

DRAG LIP-SYNC PERFORMANCE AS OTOBIOGRAPHY: FINDING A VOICE THROUGH THE VOICE OF AN OTHER

Jacob Mallinson Bird

Introduction:

Drag performance toes a delicate line between losing and finding one's self in performance. Drag queens employ various kinds of masks – certainly sonic and visual, but, as with Los Angeles' Delta Work who dabs her wrist with perfume before accepting a tip, potentially olfactory as well. It is striking that in spite of, or through, these masks, drag performers often discuss how they learn more about themselves by becoming someone else. [1] There is, of course, an irony to this, as drag is, for all intents and purposes, a masterclass in artifice, with the getting ready/masking process alone being one that is seemingly Sisyphean, if not also nymphic. Yet artifice doesn't necessarily denote fakery, or at least not an understanding of "fake" that can be easily aligned with negativity or deception. London-based drag performer Crystal Rasmussen, for example, writes in their memoir – written at the ripe age of 28 – that they always found it odd that people consider makeup to be in some way deceptive, tricking the onlooker, duping them, even belying the performer's insecure ugliness underneath (Rasmussen 2019); I, like Crystal, see makeup and the masks of drag less as trickery, but more as a concerted choice, imagining what new form to take, deciding what external trappings best reflect what's inside. And while reflection might seem to suggest an indexical relationship to something that is already there in essence, reflection always shows the subject as what they're not – inverted, an Other (Lacan 2002). So, what does a drag queen see when she looks into the mirror? She sees an other greater than herself – a self she created, one that sits in relation to a radical alterity, extolling Michel Foucault's maxim that "if the self is not given to us I see only one practical consequence: we must create ourselves as a work of art" (Foucault 1991: 351). Drag always concerns an exploration of the self through the other; or in other words, drag is always an otobiographical exercise.



There is, however, another otobiographical connection with drag, one on which the otological bent of Derrida's theory more closely leans: lip-syncing. Lip-syncing is a ubiquitous phenomenon, even mundane in our 21st-century world, as Merrie Snell's brilliant monograph shows (Snell 2020). Drag and lip-syncing have a special relationship though. Lip-syncing sits at the heart of drag performance, and while not every drag queen may choose to lip-sync, to imagine drag without lip-syncing is virtually unthinkable.[2] Far from its humble beginnings as a savvy economic trick to avoid the exorbitant costs of live musicians, where apparently less talented queens would mouth the words to other people's songs, lip-syncing has become quintessential to drag performance (Senelick 2000: 384). No matter where in the world you attend a drag show, you can be confident you'll find a lip-sync performance. In lip-syncing, the drag queen moves her body and lips to the voice of another, embodying that voice, and in turn she is envoiced, enlivened by the voice of another – in otobiographical terms, she listens out to the voice with the ear of an other.

In this short article, I will explore the ways in which lip-syncing can be considered an otobiographical exercise. First, I will look to Derrida's work on the voice, particularly *Voice and Phenomenon* (2011), to discuss how the voice is always an otobiographical endeavour. Second, I will tether this idea directly to lip-syncing, highlighting the important role silence has to play in lip-sync performances. Third, I will turn to my own experiences lip-syncing, pointing the mirror towards myself as it were, and analyse one of my own lip-sync performances in drag. Ultimately, I will question, as trite and cliché as it is to say, how it is that I am able to become more myself by becoming someone else.

The Voice as Oto biography – Theoria

In its everyday understanding, the voice is typically thought to be an inalienable part of one's self. This understanding has also filtered into academic thought, and for philosophers like Adriana Cavarero the voice is absolutely akin to individual uniqueness, with Cavarero's primary concern being the "uniqueness of each human being, as it gets manifested in the uniqueness of the voice" (2005: 2). While this may seem true, and is seemingly obvious through day-to-day examples, there are easy parries to Cavarero's understanding. While to consider the voice aside from identity altogether may be too far, the work of academics like Nina Eidsheim show the important social construction of all voices. For Eidsheim, the apparent ontological uniqueness of the voice is in fact not an essential quality of each voice, but rather a reflection of the listening ear, the ear of the other, that attends to such voices (Eidsheim 2016).[3]

