

DEAFIES IN DRAG

ROLE MODELS AT THE INTERSECTION OF QUEER AND DEAF REPRESENTATION

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In this article, Nynke Feenstra and Looi van Kessel think through the challenges of putting intersectional theory in practice by tracing a history of role models at the intersection of deaf and LGBTQ+ identifications in the Netherlands and the United States. They argue that, while the concept of intersectionality has taken great leaps in academic debates, formal institutions still sometimes struggle with the practical applications of insights that this concept offers. By looking into the history of Dutch activists such as Bea Visser and advocacy groups such as Roze Gebaar, and the current work of the deaf drag performers Deafies in Drag, Feenstra and van Kessel argue that a more practical attention to the intersection of minoritizing identifications foregrounds tensions and issues that arise from within the deaf and LGBTQ+ communities, as well as from without. The practice of drawing attention to intersecting minoritizing identifications can be found in the function of role models who identify across different marginalized communities, and thus can help work towards forms of activism that pay attention to specific issue advocacy as well as inclusivity.

INTRODUCTION

Meet Selena and Casavina, two Latinx drag queens who, since October 2015, post a weekly sketch video to YouTube in which they dramatize struggles that occur in their day-to-day life. As expected, these sketches deal with dating life, being part of the LGBTQ+ community,

or performing in drag.¹ What makes these sketches stand out, however, is that Selena and Casavina are not just two regular drag queens. They are Deafies in Drag.

By naming themselves Deafies in Drag, Selena and Casavina address both a deaf and an LGBTQ+ audience. Many deaf-born people self-identify as members of the deaf community. They are proud of being deaf and share Deaf culture, a core part of which is communication in sign language.² They identify as ‘culturally deaf’ as opposed to ‘being handicapped’ — a medical understanding of deafness.³ Within the deaf community, role models are very important. Everybody has role models and for most people their parents are the first ones. Writer and clinical psychologist Andrew Solomon calls this phenomenon ‘vertical identification’.⁴ However, most deaf children (about 90-95%) are born to hearing parents and experience the world from a different perspective than do their family.⁵ Their identification process takes place horizontally: among peers within the deaf community. Deaf role models show other deaf people what they are capable of as a deaf person and inspire them to believe in their personal capabilities, regardless of their deafness. Role models are therefore of great value to the social and emotional development of deaf children and the self-esteem of deaf people.⁶

Similar horizontal identification processes take place within the LGBTQ+ community. In 1994, Andrew Solomon was the first to draw parallels between deaf and gay and lesbian

¹ There are many varieties of acronym to indicate a broad community of different sexual and gender identifications. We have opted for LGBTQ+ in which the plus signals the plethora of different identifications which might not have even been named yet. Where we cite sources that use different versions of the acronym, we have retained those other versions.

² Anja Hiddinga and Onno Crasborn, “Signed Languages and Globalization,” *Language and Society* 40.4 (2011), 40.

³ See for a detailed discussion Paddy Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2003), 15-7.

⁴ Andrew Solomon, *Ver van de boom: Als je kind anders is*, trans. Pieter van der Veen, et al. (Amsterdam: Nieuw Amsterdam, 2013), 12; Andrew Solomon, “Defiantly Deaf,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 28 August 1994.

⁵ Corrie Tijsseling, *Anders doof zijn: een nieuw perspectief op dove kinderen* (Twello: Van Tricht, 2006), 3; Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture*, 35; Hilde Haualand, “Sound and Belonging: What is a Community?” in *Open Your Eyes: Deaf Studies Talking*, ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 116.

⁶ S. W. Cawthon, et al., “Role Models as Facilitators of Social Capital for Deaf Individuals: A Research Synthesis,” *American Annals of the Deaf* 161.2 (2016), 125.

communities in an article in the *New York Times*.⁷ Although this comparison was experienced as uncomfortable by some deaf people, American Sign Language (ASL) scholar M. J. Bienvenue argues there is likely to be a crossing between the two communities, namely in the importance of sharing stories and fighting stigma.⁸ Although the identification as deaf is a strong unifying factor, it does not necessarily prevent stigmatization and exclusion based on other identifications within the same community. Indeed, many deaf LGBTQ+ people fear stigmatization both within the deaf community and within the LGBTQ+ community.⁹ Community members might raise the question of whether identifying as gay threatens their highly valued deaf identity. That is, there is a fear that a politically unified deaf community might be fracturing because of the intrusion of other identitarian questions that do not directly speak to the deaf community at large.

