

A "CHOSEN" MINISTRY

DRAG PERFORMANCE &
QUEER RELIGIOUS TRAUMA



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phenomena

PART I:



INTRODUCTION & PERSONAL STORIES

INTRODUCTION & PERSONAL STORIES



To many queer and trans folk, the imperative of “coming out” often feels like a prerequisite to our own queer identities. Many of us touchstone our own queerness through a three-phase paradigm; realizing our queerness, expressing it to those around us, and embracing the messy-yet-liberating fallout. Much of the imagery surrounding the coming out narrative paints it as linear; as urgent; as cathartic; as final. It usually goes something like this: you’ll probably confide in your friends first, whose acceptance and tolerance are paired with a reassuring dash of apathy; you’ll then muster up the bravery to confess your identity to your parents, who’ll warmly console you with the slightly cringeworthy comfort that they have “always known ever since you were a little child”; flashing forward, you have somehow assembled a community arsenal of like-minded queers — a “chosen family” — that seamlessly coexists with your biological kin. Effectively, your journey is yet another installment in the *Love, Simon* franchise.

This trope emerges as the dominant narrative for how queer people ought to experience their own coming out. Realistically, this narrative only reflects a few. In fact, I would assert that it fails many of us. I had always wished that my queer awakening felt as seamless as this — like an epiphany rather than a gradual trudge. Truthfully, my “coming out” story has instead been a prolonged, aimless, and unspectacular process that is still being written as you read this.

As a child of immigrant parents, I’ve always maintained a commitment toward family fidelity — the adhesive that keeps our communities tight-knit even in the face of language loss, physical separation, and the many, many generational differences that keep us

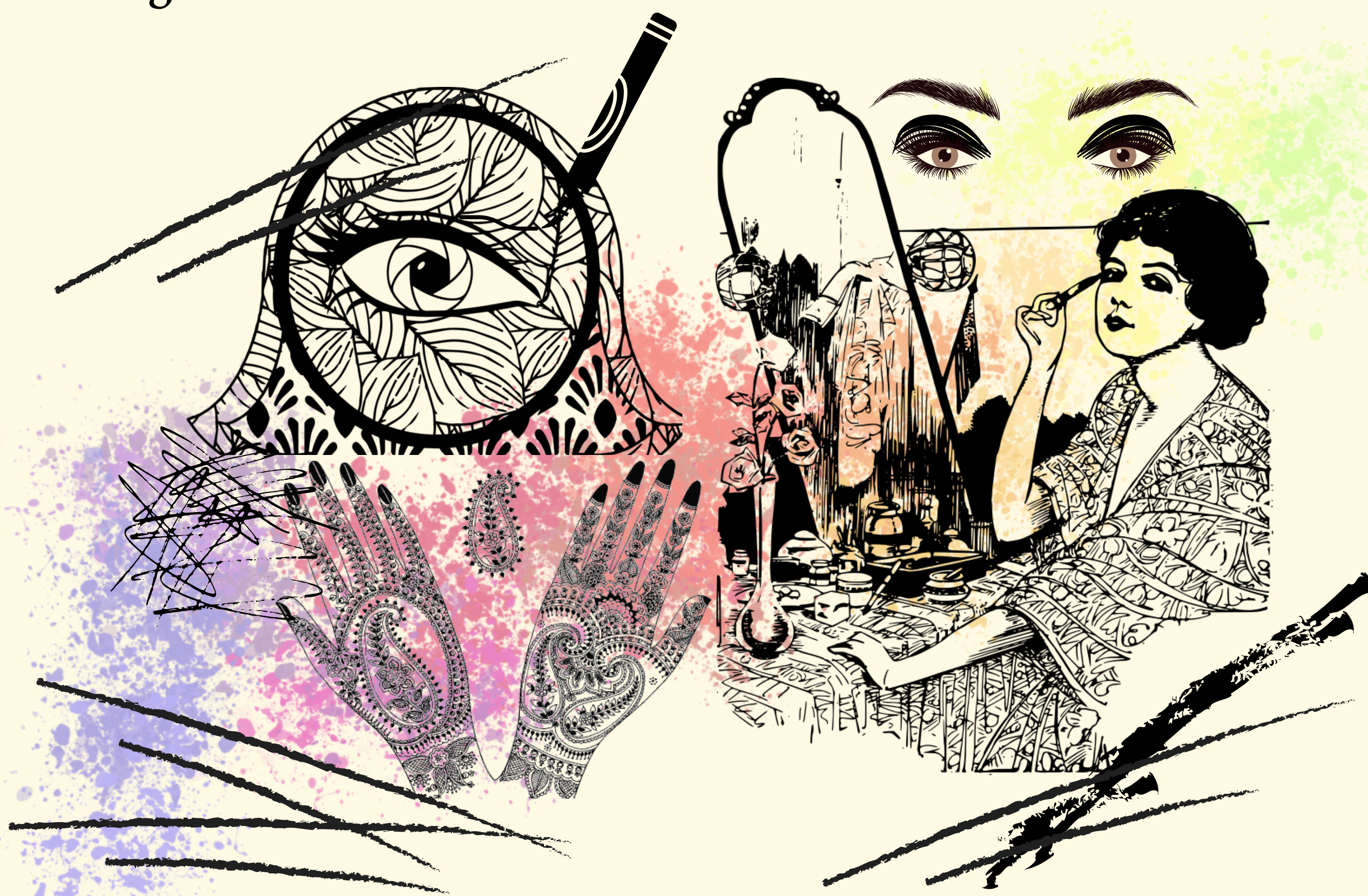
distant. Raised by an Indian mother and an Iranian father, the pillar that bridged both facets of my biracial identity was my Islamic practice. As a young Muslim, my weekend ritual of attending *madrasa* (religious school), reading Islamic *fiqh* (“jurisprudence”), and internalizing Muslim *aklaq* (“manners”) felt like my service to my family — a means of preserving a cultural vision that my parents had hoped that I would embrace for myself. As I began to stride into my pubescent years, it became abundantly clear to me that this ideal — mired by religious traditionalism and heteronormativity — was becoming increasingly unattainable for me. Being force-fed narratives of sexuality and gender as they were defined in proximity to religion had distorted my relationship with my own identity and body for years. Like many “church-hurt” queers, my self-perception was contoured by my own learned intuitions about what is right and what isn’t; the question could never be “why do you feel this way?” but rather “how are you going to reform yourself?” Instead of contemplating if I was gay, I instead reoriented: “how could I make sure that I’m not?”