The ear of the other is always at play with the voice. In every act of speech, the speaker is also the listener, and where the voice flows from the speaker as subject it returns to their ears as object. Of this phenomenon, Derrida writes:

In soliloquy as in dialogue, to speak is to hear oneself. As soon as I am heard, as soon as I hear myself, the I who hears *itself* who hears *me*, becomes the I who speaks and takes speech from the I who thinks that he speaks and is heard in his own name; and becomes the I who takes speech *without ever cutting off* the I who thinks that he speaks. Insinuating itself into the name of the person who speaks, this difference is nothing, is furtiveness itself: it is the structure of instantaneous and original elusion without which no speech could ever catch its breath. (2001: 223)

In every act of speech, the "I who speaks" becomes the "I who hears", meaning that every utterance is wrapped up in its apprehension by the ear of the other. In other words, the voice is always otobiographical. In Derrida's writings on otobiography, with Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* as his subject

matter, he states that the otobiographical exercise emerges for Nietzsche “because he tells *himself* this life and he is the narration’s first, if not its only, addressee and destination” (Derrida 1985: 13). The speaker is always at the same time their first, and potentially only, listener.

There is an important externality to the above scenario, however: the voice leaves as sonic materiality, and by virtue of sounding it returns to the ears of the speaker and is heard. I find that Derrida makes a more powerful move elsewhere, where he argues for the essential nature of this relationship even in silent, internal monologue. In *Voice and Phenomenon*, Derrida takes to task Edmund Husserl’s concept of the apparent “transcendence” of the voice, an idea “based on the fact that the signified, which is always essentially ideal, the ‘expressed’ *Bedeutung*, is immediately present to the act of expression” (Derrida 2011: 66). The issue for Derrida with Husserl’s formulation is that it panders to an ingrained phono- and logocentrism. Husserl believes that “phonic signs [...] are ‘heard’ by the subject who utters them in the absolute proximity of their present. The subject does not have to pass outside of himself in order to be immediately affected by its activity of expression” (ibid: 65). In this way, Husserl outlines a transcendent voice, one in which meaning is produced at the exact moment of its sounding (internal – silent – sounding, that is); when the subject thinks, they think at the exact same moment they hear, creating a feedback loop of pure auto-affection that doesn’t need to pass into exteriority, but one that happens in a complete temporal present, a transcendent synchrony.

This is a big problem for Derrida, indeed a central problem on which Western philosophy is founded – the metaphysics of presence. Derrida riddles out this problem of presence by inaugurating his central idea of *différance* to unpick Husserl’s transcendence. Derrida explains this idea through the same example of speaking to one’s self in internal monologue, and writes:

The process by means of which the living now, producing itself by spontaneous generation, must, in order to be a now, be retained in another now, must affect itself, without empirical recourse, with a new originary actuality in which it will become a non-now as a past now, etc.; and such a process is indeed a pure auto-affection in which the same is the same only by affecting itself with an other, by becoming the other of the same. (ibid: 72)

Within Derrida’s admittedly occlusive prose, a staggering idea emerges: speech, even in the most personal space of internal monologue, requires “the same” to become “the other of the same”, and it is in this deferral of identity that a self is made. The differing and deferral is what constitutes the self: the self is a self on the very condition that it is not self-identical.

The voice, therefore, always has a relationship with the other. From the common idea that the voice is an essential and absolutely present part of one’s self, Derrida comes to the idea that the voice, in its interminable iteration of the back and forth between speaker and listener, is the very premise of a self, but one that is always already tied up with the other, a Penrose triangle wherein the one side of the voice wraps round to the other of the same. Some answers to my opening questions are beginning to emerge. It is no longer surprising that drag queens create a sense of self through being someone else: to an extent, we all do. And this process is irrevocably vocal.

Lip-Syncing and the Voice – Theoria II

Lip-syncing may seem antithetical to the voice. It defames many of the common-sense notions of the voice that I mentioned before – being an inalienable part of one’s self, expressing totally the identity of the speaker, and being temporally and spatially present to the subject who speaks. However, if we adopt a Derridean understanding, lip-syncing and voice make pleasing bedfellows.

