couple is lovingly referred to as the “Posh and Becks of the Cape Flats.” When Gilardi wins the competition, the implication is that her ability to escape the Cape Flats is the secret to her success. Gilardi’s crown is a symbol of her departure from the oppressive “ganglands,” and as a result the pageant is systematically uncoupled from the site of its emergence in the Cape Flats.[[20]](#footnote-18)

Early in the film, Beuke’s documents the contestants’ taxi ride from the flat, featureless and impoverished Cape Flats through the economic hub of the city, known as the CBD, to the rich suburb of Camp’s Bay on the Atlantic Seaboard. This journey mirrors the cultural logic demarcated in the tourist map, indicating that what the tourist sees in not a distortion of the cityscape but rather its authentically lived embodiment; as is so often the case with urban publicity, the tourist map reveals more than it intends to signify. The very movement of this urban crossing through these dissimilar neighborhoods – from economic deprivation to prosperity and the final arrival at excessive privilege – comes to embody the journey to personal transformation and social mobility promised by the pageant, which has itself moved across the city’s landscape. The journey of the pageant through various venues around the city also tells a particular story that defines the context of publicness that the pageant produces.[[21]](#footnote-19) The pageant began in the Joseph Stone Auditorium in Athlone (Cape Flats) but was later moved to Camp’s Bay in an effort to make it more widely accessible and glamorous, though this negatively impacted on audience attendance. After one year at the expansive Good Hope Centre in the former District Six, the pageant has been scheduled at the Baxter Theatre located on the University of Cape Town campus. This theatre had strong ties with antiapartheid resistance and narratives, given that it had limited, though significant, freedom from National Party censorship. The Baxter was also easier to fill than the Good Hope Centre, which required higher ticket prices. Finally, given that the theatre is located in the southern suburbs, it is closer to and more accessible from the Cape Flats, where the vast majority of audience members live. Given that travel around the city is limited, expensive and requires careful organization, each of these venues offered their own set of criteria that both pageant participants and spectators had to negotiate well in advance. What’s more, each of these sites conditions particular spectatorial expectations and behavioral standards. While the Joseph Stone allowed for full audience participation and dialogic exchange, the Baxter prescribes a certain degree of formality that can be more restrained and muted. Beukes attempts to divorce the MGWC pageant from the Cape Flats, offering it both as spatially bounded performance practice that offers an alternative mode of living that only appears to be accessible outside of the “ganglands.” This movement from one space to the other is certainly an example of “cross-identification,” the movement beyond “the stasis attributed to ‘positions’ located on a closed map of power,”[[22]](#footnote-20) which establishes a continuity between different sites of Cape Town while, at the same time, disavowing them. In its last three homes, MGWC can be perceived as a spatially bounded performance practice that offers an alternative mode of living that only becomes fully accessible – and fully *public* – outside of the so-called “ganglands.”

In MGWC public and private are subjected to many forms of spatial negotiation. During a workshop with pageant contestants that I led with curator Siona O’Connell and sociologist Adelene Africa in March 2014 at the University of Cape Town, Glenton Matthyse (Liberty Banks) explained that his employers would not allow him to come to work in drag, because it is not “professional,” a condition of respectability that is enforced in public spaces through labour. Matthyse questioned the boundaries of respectability in the professional sphere, asking who sets out and controls the guidelines. His observation makes visible the mode in which gender and sexuality are seemingly treated as a private category when in fact they are conditioned publicly.

