

Post45
Feel Your Fantasy: The Drag
Race Cluster

Drag Queens Everywhere

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There is an unobvious potentiality in *Drag Race's* travels, one that sits alongside the negative and more obvious impacts of exporting "Americana on steroids" and invites us, perhaps, to approach the franchise *ambivalently*, rather than feeling the need to either uncritically celebrate or categorically denounce it. In Beirut (Lebanon), my home city, for example, drag is a risky business.

Beirut queens have been featured in *Vogue*, *The Washington Post*, *BBC*, *Elle*, and *The New York Times*, to name only a few. There are overlaps between some Beirut queens and RuGirls. Several of the latter have performed in Beirut. Anya Kneez, Lebanese-American drag queen and trailblazer of the Beirut scene, designed two iconic looks for Scarlet Envy's run on season 6 of *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars* — her RuDemption look and the red gown she had planned to wear during the finale, which she had discussed with Michelle Visage after her elimination on *Whatcha Packin'*. Beirut queens have also collaborated with Mo Heart on "Haus of Hearts."

Cosmopolitan Beirut, as Ghassan Moussawi has written, "is accessible as a gay-friendly space to gender-normative, cisgender, secular, and middle-to-upper-class LGBTQ people." ¹ It is also important to keep in mind that Beirut's tolerance of gender-normative middle-to-upper-class gay and lesbian communities is a useful means of distracting from the violence against Syrian and Palestinian refugees, migrant domestic workers, trans people and working-class queers. That violence is often done in the name of protecting the country from terrorism, or securing public hygiene, and posed as a marker of openness and modernity. In reality, this is a means of utilizing moral panics to counteract dissatisfaction with the government.

Yet, traveling from home to venue in drag is not an option for most queens and the risk of a raid always looms large in the background in a context where the government benefits from the occasional moral panic. To be a queen in Beirut, then, is to choose a life of precarity, which in and of itself gives drag a potentiality other than aims of the *Drag Race* franchise *and* the clubs within which it unfolds. *Drag Race* might have inspired Beirut drag in its current iteration, and Beirut drag might have limited options in terms of venues. That doesn't mean that Beirut drag is limited in its forms or aims.

This essay is based on my extensive engagement with the Beirut drag scene via social media — from following queens and venues to reading through critiques and following their feuds. In conversations with two prominent, Beirut-based queens, Latiza Bombé and Anissa Krana, I engaged them as a fan: of their art, of the scene they are part of, and of *Drag Race*. Over texts and Zoom calls, we kiki'd, we discussed what we loved and hated about *Drag Race*, who our favourite queens were, which ones we related to most (there were some interesting overlaps, but who *doesn't* love Katya?), how we felt about the show's franchising, its potentials and limitations, what inspired their aesthetics and performance styles, and why drag made us all feel alive. We talked about mental health and about fantasy as a lifeline.

Accompanying this essay are two video essays. The queens and the videographer, Nagham Darwich, had complete control over filming. I asked for a "day in the life" of getting ready for a performance, with no other guidelines. We're offering these video essays, together, as a collaboration. Thinking with, laughing with, and contemplating with these queens helped me better understand why drag so moves me and many others.

Latiza and Anissa credit *Drag Race* for Beirut's flourishing scene. Latiza told me that she was the third person to start doing drag in Lebanon, around 2016. At the time, she said, people within and outside the queer community were unfamiliar with drag. She told me that she received a lot of hate from within the queer community when she began doing drag. Femmephobia in queer spaces in Lebanon manifests as it does in other contexts, as demonstrated by the overdetermined, homonormative preference on apps like Grindr: masc4masc. For many, this femmephobia comes to be internalised and then projected on femme queers who are framed as putting the community at risk or sullyng its name.