Where lip-syncing overtly bisects body and voice, the voice, as we've seen thanks to Derrida, always involves a necessary bisection of speaker and listener. Encouragingly, this split is not a negative, but rather holds the potential to produce a self through processes of *différance*.

What I find critical in lip-syncing is the silence of lip-syncing. Where the drag queen stalks or sashays across the stage, the audience hears the voice of the singer on the track, but the drag queen's own body, as far as the audience is aware, remains silent; imperceptible inhalations of breath, yes, but no voice leaves her mouth.[4] Once again, this appears to defame another common-sense notion of the voice, that it is sound. Here again, according to Derrida, maybe not.

In Derrida's formulation in *Voice and Phenomenon*, the voice does not need to enter into exteriority, into sound; rather, the silent internal monologue also goes through the same processes of non-identity and non-simultaneity. This has powerful ramifications for lip-syncing. Lip-syncing similarly rests on axes of difference and deferral: the sound of the voice of the track comes from a body different to the drag queen's own, and from a prior time and place. And yet, just as in typical acts of voicing, the drag queen produces the sensation of speech – moving her mouth and body in time with the voice – and hears the voice of an other entering her ears, all with an undercurrent of silence. To borrow from other contemporary phenomenology, Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes in *The Visible and the Invisible* that speech operates via what he terms an intermodal incomplete reversibility, in which the *feeling of producing* voice in one's mouth and the *sensation of hearing* that voice in one's ears results in the *feeling of giving voice* (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 144). Here the drag queen satisfies both sides of Merleau-Ponty's reversibility also. Mapping Merleau-Ponty onto Derrida, the silent internal monologue is transposed to the performative act of lip-syncing. Through Merleau-Ponty's understanding, the drag queen is able to create a voice through hearing the track and feeling the vocal production in her mouth and body; and through Derrida, she is able to remain silent, and construct a sense of self through processes of *différance*.

This last point is crucial. Drag lip-sync performance can be considered as constituting a voice, experienced phenomenologically by the performing queen. What's more, this voice, as all voices do, holds the possibility of self-creation for the drag queen who performs it. Lofty claims! I hope now to show the proof of this theorisation by turning to my own experiences in drag. Shifting the otobiographical lens to my own performances is, if nothing else, a cringeworthy novelty for me, but I can genuinely attest that I feel as though lip-syncing and the performances I have crafted as Dinah have had powerful, if not campy, repercussions for my sense of self.

Jacob Mallinson Bird and Dinah Lux – Praxis

There's a seeming irony to drag, that in adopting alternative glamorous guises one feels more one's self. For me, this is undoubtedly connected to drag's protective qualities. There's an armour to drag, a multi-layered protection. The protection is strongest, I think, because drag is a self-made armour: the queen decides her form, her name, her aesthetic, rather than adopting a persona ready-made. We make ourselves, and therefore even when the glamour comes off, she's there. For the glamour of the queen works in two ways: impossibly glamorous, bewitching the audience with her beauty but also glamorous in the more arcane sense, of spell casting, still bewitching the audience into believing her illusion, but more importantly bewitching the performer into believing the reality of her own creation.

In drag, I perform under the pseudonym Dinah Lux. Dinah, in name alone, is already the other of myself. The name was inspired by my friend, Adam, who performed as Eve; and therefore Dinah, daughter of Jacob, seemed an appropriate (if not Biblically accurate) choice. And so, from the beginning, Dinah has always been both myself and not myself: myself in body, but not in appearance;

and myself in name, though not *my* name. Derrida might have said that this name alone offers protection, arguing that Nietzsche “advances behind a plurality of masks or names that, like any mask and even any theory of the simulacrum, can propose and produce themselves only by returning a constant yield of protection” (Derrida 1985: 7). The name Dinah does provide protection – it takes the place of Jacob, and yet has an intimate connection with me. I can act as her in place of me. In fact, I have some friends who may not even know that my name is Jacob, because I’ve only ever been Dinah to them, in and out of drag. The naming process is protective, it is literally a pronoun, a placeholder for me, and one that marks out a certain relationship to myself for others and for myself.