This forms an interesting parallel with *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, which the majority of the MGWC contestants and producers regularly watch. The US reality television programme, hosted by the globally renowned drag star RuPaul Charles, has been the most highly influential source of inspiration for style and performance techniques for the MGWC since 2009. RuPaul has offered an alternative to the primarily white cultural references that have dominated drag in Cape Town, which formerly included Sophia Lauren, Dolly Parton, Elizabeth Taylor, Judy Garland, Brigitte Bardot and Marilyn Monroe and more recently Madonna, Britney Spears, Lady Gaga and Miss South Africa contestants.[[23]](#footnote-21) In *Drag Race*, locations are signified in relation to performance genre, such as TV commercial, burlesque, nightclub, or fashion runway. The geographical location is rarely shown, and not at all emphasized. In certain challenges, contestants are asked to walk around on the street, which is positioned – even if implicitly – as *the* major obstacle of the challenge. Here, drag is framed exclusively as an indoor practice in private or at least privatized spaces intended for performance or performative labour. This also serves as a reminder that the public sphere is not the *space* for the articulation of discourses, but is “a principle instance of the forms of embodiment and social relations that are themselves at issue.”[[24]](#footnote-22)

Relatedly, one of the competitive categories for MGWC is based on comportment and the ability to positively represent the pageant in daily public life. Points are lost for public displays of intoxication, inappropriate attire (meaning sloppy or overtly sexualized and “cheap”) and expletive language. This category is assessed by “silent judges” – the contestants do not know their identity, though it is often suspected that these points are awarded by the organizers themselves or former winners. What constitutes the public then extends well beyond the spatial and temporal demarcations of the pageant into the broader social lives of the contestants, inclusive of their use of social media, such as Facebook. The development and maintenance of their reputations is also submitted to careful surveillance. Drag in the pageant is then professionalized within the bounds of respectability and gendered norms, while in the contestants’ working lives it is simultaneously denied the status of professionalism.

Miss Gay Western Cape presents bodies as labouring subjects and objects of pleasure, fusing binaries such as work and leisure, and exploitation and pleasure. Zine Magubane has argued that RuPaul’s catchphrase “You better work,” which simultaneously references physical labour and fierce style, also brings together these binaries.[[25]](#footnote-23) Fashion, which is intimately connected to social change as opposed to tradition, and the “anticipation of new possibilities,”[[26]](#footnote-24) further designates a performer’s relationship to the means of production. Similar to the annual Spring Queen pageant hosted by the South African Clothing and Textile Workers’ Union (SACTWU), which explicitly celebrates the labour of Western Cape women factory workers, the dresses on display are made either by the contestants themselves or those directly associated with the pageant. The pleasure of the dress is produced not only through the contestant’s ability to “work it” but also through the quality of the craftsmanship and the production of glamour.

Glamour has received much scholarly attention in recent years, particularly from Stephen Gundle (2006, 2008), Carol Dyhouse (2011) and Nigel Thrift (2010), who position the term on a broad spectrum that includes magic, sex appeal, seduction, capitalism, theatricality, celebrity and wealth. While a shared definition amongst these scholars remains allusive, Lois Banner has convincingly argued that glamour can be fundamentally understood as “distant from the regular norms of life” and as a category that “inspires awe, envy, fantasy, or a sexual response.”[[27]](#footnote-25) RuPaul argued that glamour was a response to the bleak 1980s,[[28]](#footnote-26) which carried with it associations of economic excess and luxury, as well as projections of power. As a result, glamour has enormous transformative potential and is often understood as a celebrated alternative to experiences of disenfranchisement, disempowerment, self-loathing or economic disparity. Similarly, the style and brand of glamour articulated at Miss Gay Western Cape offers a counterpoint to the working and living conditions experienced by the majority of contestants. This chimes with Reid’s observation that increased attention to style in postapartheid South Africa signifies a preoccupation with material success that is determined by “designer clothing and other accoutrement.”[[29]](#footnote-27) The construction of glamour – which Dyhouse distinguishes from beauty insofar as it is “linked with artifice and with performance”[[30]](#footnote-28) – and femininity are explicitly intertwined in the pageant. As one participant, Kayden van Eden, noted in Beukes’ documentary, “We get to do and say what we want when we’re women. It’s about power.” The intention is to be perceived both as professional and glamorous. Attempting to connect glamour with feminist narratives, sexual determination and agency, Dyhouse suggests, “If femininity can be seen as a form of belittlement, associated with the demure, the dainty and the unassuming, then glamour – it can be argued – could offer a route to a more assertive and powerful form of female identity.”[[31]](#footnote-29) Style and glamour in particular were means of subverting class distinctions, with a focus on self-confident sexuality, consumption and transgression. In contrast to the carnival, which one contestant described as “very boy’s club,” the pageant is intended to be elegant and sophisticated, which is embodied in the final competition round, evening gowns (the dresses created for the pageant cost up to 10,000 Rand, which is excessive given that local salaries around 16 Rand per hour). Accordingly, while glamour may indeed offer the fantasy of self-transformation, it obscures its role in perpetuating the capitalist structures and bourgeois hegemony.[[32]](#footnote-30)