Deafies in Drag, we argue, show in their videos the importance of recognizing both identifications simultaneously. Their videos are a form of intersectional activism which does not give primacy to one identification over the other, but instead highlights the value of thinking about what happens when deaf and LGBTQ+ identifications overlap. In this article, we look at some of Deafies in Drag's videos, and also look into the history of LGBTQ+ and deaf activism in the Netherlands, to think through the complexity of intersectionality, which as a concept is already well established, but which remains difficult for many to put into practice.

PAVING THE WAY: BEA VISSER

In the Netherlands, Bea Visser (1936-2017) made an undeniable contribution to the social emancipation of deaf people, as well as to the emancipation of lesbian or gay deaf people within the Dutch deaf community. Bea's memoir was written by Petra Essink in 2009.¹⁰ Bea spent the greater part of her childhood at the Christian Institute Effatha in Voorburg at a

⁷ Solomon, "Defiantly Deaf."

⁸ M. J. Bienvenue, "Queer as Deaf," in *Open Your Eyes*, ed. Bauman, 267, 273

⁹ *Ibid.*, 266, 270

¹⁰ Petra Essink, *Bea Visser, Dove Prinses: Het levensverhaal van Bea Visser opgetekend door Petra Essink* (Zwolle: Petrapen, 2009).

time when deaf children were taught through spoken language.¹¹ She learnt signs from older children on the playground and in the dormitory. After finishing school, already at the age of fourteen, Bea was not hindered by the restrictions deafness imposed on her: she continued her education through night classes and later at the *Volkshogeschool voor doven*.¹² As of the 1960s, Bea was actively involved in and a driving force within deaf social life – primarily through sports – and was one of the first Dutch activists to teach sign language to deaf children.



These are Selena (left) and Casavina (right), and together they are Deafies in Drag. Video: *Gay 101 (Unseen Footage)*, ©Deafies in Drag, 2017.

¹¹ For approximately a century, in various countries of Europe and in the United States, sign language was banned at schools for the deaf. This period of repression, known as ‘Oralism’, had a profound impact on the development of deaf children, sign languages, and Deaf culture. See for further reading Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture* (Index subject: Oralism and Deaf education).

¹² In the second half of the nineteenth century, the *Volkshogeschool* in Bergen (later in Bakkeveen) offered annual courses for deaf people to expand their general knowledge and organized various activities to contribute to deaf people’s participation in society.

At the age of 41, Bea fell in love with a (deaf) woman for the first time. This caused great confusion as she had never heard of the word, or concept of, 'lesbian' before. In the following years, she withdrew her active participation in the deaf community as she suffered as a result of disapproval by part of the community of her sexuality. Her engagement with the deaf community reached a turning point when other lesbian and gay deaf people came to Bea to share their experiences. Together, they realized that many deaf people are effectively barred from knowing about homosexuality and thus decided to organize an information weekend in collaboration with the Volkshogeschool. Shortly after, in 1981, Bea and two peers, Dick Kerkhoven and Corinne Munne, founded *Roze Gebaar* (Pink Gesture) of which Bea was named Chair.¹³ In 1986, *Roze Gebaar* became part of the national LGBTQ+ advocacy group *COC Nederland*.



Deafies in Drag target both deaf and hearing audiences in their videos on queer topics. Video: *Latinx!*, ©Deafies in Drag, 2018.

Documentation of the history of *Roze Gebaar* and the experiences of L/G deaf people in the Netherlands are limited. However, the personal story of Bea touches upon two themes that are recurring in the sources available;¹⁴ 'coming-out to deaf friends' and 'access to

¹³ Essink, *Bea Visser, Dove Prinses*, 49, 59, 67-68, 73, 83-86, 101-4, 108-14.