As a result, the only spaces where Latiza could embrace her art were trans spaces, where she first began experimenting with makeup and clothing. Latiza would attend club nights with trans women where they felt they could embody femininity without being, at best, judged and, at worst, physically harmed — if not arrested. Around these women, Latiza experimented with her own femininity, but to a limit. In her drag, Latiza wasn't interested in "realness," and so while these spaces were welcoming and taught her that she could and should transgress the confines of binaristic gender, they left her wanting: her desire for gender play wasn't rooted so much in a trans identity as it was in a desire for the unreal and the fantastical. (It is worth noting, that there are trans women drag queens in Lebanon, as in so many other contexts, who are just as invested in undoing the real and embracing the alien, the weird, and the fantastical.) In this sense, while Latiza does draw inspiration from *Drag Race*, for example, when it comes to her approach to lip syncing or her embrace of walking balls in Beirut themed after the show's runway categories. Her aesthetic does deviate from the show's oft-critiqued fixation, at least in its American iteration, on performances of normative femininity, as demonstrated by the kind of critiques of queens' makeup that Michelle Visage often levels, particularly towards those contestants whose beards are harder to camouflage.

Today, Latiza told me, those who were unsupportive now book Latiza for her performances, praise her art, and post celebratory comments on her Instagram. This all happened, she says, after *Drag Race* went "mainstream" in Lebanon.

But it's incomplete to frame *Drag Race* as a singular catalyst for a Beirut drag scene.

As Wael Lazkhani writes,

while a man in drag in the heart of the Arab world may appear a cultural import inspired by the most licentious aspects of the West, this actually isn't the case at all . . . Let us remember the khawal tradition of days past: throughout the Islamic world, and perhaps most notably during Mohammed Ali-era Egypt, men once assumed female roles in plays and dances, as women were forbidden to appear in public. A new breed of entertainers grew out of this peculiar set of circumstances. Belly dancing men became the rage in Egypt, and slowly men were sought after not only as performers, but also as companions and lovers. 2

The point is not simply that ways of engaging gender and performing gender in the pre-colonial, pre-modern Middle East were snuffed out during the colonial period. There are other postcolonial and contemporary examples of gender play in the Middle East, as in the long tradition of cross-dressing for comedic and dramatic effect in Egyptian cinema, or in the career of Lebanon's Bassem Feghali. Bassem emerged on the Lebanese entertainment scene in the early 2000s, even appearing in his own special during the holy month of Ramadan — the most coveted of TV slots.

Many Beirut queens recognise the path Feghali paved for them. But some have been hesitant to name him as a predecessor. While some have followed in his footsteps by drawing inspiration from Arab pop culture and cinema, and from over-the-top Lebanese women, others have looked instead to RPDR for their primary drag prototypes. Rather than dismissing the latter as inauthentic or as "bad queers," I'd like to sit with what is productive about their Drag Race "mimicry" and to propose we understand it not as mimicry at all, instead thinking through the potentiality of their ambivalent relationship to the franchise and the play it inspires.

For example, it is hard to translate Latiza Bombé's name into English and have it make sense. Roughly translated, I could explain it as: "her bombé ass" — bombe as in *rounded* in French, a term commonly used in Lebanon (where French is a colonial hangover) and France to refer to a fleshy and protruding behind. (The syntactic structure of "her bombé ass" also recalls, through an English mispronunciation of "bombé" that ignores the accent, the colloquial usage of "bomb" to mean "excellent.") Latiza, in Lebanese colloquial Arabic, translates to "to her ass," which means, "she doesn't give a fuck." Latiza Bombe, then, means something like: "her rounded ass couldn't give a fuck," although in Arabic that would require writing it as Latiza El Bombe.

Latiza describes her drag as "sexy yet gross." She tells me Latiza "is a mix of a creature you've never seen before with a super woman, with your regular friend who you can take anywhere and have fun with her." She's drawn to the extra-human with a touch of the feminine. Growing up amid countless crises, Latiza was drawn to the fantastical and absurd. Her shows are dedicated to helping people reorient, however temporarily, in relation to their circumstances. She offers an escape into the fantastic — into what she calls the magic of drag, a salve for impossible political and economic situations.