In Beukes’ documentary, success and “realness” become generatively connected in direct relation to a perceived professional respectability. Failures to conform to preconceived standards of stereotyped femininity are ebulliently highlighted, as are latent critiques of fashion and style. Beukes seeks to highlight – perhaps in direct relation to Jennie Livingstone’s documentary film *Paris is Burning* (1990) that records African American and Latina/o drag balls in Harlem in the late 1980s – both the homemade quality of the contestants’ dresses and a hierarchy of success and failure in relation to gender performativity. A prime example of this hierarchy is emphasised by Kayden van Eden, a trans contestant labeled in the film as the “pre-op,” who is rendered as a girl with a “dress-up box,” as opposed to a woman with knowledge and expertise. The term “realness,” which is in global circulation in drag cultures, directly impacts on how stylistic display is understood as a form of social and cultural transformation, and offers circumscribed and at times conflicting categories for scenes of public disclosure and self-realization.

To achieve “realness” in the MGWC is not unproblematic. When one of the organizers, Mark Donough, comments that van Eden might be expelled from the pageant there is a certain pressure placed on “realness,” which harks back to its function in Livingstone’s *Paris is Burning* wherethe term is used to describe a performer’s ability to convincingly perform an alterior identity – a man as a woman, or a poor, disenfranchised African American as a rich, successful white businessman or woman – in a public sphere that does not depend upon and judge within the same set of performative values as the drag ball. Donough explains that van Eden may not be allowed to perform because she is a “real woman,” and yet the “realness” of the participants as girls is stressed throughout the documentary. Van Eden also explains how she has beaten “real women” – by which she means female assigned at birth – in former beauty pageants: “beating them on their own ground,” as she says, before adding, “There is no way I’m supposed to be a boy.” Being a “boy” is already bounded by traditional gender norms, which are reinforced and policed by the hyper masculine roles that she suggests are enacted and embodied by the gang members of her community. Van Eden also states that she will be a “*complete* woman” only after the operation, which contrasts with Donough’s observation that she is already a “*real* woman.” And it is precisely in the tension between complete and real that “real*ness*” emerges. Donough exclusively refers to the participants as “girls” or “queens” – he only calls the crowned Miss Gay Western Cape a “woman,” an esteemed category one must compete for and win. Similarly, RuPaul in his televised drag race only refers to the contestants as “women” in the phrase, “*Gentlemen*, start your engines, and let the best *woman* win!” The category of “woman” is seen purely in relation to competition, rivalry and struggle. It is a category you attain – a beauty pageant title – rather than inhabit in daily life.

J. Jack Halberstram in *In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* considers the reception of the transgender body by multiple audiences, and argues that for some this body “confirms a fantasy of fluidity so common to notions of transformation within the postmodern,” or the “utopian vision of the world of subcultural possibilities,” while for others transgender bodies confirm “the enduring power of the binary system.”[[33]](#footnote-31) The refusal to admit trans performers into the pageant positions transwomen very precisely in this logic of gender binary. However, there are moments of gender identification that are empowering. For example, in Beukes’ documentary van Eden, who is pejoratively labeled by the filmmaker as the “pre-op,” recalled an encounter in which she was asked if she were a “moffie.” “‘No,’ I said, ‘I’m a girl’.” Here transgendered identification acted as a positive fortification against a homophobic attack – even as it simultaneously registers ambivalences about homophobia itself. Again, however, this potentially liberatory declaration for van Eden is redirected as a means to exclude her from the pageant, which suggests that one has to claim male homosexuality as a means of primary identification in order to participate in this cultural performance.

