



FROM FABERGÉ
TO THE FAB 5:

*Symbols of Contemporary
Western Queer Culture*



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ABSTRACT

"From Faberge to the Fab 5: Symbols of Contemporary Western Queer Culture" is a digital research zine exploring the established culture surrounding by LGBTQ+ identities in the 21st century.

Taking a glance into cultural phenomena from inside music, art, history, Netflix and TikTok, the zine features four short research essays paired with an eclectic collage of queer iconography and symbols.



KEY WORDS


QUEER
POP-CULTURE
HISTORY
MEDIA
ZINE

WE'RE HERE, WE'RE QUEER, WE'RE IN THE MODERN SPHERE


In 1978, nine years after the ignitive Stonewall demonstrations, artist Gilbert Baker was tasked to design an all-encompassing symbol of LGBT+ unity. Inspired by the sky-high arch of a rainbow, the pride flag was born. The flag originally had eight colours, each with its own significance. Pink for sex, red for life, orange for healing, yellow for sunlight, green for nature, turquoise for magic, blue for harmony, and purple for spirit (14). Perhaps the most widely recognized signifier of queer culture, the rainbow flag proves that the LGBT+ community has a long history of using symbols to represent meaning and resilience.

An Introduction



Long after the invention of the pride flag, queer culture continues to be marked by diverse and nuanced signifiers. They come from within pop culture, fashion, art, history and more. This digital zine is intended to demonstrate how queer culture is visually represented in the 21st-century western world, and why this culture matters to queer-identifying folks today.



For the purposes of my research, I use the term 'queer culture' to mean the broad set of historic and cultural identifiers that have come to represent and interconnect the LGBT+ community. It is worth noting that queer culture spans nations, age groups, time periods, and influences. A great deal of the momentous growth of queer subculture must be accredited to the contributions of black trans women and transfeminine people of colour. This zine will only point towards a fraction of what queer culture is.



So why a zine? According to the LGBT+ Cultural Heritage Project, zine-making has rich origins in the LGBT+ community, in the laps of historically feminist, punk, and queer circles (22). A zine is also fitting within the legacy of the pride flag; identifying queer culture and conveying meaning through imagery. Zines are a true marker of free queer expression. As Gilbert Baker said, "...something to express our queer joy, our beauty, our power" (1).




DO YOU LISTEN TO GIRL IN RED?

Queer Symbols in LGBT+ Youth

The use of coded language to express one's identity plays a major role throughout gay history. Some codes, dubbed 'Lavender Languages' have surfaced for the sake of secrecy and safety, incorporating both visual and oral symbols. Take for example the vernacular Polari, used to discreetly express queerness during the criminalization of homosexuality in Britain circa 1960 (11). These days, a similar (though less elaborate) phenomenon has come up in queer youth of today. And where better to foster the development of culture than within Generation Z's social stomping grounds; TikTok.

It begins with queer Norwegian indie-pop artist Marie Ulven, better known by the stage name girl in red. The Spotify-verified artist has over nine million monthly listeners (7) and is recognized both in and out of the queer community for her lo-fi poetic lyrics, often about loving other women. In 2020, the singer's *alia* was adopted by a 19-year-old Michigan musician in a song in which 'does she listen to girl in red?' is used as a kind of lyrical code; a means of asking if another woman is also queer. Since then, "do you listen to girl in red?" has appeared numerous in comment sections across TikTok, even getting its own definition in the Urban Dictionary (4).



Queer publishers *Them*. write that “As the phrase became a full-blown meme, some users “answer[ed]” the question by flashing other coded signifiers for sapphics on the platform, like baking, making outrageous earrings, showing off their eyebrow slits, and wearing Doc Marten boots... While there have been other cultural rallying points for lesbians of generations past, “do you listen to girl in red?” has helped Gen-Z sapphics discuss and express their sexuality in a way that is both discrete and further-reaching than ever before” (10).