¹⁴ The archival sources used for this research are interviews (newspapers and magazines) and the documentation of the *Roze Gebaar* symposium in 1996. All sources are accessed through *IHLIA: LGBT Heritage*. IHLIA manages Europe's biggest collection of LGBTQ+ history. Thanks to this collection we were able to write the historical paragraph on *Roze Gebaar* for this article. For more information see <https://www.ihlia.nl/>.

information'. A 1993 article on Roze Gebaar in *De Gaykrant* mentions that the coming-out process of deaf people produces similar feelings to those of hearing people, but comes with the realization that coming-out to one deaf person means that soon the entire deaf community will probably know, due to its small size. Deaf people often fear losing deaf friendships, which are perceived as essential in a society dominated by hearing people.¹⁵ Similar reasoning can be found in a 2006 interview with Barbara Otten in the deaf magazine *Woord & Gebaar*. During the experimental process she shunned the 'deaf world', Barbara reports, fearing that she would lose friends if they found out.¹⁶

It can be understood from Barbara's interview that she knew about homosexuality before she herself identified with it. However, considering Bea's story, this was not self-evident in the previous decades. One of the founding objectives of Roze Gebaar was to fill the information gap in sexuality.¹⁷ In 1996, Roze Gebaar organized the symposium "Zit Roze Gebaar nog in de kast?" (Is Roze Gebaar still in the closet?). Main topics discussed included coming-out processes, the lack of understanding for L/G deaf people, social isolation, and accessibility of education on AIDS prevention. Nowadays, Roze Gebaar still stands up for the interests of LGBTQ+ deaf people.¹⁸ In addition to this, the organization seeks to make important events for the LGBTQ+ community accessible for deaf people and have established a network of interpreters who either identify with the LGBTQ+ community themselves or are 'gay-friendly'.¹⁹

ONLINE DATING: PROBLEMS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Despite local differences, such as national sign languages, the deaf community extends beyond national boundaries and can be considered a global cultural community.²⁰ Deaf

¹⁵ Emiel Bootsma, "Wij moeten twee keer een isolement doorbreken," *De GAY Krant*, 21 August 1993. IHLIA: LGBT Heritage.

¹⁶ Tamara van Meer, "Leven op een Roze Wolk?" *Woord & Gebaar* 26.3 (April 2006), 11. IHLIA: LGBT Heritage.

¹⁷ Bootsma, *De GAY Krant*.

¹⁸ Roze Gebaar, "Over ons" (2019), <https://rozegebaar.coc.nl/over-ons/>.

¹⁹ Roze Gebaar, "Tolken" (2019), <https://rozegebaar.coc.nl/tolken/>.

²⁰ Hiddinga and Crasborn, "Signed Languages and Globalization," 489.

people feel a strong connection to other deaf persons because of their shared visual-gestural language and primarily visual perception of the world. Therefore, they often seek contact with one another wherever they are. These transnational exchanges have expanded rapidly thanks to recent technological developments such as Skype, YouTube, and WhatsApp. An increased proficiency in different sign languages, continuing debates on diversity and representation, and developments in the field of sociolinguistics have led to reflection on the use and appropriateness of particular gestures within the deaf community.²¹ Similarly, deaf history has mostly been written by white hearing men, and is based on white, straight, and cisgender people's experiences. In recent years, the desirability of this situation has been up for debate.²²

The turn to online platforms, however, also brings to light a set of disadvantages that deaf people, and queer deaf people in particular, might experience. As social life is moving increasingly to online forms of communication, dating, too, has moved at a rapid speed towards smartphone apps and other online outlets. These platforms come with a unique set of online etiquette that involves unwritten rules, ranging from how to flirt via text message to when or when not to send someone an image of your private parts. For some queer communities this move to online dating is considered a form of progress since it has become much easier for certain persons to meet others who share similar sexual interests. Whereas dating used to be a game of recognizing each other's body language and thus running the risk of misinterpretation, online dating now uses mostly text-based communication. Thus, for some this online communication means that they can flirt in a safer context. It has been suggested, however, that the move to online dating privileges mostly white cis-male members of the LGBTQ+ community while disadvantaging others, because on online platforms it becomes easier to discriminate against non-white and trans identifications. A growing body of work that researches the effect of online dating on people with disabilities shows that these communities, too, are affected by changing communication strategies involving the renegotiation of disclosure practices that further complicate

²¹ Ceil Lucas, *Multilingual Aspects of Sociolinguistics in Deaf Communities*, (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1996).