Realness in *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is positioned not in relation to totality, seamless coherence or explicit certainty, but rather in partiality, the disjunctive ambiguity produced through virtuosity.[[34]](#footnote-32) Performance is more complicated than the difference between the real and the fictional. And for performance theorists this calls to mind Richard Schechner’s distinction between doing and *showing* doing. “Realness” hovers between these categories, refusing to stick. If realness is an imitation, then it is specifically an imitation of the mainstream. There is a constant tension between authenticity and believability *and* high theatricality and artificiality that determines and conditions realness. This can be understood as an act of refining one’s difference from the mainstream to the point where the signs of that difference have been totally effaced and the performance is at once *doing* for the uninitiated and *showing* doing for those with the necessary cultural knowledge. However, if either the artifice *or* the believability of the performance is foreclosed then “realness,” which is co-organised through these categories, is eclipsed. In the documentary, the trans body sides too forcefully with the latter category and thus fails to embody realness.

To be “real” is to “pass” or to “convince,” but it is also to accomplish virtuosity in performance. The former is about performance fading away, becoming “imperceptible,” while the latter emphasizes the *visibility* of performance as consciously constructed and professionally executed. Indeed synonyms of virtuosic include practiced, perfected, trained, *conspicuous*. Beukes focuses on a pre-operative transwoman, who suggests a form of gender rigidity that works against the logic of fluid and flexible gender performances enacted in the pageant. I would assert here that this prescribed binary of rigidity versus fluidity should be treated with suspicion, a working fiction that requires interrogation. Van Eden uses wigs made from real human hair, which she connects with her experience of her own gender as organic rather than performatively constructed. Here, the ‘realness’ of a trans body is singled out as problematic and is scrutinized for exclusion from the MGWC competition on the basis that the pageant validates and rewards “illusion” – the notion of successfully passing is not attributed to the trans body. Gender and biological sex are collapsed by this rule of the pageant, which is carefully policed by the organizers.

While Peggy Phelan has argued that the realness in *Paris is Burning* is the desire to eliminate the distance between ontology and performance and, simultaneously, the reaffirmation of that distance,[[35]](#footnote-33) Seth Clark Silberman has argued against this position claiming that the drag ball is a site of conscious fantasy, which allows participants not to foreclose but to at least renounce “the very real implications race does have for the gap between ‘opportunity’ and ‘ability’.”[[36]](#footnote-34) Ultimately, Silberman concludes against Phelan’s argument that “realness” demonstrates the “impossibility of realizing [the contestants’] dreams” and instead asserts that it affirms community.[[37]](#footnote-35) When we consider realness in relation to van Eden in MGWC that argument breaks down because of the performative requirements and limitations set out by the conditions of realness. While realness may affirm community, the community is again determined by a form of exclusion and prohibition. In the end, effecting innovative modes of interaction is not without its limitation in the coalitional counterpublic set up by the pageant.

Returning to the relationship between drag and masculinity, Marjorie Garber has pointed out that drag queens are typically “looked *through*, rather than *at*.”[[38]](#footnote-36) RuPaul frequently inverts this logic, but usually in a mode that asserts his masculinity, such as his participation in the advertising campaign for Rockport shoes in the 1990s. It may at first seem incongruous that a company attempting to sell masculinist and ultra butch style would use a drag queen for their publicity. Magubane has argued that Rockport were attempting to suggest that any man willing to put on a dress is secure in his masculinity, and that the “purpose of the transvestite, therefore, is to further emphasize the importance and efficacy of masculinity.”[[39]](#footnote-37) Alternatively, the authenticity of the trans body both destabilizes the pleasure of voyeuristic decoding while undermining the primacy of masculinity.