Makeup, of course, is the most obvious mask in a drag queen’s arsenal, and it does provide a degree of protection. It is no coincidence that drag parlance often describes makeup as “fierce”. But there is also a softer side to the drag queen’s complexion. Michel Serres writes a sensual cartography of the body through makeup – “she emphasizes the eye and the gaze, accentuate with colour the place to be kissed, crowning the zone of words and taste; underlines hearing with an earring, traces the bridges or links of colour between the wells or the mountains of the senses, draws the map of her own receptivity” (2016: 34) – and certainly there is a sense in which my receptivity to sensual experience changes in drag. I become more aware of parts of my face and body I would normally pass over. And when I see myself in the mirror, I see a self necessarily myself but somehow greater than myself, the constituent parts sutured into a larger-than-life Lacanian Imaginary, a literal mirror image. In other words, I see myself through the eyes of the other.[5]

But what about, as I’ve been arguing, the experience of *hearing* myself through the ears of the other? Here is where I think lip-syncing and this dialectic of self-creation and self-alienation is most important. Lip-syncing, in and of itself, offers a special protection. We all know how awful it can be to hear our own voices played back to us. Steven Connor, for example, writes of the “discomposing effect of hearing one’s own voice as others hear it” (Connor 2000: 8). For Connor, the feeling is produced because in hearing our own voices we might notice certain elements we would rather keep hidden: our voices give us away. Lip-syncing in a sense safeguards our own voices, allows us to say what we mean, but not offer up our own voices for scrutiny in the process. While lip-syncing, though I may not be able to change the words I am saying in that very moment, I have chosen the words ahead of time, whether in deciding which track to lip-sync to, or by making my own track, stitching together a series of songs, audio files, and soundbites to construct a narrative of my own. I can say what I want through the voices of others. This was put well by a friend who also featured in my doctoral ethnographic research, ShayShay, who said that they were “becoming more comfortable with, not the *sound* of my voice, I don’t want to hear my voice, but I’m feeling much more comfortable about other people having to listen to the *stuff* of my voice”. With the sound of their own voice sequestered away, they can still express the stuff of their voice. In this sense, lip-syncing offers up a protective wall between the performer and the audience, one that keeps the queen’s own voice safely tucked away.

Lip-syncing goes further, though, and this protection is multiplied through a roundabout turn from vocal otobiography to biography. In lip-syncing, it matters whose voices drag queens perform to. When I perform to queer idols like Cher or Madonna or Lady Gaga there is a layering of their identities with mine, traces of them within their voices, and the constitutive assemblage of my lip-synced voice across my body and theirs is crucial to the emboldening self-creation of drag. Lip-syncing is a way to be the superstars we adore, in a manner that other performance styles don’t quite reach. And these stars hold vital positions in queer culture. Take for example Richard Dyer’s beautiful analysis of the gay fascination with Judy Garland. Judy’s own biography, tormented by film studios and addiction yet promising blue skies beyond the rainbow, chimed with the experiences of queer people, who held Judy up as a beacon of hope and perseverance (Dyer 2004: 138). Add to

this list Madonna, lambasted by the press for being too sexual, or Lady Gaga, criticised for being too weird, or Britney, vilified for struggling with her mental health, and the list of popstars becomes a list of inspirational figures within a patriarchal world. A friend said it best to me when he aphorised: “queer people are drawn to lip-syncing camp pop queens because they envy their glamour and sexuality, and they envy that they are validated by fame, themselves never validated by the heteropatriarchy around them”. Whether validation from the heteropatriarchy is a worthwhile aspiration, I’m not too sure, but certainly the people behind these voices, those bodies that matter, are critical to the experience of lip-syncing. Biography and otobiography forge another axis of the Penrose triangle.

When I’m lip-syncing as Dinah, I’m lip-syncing the words of someone else, in the guise of someone else, but somehow also performing as myself. The fallacy of drag is that it was ever an attempt to be someone else to begin with. Drag, at the best of times, is a way of exploring who you are, of, as Foucault says, creating yourself as a work of art (1991: 351). And if for Derrida the silent internal monologue of speech is one way through which the very idea of consciousness is generated, then it seems to me no surprise that drag queens choose to explore these parts of themselves through lip-syncing.