²² Arlene Blumenthal Kelly, "Deaf HERstory," in *Open Your Eyes*, ed. Bauman, 259-60.

online communication.²³ Indeed, deaf persons might encounter two disadvantages during online dating: first, the move towards text-based dating disadvantages persons whose verbal communication predominantly relies on body language, facial expression, and verbal cues rather than on spoken words; second, deaf persons might feel apprehensive about disclosing their deaf identity out of fear of being discriminated against. Andrew Shield, in his study on discrimination on Grindr, discusses the case of a deaf person who relates that “some of his friends ‘avoid using the words Deaf or Sign Language in their profiles’ out of fear of being excluded”.²⁴

In the Netherlands, advocacy groups have begun to draw more attention to the effects of these intersecting identifications. The history of Bea Visser and *Roze Gebaar* shows that the discussion about the different experiences of LGBTQ+ people living with disabilities was already a pressing issue long before online dating became a widespread phenomenon. A similar conclusion was drawn by COC Netherlands in 2003. The COC conducted a research investigating the needs of LGBTQ+ people with mental or physical disabilities and concluded that there is a demand among this community for more opportunities to socialize and for better sexual education aimed specifically at their individual situations.²⁵ While issues of intersecting LGBTQ+ and disabled identifications in the Netherlands might have been present before the advent of online dating, only in recent years have the complexities of such intersections gained more widespread recognition, perhaps even because of an increased online visibility.

One of these, *AutiRoze* (AutiPink) tries to create safe spaces for LGBTQ+ persons on the autism spectrum by organizing monthly gatherings at which people can share stories

²³ For some more recent research, see Jitka Sinecka, “‘I am Bodied’. ‘I am Sexual’. ‘I am Human’. Experiencing Deafness and Gayness: A Story of a Young Man,” *Disability and Society* 23.5 (2008), 475-84; John R. Porter, et al., “Filtered Out: Disability Disclosure Practices in Online Dating Communities,” *Proceedings of the ACM: Human-Computer Interaction* 1 (2017), 1-13; Andrew D. J. Shield, “Grindr Culture: Intersectional and Socio-Sexual,” *Ephemera* 18.1 (2018), 149-61; Johnathan Smilges, “White Squares to Black Boxes: Grindr, Queerness, Rhetorical Silence,” *Rhetoric Review* 38.1 (2019), 79-92.

²⁴ Shield, “Grindr Culture,” 156.

²⁵ COC, “Gehandicapte homo’s willen meer contact en informatie,” 5 December 2004, <https://www.coc.nl/jong-school/gehandicapte-homos-willen-meer-contact-en-informatie>.

and experiences, but also by creating awareness and visibility of persons on the autism spectrum within the LGBTQ+ community.²⁶ Similar initiatives include the website *Zonder Stempel* (Without Label) for LGBTQ+ people with mental disabilities, and the working group *Homo en Handicap* (Gay and Handicapped) for people with physical disabilities.²⁷ These organizations respond to a growing call by LGBTQ+ persons with disabilities for care and information that is tailored to their specific needs. *Zonder Stempel*, for example, addresses people working in health care that might feel uncomfortable talking about the sexuality of their patients, or who are unfamiliar with the LGBTQ+ community at large. These initiatives have prompted us to look a little closer at recent developments in thinking about intersectionality. After all, the concept has become something of a buzzword in current Dutch debates on inclusivity, but putting insights that the notion of intersectionality has to offer into practice often proves easier said than done.

INTERSECTIONAL THEORY IN PRACTICE

Above we addressed the inaccessibility of the (gay male) dating scene for people with disabilities or other minoritizing identifications. Whether intentional or not, people who do not correspond to the norm of able-bodied, fit, white, and cisgender males will often experience exclusion and blatant discrimination in the gay dating scene.²⁸ The interventions of Deafies in Drag address some of these issues by trying to establish more understanding for deaf people in romantic situations. In a video published in September 2016, they humorously address some ‘do’s and don’ts’ of dating a deaf person, the latter including covering your mouth with your hands while speaking.²⁹ This makes it impossible for your deaf date to lip-read what you are saying. This video, for example, flips the discussion and calls for more understanding for people with disabilities when dating. As they suggest, it is often the lack

²⁶ AutiRoze, “AutiRoze: van, voor en door LGBTI+ met autisme” (2019), <https://www.autiroze.nl>.

²⁷ COC, “Zonder Stempel” (2019), <http://zonderstempel.coc.nl>; COC Midden-Nederland, “Homo en Handicap” (no date, accessed 5 August 2019), <http://www.cocmiddennederland.nl/homo-en-handicap>.