“Tucking” – the act of hiding one’s genitalia – is a complicated and sometimes painful process, and the organizers make sure the participants are appropriately tucked before appearing in drag on stage or in public. Self-transformation is then linked to bodily constraint. Beukes’ documentary draws attention to this “backstage” process. Just as in *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, those who fail to tuck properly are cruelly castigated or humiliated. The American television show makes sure to offer fleeting but recurrent glimpses of the tucking process and also makes numerous direct and coded references to it through jokes about duct tape, spandex and gaff. The process of inserting synthetic padding is also carefully documented. An overriding emphasis tends to be placed on providing an interpretation of the body that gives special attention to the cultural dimension of this *trans*-formation that is at times contradictory. While gender variance causes enormous uncertainty when it is aligned with hormones and surgery, which carry with them associations of ill heath, the focus on tucking in RuPaul’s programme reveals not only the fact that this is an essential element of drag *performance* practice, but, perhaps more importantly, it is an attempt to allay the subjective anxieties produced by the public display of transgendered bodies. The trans body, managed by medical experts, is pathologised, while the drag body is celebrated as virtuosic and performative. The pageant sets up the idea that to change one’s physical appearance has the potential to alter an entire symbolic field; however, any attendant determination to suture authenticity to the trans body is offered no such point of privilege.

Halberstram has argued that the right to self-determination and recognition, even if this implies gender rigidity, is crucial for transgender identity politics.[[40]](#footnote-38) The problem here, it seems to me, is that while drag and cross-dressing are conceptualized as a site of empowerment and acceptance – style here openly functions as means of publicity, disclosing unseen or private aspects of the self – the trans body becomes a site of stable identity that is neither affirmed in public life nor in the liminal enactment of the pageants. The trans body is primarily and essentially marginalized. It is precisely in the theatricality of the pageant performance that the distinctions delimiting gender – through the exposure to physical bodies and the performative acts that inscribe those bodies into the social lexicons of gender – that one finds the most appropriate space for this debate, not necessarily to side with an “authentic body” that implicitly favours trans over drag.

If I started at the top of Table Mountain, I would like to end somewhere else. As I have demonstrated, the MGWC pageant is attended by restrictive rules and discourses around gender and sexuality. However, it is also a space to reimagine and rearticulate the transformative potentials around these categories. While, admittedly, liberational potentials are never fully disassociated from emerging forms of hegemony, MGWC produces a self-awareness of a subordinate social status, which enables rather than disempowers new forms of exchange. What would have been seen as a matter purely for private life is made of public relevance and a valid subject of common concern. The conditions of the performances are themselves in flux, as has been seen in the crucial and significant changes in style over a very short period of time. Realness continues to be pursued in an effort to both expose distinctions between lived and imagined realities, while also functioning as a generative category by operatively collapsing such distinctions. Observing the movement of the pageant around the city ties schemas of gender and sexuality to spatialised understandings of the public sphere. While drag remains a multidirectional cultural form that is capable of aesthetic repurposing, “realness” remains a complex and contested category. If the Miss Gay Western Cape pageant sets realness up as a definitive mode of self-transformation and realization then it requires careful interrogation. Not only is realness produced through virtuosic performative categories that demarcate gender – through the exposure to physical bodies and the performative acts that inscribe those bodies into the social lexicons of gender – it also is geographically bounded. It is crucial not to follow the racist logic of the tourist map that only sees the legitimation of publicness in spaces outside of the Cape Flats and other townships. In contrast to conditions of labour, the MGWC offers drag as a mode of professionalism and respectability. The pageant produces counterpublics and their publicness – recalling that the public sphere is not solely determined spatially – is conditioned by the construction of newly imagined social relations and ways of living that are intimately bound up with space, labour, gender and self-fashioning.