Dinah, or... Donatella?

There is a long-standing joke among my friends that Dinah doesn’t change – she has one wig (worn, if I don’t say so myself, in a variety of ways); she has one outfit; and she has one routine, Lady Gaga’s “Donatella”, an ode to the queen of fashion herself, Donatella Versace. So frequent are the jokes in fact that I haven’t actually performed “Donatella” in a few years. But since its release in 2013 when I was finishing my undergraduate degree, I performed “Donatella” week in week out. From university balls to sweaty East London dive bars, “Donatella” has served me well.

In many ways, it epitomises all of the most grotesque parts of the fashion world, and invites a bitchy gay persona; a persona, though, that I grew up with and indeed revelled in with the likes of Jack and Karen (my queer parents growing up, save for Felicia Jollygoodfellow, Bernadette Bassenger, and Mitzi Del Bra) from the iconic *Will & Grace*.^[6] With lyrics lauding Donatella’s platinum hair, unfathomable personal wealth, and her incredibly petite silhouette, the song plays into many horrendous early-2000s tropes, but ones that punctuated my life as a little gay boy in Essex: Paris and Nicole in *The Simple Life*, Snejana Onopka opening Dolce & Gabbana Spring/Summer 2007 to Justin Timberlake’s “SexyBack”; the aspirational horror of *Gossip Girl*. And it is all done, in Lady Gaga’s fantastic *Artpop* way, with a knowing irony, dare I say even an incisive commentary, toward its subject matter.

Lady Gaga and Donatella Versace epitomise what it means to be a queer icon in several ways. Lady Gaga is a paradigm of Jack Halberstam’s notion of the queer art of failure (Halberstam 2011). Her vanguard of Little Monsters, to whom she acts as Mother Monster, worship her because she shows that you can be weird, a failure in this world, an outsider, and still succeed, even when the odds are stacked against you. Two Gaga anecdotes come to mind: the first, when her abusive boyfriend said she’d amount to nothing and she responded that one day he wouldn’t be able to buy a cup of coffee without hearing the name Lady Gaga; the second, the vicious Facebook group set up by her college peers simply entitled “Stefani Germanotta, you will never be famous”. Both ring with the most delicious joys of hindsight. Gaga is the failure *par excellence*, who turned failure and fame into an art.

And Donatella Versace similarly epitomises much of the queer experience. Again, Jack Halberstam writes of losing ourselves in the spaces of nightclubs, in alternative times, and Donatella certainly could represent this (Halberstam 2005). A cursory watch of the camp classic *House of Versace* will tell the tale of a life lived for the party and having to claw back that life when

the partying became too much: “I was crazy even before the drugs”, Donatella quips. And of course, the unimaginably painful experience of having her brother murdered by his gay lover on the steps of their Miami home, a crime of passion that threw Donatella’s life into disarray, not to mention herself into the spotlight at the helm of the eponymous Versace brand. If that wasn’t enough, the ensuing years of media criticism for her reinventions through cosmetic surgery mark Donatella as other, as different, certainly as queer. Gaga and Donatella are queer figures, and when they come together, it’s something quite special.

Of course, there are issues with their relationship to queerness, through its overt materialism, its whiteness, its glamorising of a specific bodily standard, though Gaga’s “Donatella” arguably seeks, as I say, to parry this through ironic distance.^[7] But it is undeniable that these figures and this song have a certain queer identity.

What happens when I, when Dinah, lip-sync this song? Mincing onto the stage in a faux Hervé Léger bandage dress with a fake Birkin slung in the crook of my arm is no grand political act, to be sure. But for those moments on the stage, whether being onstage at a Cambridge Ball or a sweaty nightclub, that stage becomes my Wembley Arena, my Milan Fashion Week. Lip-syncing to Gaga’s voice as she deifies Donatella, it’s as though I’m Dinah, and Gaga, and Donatella, and Jacob all wrapped up in one. Transported back to the streets of my Essex hometown, strutting down the high street, but suddenly transposed to this heraldic setting of queen and audience. I hear the voice of someone else but speak it as my own. I feel the words forming in my mouth, and I inflect their meaning with my bodily performance. I listen out with the ear of an other to a voice that I resolutely claim in that moment, going through the processes outlined by both Derrida and Merleau-Ponty above. And it’s not only the words that are important – whether having a brief reverie imagining my greatest problem was a dodgy spray tan or devoting my entire life to the untenably chic pastimes of smoking and drinking champagne – but the fact that it is sung by Gaga and devoted to Donatella. My otobiographical voicing is utterly indebted to the biographical nature of these women.