Her drag, she tells me, is not "Oriental." To silo Middle Eastern queens within a particular aesthetic or to limit them to particular references, she believes, is a disservice. Latiza's inspiration does not necessarily translate into obvious references to Lebanese or Arab culture. Her mother, she tells me, is her primary role model. She was injured during the civil war (1975-1991) at the age of eighteen, and lost one of her legs as a result. She's a divorcee who raised two children on her own.

When I do drag, that's the persona I have in mind. I cannot be tamed or put in a closet.

At one Beirut Grand Ball, inspired by the queer of colour ballroom scene that originated in Harlem, Latiza walked the runway category, as usual. The theme was "Post-Apocalyptic Couture," evoking the first maxi challenge in season 4 of Drag Race. Latiza stomped the runway in flesh-coloured sheets of leather roughly stitched together, revealing into a mask that contained three versions of her drag face. The multiple faces and stitched-together outfit were a reference to the ammonium nitrate explosion at the Port of Beirut that rocked the city on August 4th, 2020, the largest blast in its history.

She told me the outfit was inspired by the scenes she witnessed amidst the rubble and chaos in the aftermath.

She was trying to send a message, she said, without making the audience uncomfortable to the point where they could no longer enjoy the ball. For many, drag is meant to be unsettling and uncomfortable, and on many occasions for Latiza, that is her aim: challenging what we see as beautiful and desirable. But on this evening, she had multiple contexts in mind: a Lebanon reeling from the August 4th explosion and, before that, haunted by the routinisation of failure gripped by what has been called a "stuckedness" in a present felt to be permanent; disenfranchisement and limitations set by a ruling class that appears alarmingly capable of reproducing itself in the face of crisis after crisis. ³ Latiza wanted to offer an otherwise in this context of suffocated political imaginations.

Perhaps confronted with this mangled and yet glorious creature, one could remember not only the blast, but also the ways people tried to pick up the pieces and rebuild while the government stood idly by, and how even in our brokenness, and even as those in power attempt to tear us apart, we can stitch ourselves back together in previously unthinkable ways. Maybe we can grow new faces.

"Every time I get in drag," Latiza told me, "I feel like I'm fucking the government."

The name Anissa Krana is easier to translate. It means, "I'm drunk." Anissa is the alter ego of Aniss who, when not in drag, is a fashion designer. Aniss describes Anissa as an "ex-pornstar":

Her name says a lot about the character. She's drunk. She's a life lover. She loves to go out, be hot and seductive. Almost too much. She can't seem to remove that part of her life [the porn career]. It affects everything she does. All of her performances get sexual even at the wrong times. She's always someone who loves herself. Everything she does is unacceptable, but she does it anyway.

Anissa likes to tell what she frames as universal stories through her drag performances — a young boy overcoming bullying; a young woman getting over a difficult breakup, a young queer trying to gain acceptance within their birth family. Arab popular culture doesn't particularly appeal to her, and her drag and cultural influences include Alyssa Edwards, Katya Zamolodchikova, Alaska Thunderfuck 2000, Lady Gaga, and Arianna Grande. She's interested in appealing to a broad audience and in being funny, too.

In her scripts, she looks especially to *SNL* and *Euphoria*. She also wades into local media, but only if it tickles her. Like Latiza, Anissa's cultural references are not explicitly Arab or Lebanese. She isn't impersonating Arab pop divas or lip syncing to Arabic pop music. Anissa, she says, is in some ways a tribute to sex workers who frequent particular spots in Beirut. Fantasizing who she'd play in Snatch Game, she imagines playing either The Cock Destroyers or Miriam Klink, a notorious singer and public figure famed for her unabashed embrace of sex and sensuousness. Anissa describes her as

the Lebanese Paris Hilton. Anissa also uses her platform to advocate for LGBT rights and to shed light on the specific struggles the LGBT community faces in Lebanon. For example, advocating for the abolishment of Article 534 of the Lebanese penal code, which criminalises sex "contrary to nature."