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1. Throughout the article, I have attempted to use the terminology employed by pageant producers, performers and spectators. Terms such as homosexual, gay, queer and LGBTQI are thus all present in the discussion. While these terms each have established associations with community, identity and sexuality, their meanings are frequently open to variation and understood differently by these groups. While “gay” now functions as a standard and normative form of identification, LGBTIQ is an acronym that simultaneously produces visibility and invisibility, in which Lesbian and Gay tend to obscure Trans and Intersex. Queer is not a straightforward synonym for any of these former designations, but is rather a “critical approach that interrogates sexual normativities and orthodoxies” (Oswin, “Critical Geographies,” 92). However, it is crucial to add that because queer attempts to deconstruct or interrogate norms does not mean it is itself beyond the reach of normativity. Please see interviews with Mark Gevisser, Zethu Mathebeni and Glenton Matthyse in this issue for further analyses of these terms in South Africa. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Williams, “Spatial,” 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Ibid., 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. One particularly significant counterexample to this trend is Zer021, which caters primarily to black and coloured clientele. Manila von Teez regularly performs a drag act in this venue as well as hosting a weekly screening of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. The fact that the bar is located on the *periphery* of De Waterkant (Chiappini Street) is highly suggestive of its perceived cultural positioning in the gay village. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. This remark was made by Zethu Matebeni at the Pride Discussion Forum in Cape Town on 2 March 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. While the term “non-European” stands out so starkly today as problematic, it is interesting to note that in much contemporary queer theory and writing about LGBTQI identities, the term “non-white” is still very much in circulation. This move from a geographical association to racial attribution might strike one as odd, particularly given advancements in critical race studies. What this points to is an ongoing disjunction between these critical methodologies. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
7. For a detailed account of Madame Costello’s drags see Chetty 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
8. Thelwell, “Blackface,” 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
9. It is worth further investigation into the South African identities that were being buttressed in Costello’s performances, given that hybrid national identities were not a focus or aim of blackface minstrelsy in the nineteenth-century South African context. Rather, it carefully marked and legitimated racial difference. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
10. Leap, “Finding,” 240. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
11. “Moffie” is a pejorative term for a gay man that has been largely reappropriated as a positive means of expressing queerness. The famous District Six moffie queen Kewpie Doll commented that in the 1950s-60s, “only talented people were allowed to be called moffies” (in Lewis, *A Normal Daughter*), indicating style and fashion as well as an ability to dance, sing and entertain. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
12. Reid, *How to Be*, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
13. Oswin, “Producing,” 666. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
14. Reid, *How to Be*, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
15. Warner, *Publics*, 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
16. This is a highly common and often ambivalent association in South Africa. As Graeme Reid has indicated, while “[c]laiming rights and educating the public is a familiar rationale for organisers of [gay] beauty pageants,” “distinctions between style and activism [tend to] become blurred in practice” (*How to Be*, 173). These categories should not be understood as fundamentally discrete or disconnected, of course, given that style itself can function as a form of activism. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
17. These have developed over the years and now include: Enigma von Hamburg’s (2009 winner) Mr & Miss Matric Supermodel, which takes place annually at the Stellenbosch Town Hall, and raises money for school fees and supports young fashion designers; Logan McGregor’s (2011 winner) Miss Gay Ambassador at the Kensington Civic Centre, the winner is recognized as an ambassador of her community and LGBTQI matters and the pageant raises money for HIV and AIDS awareness; and Zilin Ayoki Zhang’s (2012 winner) Miss Gay New Woodlands in the Cape Flats that supports local LGBT youth. This strongly indicates that the pageant winner primarily has a social role to play in not only publicising social concerns, but also in effecting change in negative perceptions of queer people. The limits of such community work have been discovered in Liberty Banks’ (2014 winner) event “Solidarity's Night OUT,” which brings together activists, scholars, transpeople and drag performers in an effort to celebrate difference and discuss issues that affect differently oppressed groups of people. While the other events reinscribe the performance structures and value systems of the beauty pageant, Banks intended to break with these in order to focus on the activist agenda prescribed by the MGWC constitution. However, attendance at the event has fluctuated, which invites some critical reflection concerning the publicized agenda and unstated investments in the pageant. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