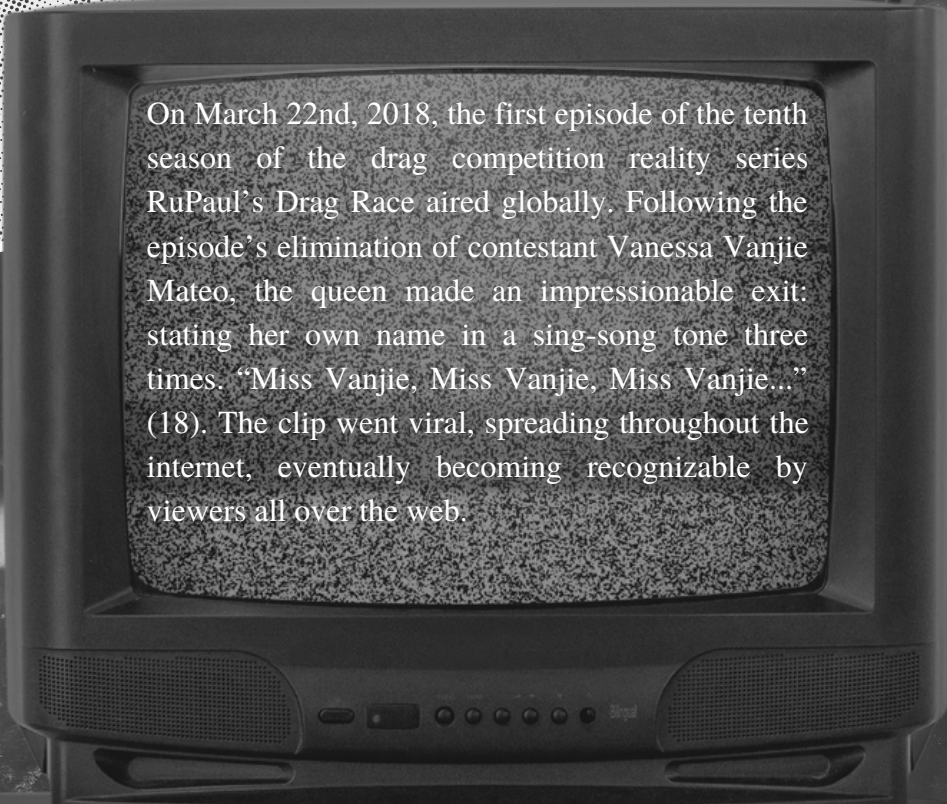
Coded signifiers like these only touch on a portion of the coded signifiers used by LGBT+ youth. TikTok even points to cuffed jeans and clear iPhone cases as symbols of queerness. The Washington Post has even gone as far as to name TikTok “the soul of the LGBTQ internet” (12). The use of style as coded signifiers is not in any way new to the queer community. As is written in the book *Queer Style*, “...fashion has coded same-sex desire, from eighteenth-century macaronis and gentlemen fops to modern leathermen and muscle queens... this condition finds its visual signifiers in queer style...” (6).

These coded symbols are examples of the ways in which historical Lavender Languages have adapted to modern times, finding space as -if only ephemeral- cultural markers of the queer identity. Through the use of technology, a shared visual world is more accessible to queer youth than ever. The cultural connecting of a network of queer youth together through trends and popular symbols is just one way queer folks identify one another, share their stories, and find a chosen family.

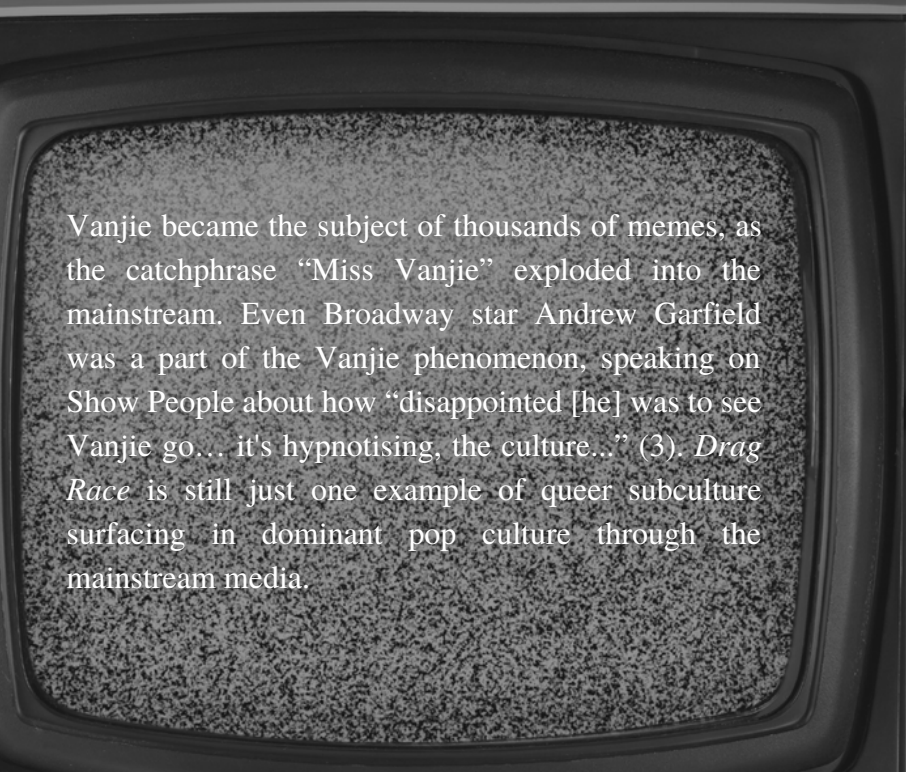
Read more about chosen family in this zine's conclusion.

