

“The history I wrote was not mine to hold onto, but rather belongs to the drag performers of the past, present, and future.”

– Dr. Lady J



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The Erasure of Drag Contributions in Performance History

How one researcher's decision to include her dissertation in PQDT allowed her to document, elevate, empower her voice

Dr. Lady J is a non-binary trans woman who holds a doctorate in Musicology from Case Western Reserve University and is the world's first drag queen with a Ph.D. dissertation on drag history. She is a working drag queen whose research and educational outreach focus on obliterating the erasures of queer performance from history and bringing forward the contributions drag performers have made to politics, music, film, fashion, and popular culture. Dr. Lady J's dissertation "From the Love Ball to RuPaul: The Mainstreaming of Drag in the 1990s" traces the emergence of drag into the mainstream US and UK culture of the 1990s. Dr. Lady J argues that three separate subcultures dramatically altered the aesthetics and aims of drag: Downtown New York new wave, Harlem House Ballroom, and London New Romantic. The insights, observations, and conclusions resulting from her research impact the drag community's acceptance and recognition in performance history. Dr. Lady J is currently the Director of Programming, Education & Outreach for Studio West 117 in Cleveland, Ohio. In an interview, Dr. Lady J discussed the process that led to the research and writing of her thesis, as well as why it's important to make her research more widely available to other researchers through ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Dr. Lady J (she/her/they/them)

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Case Western Reserve University

Drag performance history in Musicology Ph.D. program

Title: *From the Love Ball to RuPaul: The Mainstreaming of Drag in the 1990s.* Davenport, Jeremiah. Case Western University, 2017.



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A Dearth of Scholarly Information Inspired the “Swiss Army Knife” Approach to Research

While working on her dissertation, Dr. Lady J had to think creatively about resources. There was little information available in books or journals related to her research area. “Though drag had been discussed heavily in the academic world, the focus largely remained fixed on theorizing the experience of cross-dressing off-stage rather than what performers were doing on-stage. Very little space was given to what drag artists were trying to communicate with the art they were creating,” she said.

Dr. Lady J added that “In the drag world, performers are simultaneously actors, producers, directors, storytellers, costume designers, wig makers, choreographers, performance artists, musicians, and puppeteers.” Dr. Lady J formed what they called a “Swiss Army Knife” approach, using sources from musicology, gender theory, LGBTQIA+ history, media studies, television studies, film studies, US history, and pop culture history. This included using academic resources like ProQuest’s Dissertations & Theses as well as numerous non-academic sources such as blogs, websites, biographies and personal histories, podcast interviews, social media posts, journalism, and popular press books.

“Sharing history this way has brought my dissertation to over 4000 downloads in under 4 years, allowing exponential numbers of people to benefit from this research.”

As she scoured the internet, conducting Google searches for many of her resources, Dr. Lady J discovered a wealth of content related to drag performance in the theater world from ProQuest. “ProQuest was particularly helpful when looking for recent dissertations on drag that could help me expand my list of sources. Occasionally, this would open up entirely new avenues to performers I had not yet considered or known existed,” Dr. Lady J said.

With the help of ProQuest’s Dissertations & Theses Global (PQDT), Dr. Lady J explored how each of these artistic nightlife cultures incorporated drag and queer performance as well as the ways that each garnered increasing attention for drag from new audiences and media outlets. Susanne Bartsch’s role as a purveyor of drag to the worlds of fashion and art was also explored. She also examined successful drag films of the 1990s that capitalized on, or contributed to, this phenomenon and how drag and sexuality are treated in each, reflecting the approaches major studios, directors, and actors took in seeking a heterosexual audience for drag.

Making a Little-Known History Available to Researchers of Every Level

Dr. Lady J noted that Case Western began submitting dissertations to ProQuest in 2020 after pausing for several years. She added that it was a good idea for Case Western to start submitting dissertations to ProQuest again because it allows for wider sharing of ideas. Dr. Lady J knew it would be important to include her work on ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global because she wanted this history to be easily accessible to all researchers, regardless of education level. Dr. Lady J added that the history she wrote about doesn’t belong to her but is part of a legacy including drag performers from the past, present and future. Dr. Lady J wanted anyone who comes to one of her open-to-the-public drag history classes to be able to leave the class, download the dissertation, and have access to her dissertation research. It’s the same reason her podcast is free. She added that “sharing history this way has brought my dissertation to over 4000 downloads in under 4 years, allowing exponential numbers of people to benefit from this research,” which was housed on her institutional repository.

By complimenting the open access through her institutional repository with PQDT, she is making her research available to an additional 4 million researchers from around the world. It’s opened many doors for Dr. Lady J. She noted that ProQuest has provided an additional outlet for her to put her work front and center, giving every audience and person she meets the gift of a book on drag history that they can download right then. Dr. Lady J was able to trace the history and evolution of drag history with the content found in PQDT. Because of her research, readers are able to explore drag history in a way they might have not been able to before by accessing Dr. Lady J’s distinct and captivating content. “Having my work accessible on PQDT has also yielded unique collaborative work opportunities. I now get to amplify marginalized voices and drag history by working on inclusive performance opportunities, a podcast studio, and working toward a college curriculum at Studio West 117, the forthcoming LGBTQ+ hub where I now serve as Director of Programming, Education & Outreach. If I had hidden my work, I think many people would not have taken me as seriously outside the academic job market,” she added.

Dr. Lady J added that what you specifically bring to the table is important and to make sure to find a unique approach that showcases your strengths, knowledge, and skillset. Dr. Lady J noted that as researchers we need to “try to be as current as possible with up-and-coming scholars in your area, and other fields, that are touching on the subjects you are talking about.” ProQuest Dissertations & Theses allows every voice to be heard and allows for a broader range of perspectives and insight.

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