²⁸ Sinecka “‘I am Bodied,’” 477; Porter, et al., “Filtered Out,” 9; Shield, “Grindr Culture,” 153-57; Smilges, “White Squares to Black Boxes,” 90.

²⁹ Deafies in Drag, “The Do’s and Don’ts: Dating Deafies,” 16 September 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXQaYnGi6qY>.

of experience with and knowledge about dating people with disabilities that makes some uncertain of how to behave on a date or forego dating people with disabilities altogether.

Deafies in Drag, then, does not just reach the deaf community with their episodes.³⁰ As they emphatically act out their different identifications in their videos, they also speak to communities beyond those who are deaf or hard of hearing. The recent surge in popularity of drag performance, for example, gives them a means by which to reach able-bodied and relatively privileged sections of the LGBTQ+ community that would usually not encounter persons with disabilities through their normal dating practices or social networks. When Selena and Casavina from Deafies in Drag shared one of our blog posts, “#DeafiesInDrag #Challenges”,³¹ on their Facebook page it was accompanied by the following message:

“Guess what?! We’ve been recognized by two students that are from Holland and they have written [a] prestigious article about us. This article talks about the complex of having multiple identities, in our case, being Latino, Gay, Deaf and Drag! This is something that confuses many people who follow the ideal “norm” society’s rules. We are breaking barriers and we love Being who we are and proud of it!”³²

Selena and Casavina have become role models both for deaf LGBTQ+, and deaf Latinx persons in particular, and actively contribute to creating understanding for intersecting identifications within the deaf community. However, they stress that this understanding is also not guaranteed in society in general. Marginalization and discrimination on multiple grounds is an issue that is gaining awareness yet is still an under-recognized problem. To deepen our understanding of the importance of intersectional role models such as Deafies in Drag, it is necessary to examine the ways in which ‘intersectionality’ as a theoretical

³⁰ While not on the scale of so-called influencers, Deafies in Drag have a significant online presence, boasting over 200,000 followers on their Facebook page, many of whom do not identify as deaf.

³¹ Looi van Kessel and Nynke Feenstra, “#DeafiesinDrag #Challenges,” *Leiden Arts in Society Blog*, 1 September 2016, <https://www.leidenartsinsocietyblog.nl/articles/deafiesindrag-challenges>.

³² Quoted in Nynke Feenstra and Looi van Kessel, “Series Final: The Intersection of Multiple Minoritizing Identifications,” 31 March 2017, <https://www.leidenartsinsocietyblog.nl/articles/series-final-the-intersection-of-multiple-minoritizing-identifications>.

tool was established and, consequently, how it manifests itself beyond academic debates within our wider society.

The concept of ‘Intersectionality’ was first introduced by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to address the marginalization of black women within antidiscrimination laws, antiracist politics, and feminist theory. With her ground-breaking 1989 article and a subsequent article in 1991, Crenshaw established the beginnings of what would become an esteemed analytical tool, adapted by scholars across disciplines and across the globe.³³ In the introduction of a special issue of the *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* (2013) on intersectionality, Crenshaw et al. argue that intersectionality is always a work-in-progress. An intersectional approach is ‘necessarily particularized’ in order to continue exploring other (and sometimes new) contexts.³⁴ In this article, for example, we focus on the intersection of deaf and LGBTQ+ identifications to seek a better understanding of the ways in which these two communities parallel and intersect. This fosters a deeper understanding of deaf and LGBTQ+ identifications, within and between these communities, and also beyond them.

A noteworthy example of the intersection of deaf and LGBTQ+ identities is *Queer ASL*, a programme that aims to create a safer space for hearing queer people to learn ASL. In 2009, Zoée Montpetit, a deaf queer person, began teaching sign language to her hearing friends from the queer community in Victoria, BC, Canada (and later in Vancouver, BC) in order to increase outsider access to the community. By now, their initiative has grown into a successful multi-level sign language course (1-4) and a network of deaf queer instructors.³⁵ The organization’s importance is demonstrated by the fact that most sign instruction methods, just as other teaching methods, do not take into account the diversity

³³ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (1989), 139-67; Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review*, 43.6 (1991), 1241-99.

³⁴ Devon W. Carbado, et al., “Intersectionality: Mapping the Movements of a Theory,” *Du Bois Review* 10.2 (2013), 303-12.