It is, I realise, ridiculous to have a near ecstatic connection with a song that, however knowingly, glamorises and indeed, valorises facets of a life that some would deem frivolous. But for the 4 minutes and 24 seconds of that song, I really do, and when I come offstage, I feel fabulous, lacquered in Dinah-Donatella-Gaga confidence. And surely that was Gaga’s point all along. *Artpop*, a musical answer to Warhol, relishes in the ridiculousness of fame, the grotesquerie of capitalism, the narcissism of performance: the song, whilst respectful of its subject, is aware of its own absurdity. And my performance, perhaps, captures some of the song’s ridiculousness. During the number, I remove more and more of my clothing until I am left on the stage completely naked, covered only with stuck-on images of Donatella Versace’s face, cladding my body like Renaissance fig leaves – the artifice is laid bare, as it were. I do have one final trick though: as I am stood naked onstage, I somehow procure a pink magician’s handkerchief from Donatella’s winking face covering my crotch. This, I think, is the perfect ending to the song. “Donatella” is all smoke and mirrors. It’s camp, ridiculous, funny, and it’s the Emperor’s new clothes of fame. The song isn’t so much about Donatella Versace – it’s telling everyone to be their own Donatella, a call to action that Dinah takes extremely seriously.

Dinah and I

Drag is always otobiographical. Through becoming the other of the same, a drag queen can learn more about herself, and lip-syncing redoubles this phenomenon. People often consider drag as superficial, or frivolous, or downright immoral, but to see drag in such ways is to miss the point; yes, it’s artificial, of course, but that’s the point. In a world not designed for us, what other option is there but to create something of our own, if not also ourselves? Surely this is why artifice has such an intimate relationship with queerness and camp. Camp, Susan Sontag writes, is to see the world

in quotation marks (2018: 18) – and, as Derrida wrote, “once quotation marks demand to appear, they don’t know where to stop” (2011: 104). Drag and lip-syncing set the voice in quotation marks. Through ironic distance from both herself and the words, the drag queen rehearses the same processes of *différance* as are apparent in Derridean understandings of speech — non-identity and delay.

Writing this has been in and of itself an otobiographical exercise. I have never framed my own drag in my writing, and admittedly this is hardly an exhaustive auto/otoethnography, but to speak of myself as Dinah already feels bizarre (the much more non-descript The Drag Queen is far easier to handle). Maybe the difficulty is that writing her is writing me: as Jorge Luis Borges states, “I do not know which of us has written this page” (1970: 283).

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Endnotes

1. For ethnographic content, see Jacob Mallinson Bird’s, “The Cyborg Queen: Lip-Syncing and Posthumanism in ShayShay’s ‘Mutual Core’” (2020) and “Haptic Aurality: On Touching the Voice in Drag Lip-Sync Performance” (2019).
2. On the most recent season of *RuPaul’s Drag Race: All Stars*, on which winners from the preceding seasons battle it out again to be the winner of all winners, the top queen will be picked by a “Lip Sync Smackdown”, evincing quite how central lip-syncing is to the art of drag.
3. See also Brian Kane’s incisive critique of Cavarero, in which he argues convincingly that Cavarero only goes so far as to replace logo- and phonocentrism with topocentrism (Kane 2016).
4. For more on the undercurrent of silence in drag, see Bird, “Haptic Aurality” (2019).
5. There is also an important connection with the misrecognition in Lacan’s mirror stage, and indeed in Guy Rosolato’s acoustic mirror (1978).
6. With, of course, reference to the main characters of Stephan Elliott’s 1994 film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*.
7. Richard Dyer makes an interesting Marxist defence of materialism in “In Defence of Disco” (1979)

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