18. Joseph, *Against*, vi-vii. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
19. Ibid., viii. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
20. In this way, Beuke’s film differs radically from Jack Lewis’ *A Normal Daughter: The Life and Times of Kewpie of District Six* (2000) in its positioning of Cape Town’s sexual geographies. Unlike Kewpie’s birthplace, Bellville, District Six was a queer space that allowed for a multiplicity of alternative lives. Kewpie describes District Six in many of the same ways Beukes’ frames the Cape Flats, dominated by overcrowding, gangsterism and poverty. However, in Lewis’ film the focus is on the imagined community in the district that was intimate, multiethnic and a welcoming space for gay people. Another significant difference between the documentaries is the unstranslated presence of Afrikaans in Lewis’ film. Although the majority of Miss Gay Western Cape contestants speak Afrikaans, as well as the pageant hosts, the language was entirely excluded from Beukes’ documentary. On a related note, the 2012 MGWC pageant was hosted by Latrice Royale from *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (season 4), who did not know local references and could not quip in Afrikaans. Despite her global celebrity status, Latrice did not prove the most popular or well-received host, whose success depends upon linguistic interaction with the audience and not purely in physical appearance or showmanship. Hosts tend to make sexual innuendos and use expletives in Afrikaans, while English is formalized and primarily used for official announcements and introductions. Only being able to communicate in English limited and formalized Latrice’s audience interaction. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
21. Similarly, Pride events in Cape Town find their political relevance through their chosen sites of enactment. To focus purely on the performance styles and genres is to miss out on the complex modes in which different locations in the city count differently in the production of public spheres, and the way in which diverse norms function and are articulated in different spaces. Disappointingly, the schedule of Pride events only reinforces the cultural logic of the tourist map. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
22. Silberman, “Why RuPaul,” 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
23. Although RuPaul remains an important influence, his understanding of gender tends to significantly differ from some of the MGWC participants. For example, unlike the majority of pageant contestants, RuPaul does not claim to impersonate females – “How many women do you know who wear seven inch heels, four foot wigs and skintight dresses?” (cited in Corso, “Drag Queen,” n.p.). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
24. Warner, *Publics*, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
25. Magubane, “Black Skins,” 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
26. Enwistle, *Fashioned*, 72 in Reid, *How to Be*, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
27. Banner, “Glamour,” 1066. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
28. In Silberman, “Why RuPaul,” 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
29. Reid, *How to Be*, 280. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
30. Dyhouse, *Glamour*, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
31. Ibid., 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
32. Gundle, *Glamour System*, 14-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
33. Halberstram, *Queer Time*, 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
34. One problematic overlap between *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and MGWC is the way realness and fierceness are attributed to culturally and historically decontextualised narratives, which are ambiguously redefined in relation to a liberatory drag performance. For example, in the first episode of the second season of *Drag Race –* entitled “Gone with the window” – contestants were asked to recreate Scarlet O’Hara’s unbeatable spirit. In order to achieve this contestants were required to climb onto a canon flanked by two semi-nude African-American male models and hold a flag aloft in front of a strong fan. In this reenactment of “spirit“ the former slave owner (O’Hara) is celebrated rather than the liberated slaves themselves. The contestant’s racial or ethnic identity was not taken into account so that race was evacuated from discourses around *Gone with the Wind* and only the notion of self-preservation and fortitude against adversity – two archetypal motifs of drag performances – were invoked. In MGWC a number of themes – “Africa” (2012) and “Arabian Nights” (2013) in particular – are also decontextualised from cultures, geographies and identities in order to focus purely on style. Again, these themes were intended to evoke “fortitude against diversity,” but at the cost of broader or more nuanced understandings of subjugation, prejudice, Orientalism or exoticism. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
35. Phelan, *Unmarked*, 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
36. Silberman, “Why RuPaul,” 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
37. Ibid., 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
38. Garber, *Vested*, 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
39. Magubane, “Black Skins,” 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
40. Halberstram, *Gaga*. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)