³⁵ *Queer ASL*, “How Did *Queer ASL* Start?” (2018), <http://www.queerasl.com/how-queer-asl-began/>; “What is *Queer ASL*?” (2018), <http://www.queerasl.com/what-is-queer-asl/>.



of those who use their manuals and methods. In a blog post from 2016, Alex Lu, a deaf queer person of colour, argues that one of the most-used methods of ASL instruction, Vista Signing Naturally, facilitates normative gender roles and sexual identifications by consistently featuring heteronormative examples or structuring assignments along binary gender divides. Furthermore, the creators of methods such as these are unaware that they have a queer target audience. Therefore, these methods fail to provide sign language speakers the vocabulary and means to talk about non-normative identifications. LGBTQ+ learners will not always identify with the examples or assignments, which may make them feel uncomfortable and alienated from their fellow learners.³⁶

Among both deaf and hearing LGBTQ+ communities there is a growing interest in understanding one another and providing safe spaces for sign language learning. Besides learning sign language, the *Queer ASL* courses also provide information on Deaf culture (history,

³⁶ Alex Lu, "How the Deaf and Queer Communities are Tackling Oppression Together," *Medium*, 28 June 2016.

norms, identity politics).³⁷ According to Montpetit (quoted by Lu) queer people can relate to the experiences of deaf people: “There is a real sense of kinship, a desire to increase access, and an ability to understand how hearing people can oppress Deaf people, just like how straight people can oppress queer people”.³⁸ Lu also mentions that the exposure of a large group of hearing queer people to ASL and Deaf culture has had an enormous impact on the accessibility of the queer community. *Queer ASL* graduates, for example, use their knowledge of deaf culture and ASL to increase the accessibility of queer spaces. In reverse, understanding the importance of queer-friendly ASL sends positive ripples into the deaf community as well.³⁹ *Queer ASL* thus shows how a particularized intersectional approach can foster a deeper understanding of deaf and LGBTQ+ identifications within and between communities.

These developments between deaf and hearing LGBTQ+ communities have also contributed to a wider debate on the lack of diversity among interpreters. According to Sara Gold, a white queer interpreter, recent theoretical assessments of interpreting substantiate that the values and identifications of interpreters inevitably influence the ways in which they receive and pass on information. The current increase of queer interpreters, stirred by *Queer ASL*, enables queer deaf people to have interpreters that mirror their own experiences. Similarly, it is important to have interpreters of colour: Lu illustrates this with an example of a Black Lives Matter panel in which a white interpreter translated the experiences and anger of black women.⁴⁰ *Queer ASL* thus shows that an intersectional approach can empower two communities to act together for acceptance, but also that this can lead to a deeper understanding of other contexts as well. Near the end of his blog post, Lu says: “While the movement towards increased interpreter diversity is challenging, it is extraordinarily important for Deaf people who stand at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities”.⁴¹

³⁷ *Queer ASL*, “*Queer ASL* 101-104 Classes” (2018), <http://www.queerasl.com/queer-asl/>.

³⁸ Lu, “Deaf and Queer Communities.”

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

WHERE DEAF MEETS DRAG

The flight in popularity that drag culture has taken over the past ten years, combined with the ever-increasing availability of online access, has significantly transformed the ways in which the LGBTQ+ community engages with its own cultural production and politics.⁴² Popular television shows such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* have driven an interest in drag culture that allows drag queens to set up successful YouTube channels, giving them both the opportunity to reach wider audiences beyond their local community and also transform how they communicate their art and activism. Deafies in Drag, too, have benefitted from the increased popularity of drag culture, as it has given them access to a platform with which they can reach both deaf and hearing queer audiences. In doing so, they have found a way to publicly bring their identifications as queer persons into conversation with their deaf identifications. Indeed, what makes their videos so attractive is the coincidence between drag culture and sign language that their videos showcase. That is, both parts of their identification — being a drag queen and being deaf — amplify each other as their style of drag works with, rather than against, their communication methods.