Overall, however, Anissa's relationship to drag is primarily a personal one. To her, it's about the healing potential of feeling your fantasy after years of queerphobic bullying and the spiral into drug abuse and addiction they enabled. This brings us, again, to the importance of taking an ambivalent approach to the franchise that introduced her to drag. As mentioned, the majority of Anissa's inspirations and references are Western, which if read superficially might open her up to a critique based on mimicry. But for Anissa, engaging with drag on the back of becoming enchanted by drag race allowed her to find a lifeline that had otherwise been sorely missing in her life, and to push back against the hegemonic norms that had, in her local context, traumatized her. "I always thought I had healed from school traumas, but I never healed until I performed," she told me, referencing one of her early lip sync performances to Radiohead's "Creep." As she lip synced to the lyrics "I don't belong here," and the audience responded, "you belong here," she began to see a way out of the negative emotions that had gripped her for so long. It didn't matter that the song was in English or that the model of drag performance was borrowed from elsewhere — the message meant something in Beirut and in the queer club she was performing in.

"Being a man is the highest power. Why would a man turn into a woman?" Anissa asked me, setting up her answer. For her, embracing her femininity in drag was a means of rejecting the norms of masculine comportment that had been used to police her and legitimize the bullying she'd experienced as a child and a teenager. Seeing queens on Drag Race discuss the power of femininity and the

empowering nature of drag revealed a way to fight back without trying to perform a violent masculinity that she would always fail to appropriately embody anyway. "Drag Race gives hope and ambition to people who do drag. The struggle is universal. Solidarity across borders." Listening to Anissa, I often felt as though we were in the Drag Race workroom, when those conversations that always feel somewhat forced and produced unfold between queens reflecting on their struggles and journeys. While I had, in the past, scoffed at the exploitative nature of these scenes, speaking to Anissa I realized that they exceeded the profit and ratings-oriented desires of the show's producers who are of course after drama and trauma porn as a means of making profitable entertainment. Regardless of how these stories were produced into their public existence, they were real reflections of the queens' real experiences, experiences that resonated with Anissa and that allowed her to see not only that she was not alone, but that there was a world, an otherwise, at her disposal — there was an artform that could save her.

Drag in Beirut has thus far been a celebration of the bad queer rather than a solidification of the good queer. More than anything, it seems to me, this is about cultivating community, about what Goldmark calls "the kinship of marginality." ⁴ (2015, p. 513). I will leave it to the video essays to demonstrate this. Limited access to materials and differing aesthetics mean that queens rarely conform to hegemonic notions of femininity — they sport body hair, often eschewing the metrics of passing and/or fishiness. The fantasy of feeling femme and beautiful does not derive for them from mimicry but from play. There is a roughness to Beirut's drag, but that roughness doesn't disrupt the fantasy. Effort and money is put into the craft, much of which depends on shipping material from abroad. But the success of that look doesn't depend on Drag Race standards. While the popularity of *Drag Race* has allowed Beirut queens to find broader audiences in local and international queer

communities (as Latiza has, for example), many have refused to be limited by what the show promotes as successful drag.

Beirut queens make clear that while the show might have inspired them by feeding their fantasies, the conditions of their lives in Lebanon have meant that in their ambivalent engagements with Drag Race, there emerges something much more subversive than a superficial reading would allow us to see.

"Drag Queens Everywhere": Anissa Krana



"Drag Queens Everywhere": Latiza Bombe



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References

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2. Wael Lazkhani, "[The Queen](#)," Bidoun, 2009. <https://www.bidoun.org/articles/the-queen>. [[↑](#)]
3. See Ghassan Hage, "Alter-politics: Critical Anthropology and the Radical Imagination" (Melbourne University Press, 2015), especially Chapter 2. [[↑](#)]
4. Matthew Goldmark, "[National Drag: The Language of Inclusion in RuPaul's Drag Race](#)," *GLQ* 21, no. 4 (2015): 513. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/595592/pdfv>. [[↑](#)]