START YOUR ENGINES

The Acceleration of Queer Pop-Culture into Mainstream Media




On March 22nd, 2018, the first episode of the tenth season of the drag competition reality series RuPaul's Drag Race aired globally. Following the episode's elimination of contestant Vanessa Vanjie Mateo, the queen made an impressionable exit: stating her own name in a sing-song tone three times. "Miss Vanjie, Miss Vanjie, Miss Vanjie..." (18). The clip went viral, spreading throughout the internet, eventually becoming recognizable by viewers all over the web.



Vanjie became the subject of thousands of memes, as the catchphrase "Miss Vanjie" exploded into the mainstream. Even Broadway star Andrew Garfield was a part of the Vanjie phenomenon, speaking on Show People about how "disappointed [he] was to see Vanjie go... it's hypnotising, the culture..." (3). *Drag Race* is still just one example of queer subculture surfacing in dominant pop culture through the mainstream media.



Miss Vanjie.



Mainstream fascination with queer culture is growing. As it does, I begin to worry about representation becoming a commodity. Becoming associated with passing iconographies rather than a long-established, permanently rooted culture. If queer culture exists in a kind of opposition to the mainstream, What happens to queer subculture when it grows in popularity within the dominant straight hegemony? Within dominant pop culture? There is no singular answer, but that is not to mean there is no solution.

As Suzanna Walters writes in "Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film and Television," "The complexity and diversity of the gay and lesbian community needs to be represented, not promoted as simply heterosexuality with a twist. Whether or not this representation has actually been accomplished remains an open question" (13). Perhaps one way to steer away from commodification is an acknowledgement of queer peoples' historic and ongoing cultural presence.

CHOSEN FAMILY

Speaking of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, this zine would be incomplete without the inclusion of one of the show's most key sentiments stated by the titular host: "We as gay people, we get to choose our family" (17). Kath Weston's 1991 ethnography provided insight into the ways in which diverse urban queer people organized their families of choice. "These relationships legitimize the existence of gay and lesbian people as family members and increase available social support" (21).

The huge selection of iconography offered by queer culture only amplifies further the ongoing presence of trans, gay, and queer peoples in the world today. For the queer people, popular signifiers are not only a means of personal and cultural identification: but a means of survival. As mentioned, in times of persecution, secret symbols were used to express queerness while flying under the radar of oppressors. Violets were exchanged between women of the 20th century to quietly indicate lesbianism. The Hanky Code arose in 1960s New York City leather bars for predominantly gay men to safely identify sexual partners (20). In the 1970s, the Greek letter lambda was selected by the Gay Activist Alliance as a signifier for gayness; the letter symbolized unity in the face of oppression (5).

Why Visible Queer Culture Matters

Queer culture allows for powerful and essential collective identification. Such symbols are still used to recognize other queer youth. To find a community. To escape the fearsome possibility of becoming invisible through embracing the identity of a collective 'other.' As LGBT+ identities become more widely acknowledged, the queer community can find cultural belonging with relative safety. But relative safety does not leave adequate room to thrive. Queer prosperity comes with representation. Representation innately paired with the continued presence of queer cultural signifiers. We can *be* seen when we *feel* seen.

Gilbert Baker's pride flag stands as a symbol of pride, joy, resilience, and proof of queer culture's use of symbols. But just like with any other flag, the pride banner waves as a beacon: staking the ongoing sovereignty of LGBT+ peoples. Recognized, symbolized, and surviving on with immense beauty, We are here, we are queer.



PERSONAL STATEMENT

ANGIE LAWRENCE (THEY/THEM)

Angie is a third-year Film Production student at York University, with a specialization in fiction writing and direction. Outside of academia, Angie is an essayist, a poet, an animator, and a podcaster.

Angie is a scholar of queer culture both past and present. The zine which they have published in *Contingent Horizons* titled "From Fabergé to The Fab 5: Symbols of Contemporary Western Queer Culture" came from a personal understanding of what it means to be queer, and how it is so much more than an individual identity. Fascinated by the ways in which queerness is symbolized, Angie put together their zine as a tip-of-the-iceberg peek into what queer culture looks like in the 21st century. Queer culture is electric, colourful, hypnotizing; the long-awaited amalgamation of hundreds of thousands of stories, both tragic and joyful.

In the coming years, Angie aims to ease the weight of life with films that make people laugh, cry, and feel. They seek to tell unique stories in which their voice is sharp and clear. Angie wants to make art that is striking and beautiful, even in little ways.

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