Already in her seminal books on gender performativity, Judith Butler recognized the way in which drag performance can challenge the perceived stability of gender categories.⁴² By toying around with and exaggerating gendered stereotypes, drag queens draw attention to the fact that our everyday gendered behaviour is merely the performance of what is considered socially desirable. The convergence of drag performance with the visual-gestural language of signing makes this point even more apparent. Just as gender performativity operates on the indexicality of gestures and language — that is, certain gestures and words are associated with certain gender identities — so too does sign language often operate within the arbitrary relationship between certain signs and their meaning. These relationships often belie socially received notions of how men and women are supposed to dress

⁴² Looi van Kessel, "Digital Drag: Queer Potentiality in the Age of Digital Television," in *Queer TV in the 21st Century: Essays on Broadcasting from Taboo to Acceptance*, ed. Kylo-Patrick R. Hart (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2016), 123-26.

⁴³ See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 186-89; Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 121-40.



No! i'm gay!

Selena, portraying a male person, signs the word for gay. Video: *Deaf Coming Out*, ©Deafies in Drag, 2019



So hungry!

Selena's family misinterprets the sign as meaning that he wants to eat. Video: *Deaf Coming Out*, ©Deafies in Drag, 2019

and behave. For example, in Dutch Sign Language (Nederlandse Gebaren Taal), the sign for “woman” has the signer touch their earlobe as if to indicate the presence of an earring.

The arbitrariness of these gestures is amplified by Deafies in Drag’s particular style of drag. They present themselves as comedy queens: drag queens who in a comedic fashion exaggerate gestures and make up styles to poke fun at gendered stereotypes. Their comedic style not only destabilizes gendered performance but also amplifies the arbitrary and indexical nature of many sign languages. This is often expressed in comedic sketches, such as that in the video titled “Deaf Coming Out”.⁴³ In it, Casavina plays a young deaf man who

⁴⁴ Deafies in Drag, “Deaf Coming Out,” 31 May 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_KnDCbpESo&t=3s.

is coming out in front of his hearing family (played by both Selena and Casavina in drag). His family members, however, are still learning ASL and struggle with some of the signs Casavina uses. Thus, when Casavina uses the sign for ‘gay’, his family confuses it with the sign for ‘eating’, assuming that he is hungry, or even worse, that he might be vegan. The confusion that arises draws attention to the reality that the experience of coming out for a deaf person can be vastly different from those of hearing persons. In other videos, such as the one titled “Latinx”, Selena and Casavina emphatically connect their experiences of being deaf and queer to their Latinx identities.⁴⁴ The aforementioned video, “The Do’s and Don’ts: Dating Deafies”, and others like the one titled “ASL Dance”, seem to be less about identifying as queer.⁴⁵ Instead, these videos address the complexities of navigating a predominantly hearing world as a deaf person, particularly on the dating scene. However, while in these videos Selena and Casavina’s queer identities are foregrounded less, they continue to perform most of their roles in drag, and it is in their female personas that their facial expressions and body language seems to interact more profoundly with their use of ASL. The male personas, if they sign at all, are more subdued in their facial expressions and gestures. The contrast between their male and female personas draws more attention to the interaction of drag performance with deaf communication. Their play on gender expression through the art of drag creates a space in which queerness and deafness not only amplify, but also complement one another.

The comedy style of these videos is obviously meant to make its audience laugh, but it also points to a more serious issue that deaf LGBTQ+ persons struggle with: because of their intersecting identifications as both deaf and queer, their queerness could run the risk of getting lost in translation while they navigate a hearing world. The videos of Deafies in Drag also address the accessibility of the gay dating scene for deaf LGBTQ+ persons by situating a series of videos that address the do’s and don’ts of dating in a queer setting. In doing so, Deafies in Drag cleverly adopt an intersectional approach to their art and activism. Their sketches highlight the fact that their identifications as deaf, gay, drag queens, and Latinx

⁴⁵ Deafies in Drag, “Latinx,” 27 April 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0BDnIXlohU>.

⁴⁶ Deafies in Drag, “The Do’s and Don’ts,”; Deafies in Drag, “ASL Dance,” 1 August 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwtRE7vpzjo>.

are never fully separable, but always operate in relation to one another. These intersecting identifications result in unique situations that would not be as poignant had they focused only on their deaf, gay, or Latinx identities. Ultimately, it is at the intersection of their different identifications that Deafies in Drag make their art available to audiences that exist beyond any one of these identifications. It is herein that lies the hope that through their modes of communication, role models such as Deafies in Drag can continue to spark reflection on the ways in which deaf LGBTQ+ persons navigate both the deaf and hearing worlds differently.

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