One can say that my “coming out” journey does not necessarily match the prevailing social paradigm. In fact, I am not even sure if I have even transitioned beyond the second stage — the ceremonious spectacle of *actually* coming out. I have never even pondered the idea of formally coming out to my family. With so much of my family dynamic being ruled by religious auspices, our relationship is premised on me fulfilling their cherished religious ideal. Like many Indian families, the Hindi-Urdu slogan “*log kya kahenge*” (“what will people think?”) informs how my family navigates the communities that we inhabit. Because of my own religious nurturing, I have been conditioned into believing that my queerness would not only taint how others perceive my own family but would also manifest as an impasse to own my commitment to family fidelity. The idea that my queerness would compromise my relationship with my family is a relic of my own religious shame and is a guilt that I am trying to shed as I continue to unlearn these modes of thinking.

Queer people identifying religion as a site of trauma is not a new phenomenon. The specter of religion has long left indelible marks on the lives of queer people, whose identities have been historically shaped by religious discourses on gender and sexuality. My relationship with religion is fraught, multifaceted, and ongoing — it continues to shape how I identify and the spaces that I inhabit. Though my dynamic and volatile relationship with religion is unique to my own experiences, it is emblematic of a broader collective tension that many queer people face every day. For many, organized religion has long been a source of turmoil and baggage; for others, it has provided a sanctuary for various forms of religious trauma they have experienced. This dichotomy has long been identified with binary language: the former camp centers their own “chosen family” as a site of community protection, whereas the latter camp advances a “chosen divinity” narrative towards a more “transcendent” source of comfort. For many, the patriarchal foundations of organized religion help cultivate a sense of safety, security, and structure. This is somewhat ironic: religion might offer a resolution for the void that church-hurt queers seek to fill following their *own* traumatizing histories with religion.

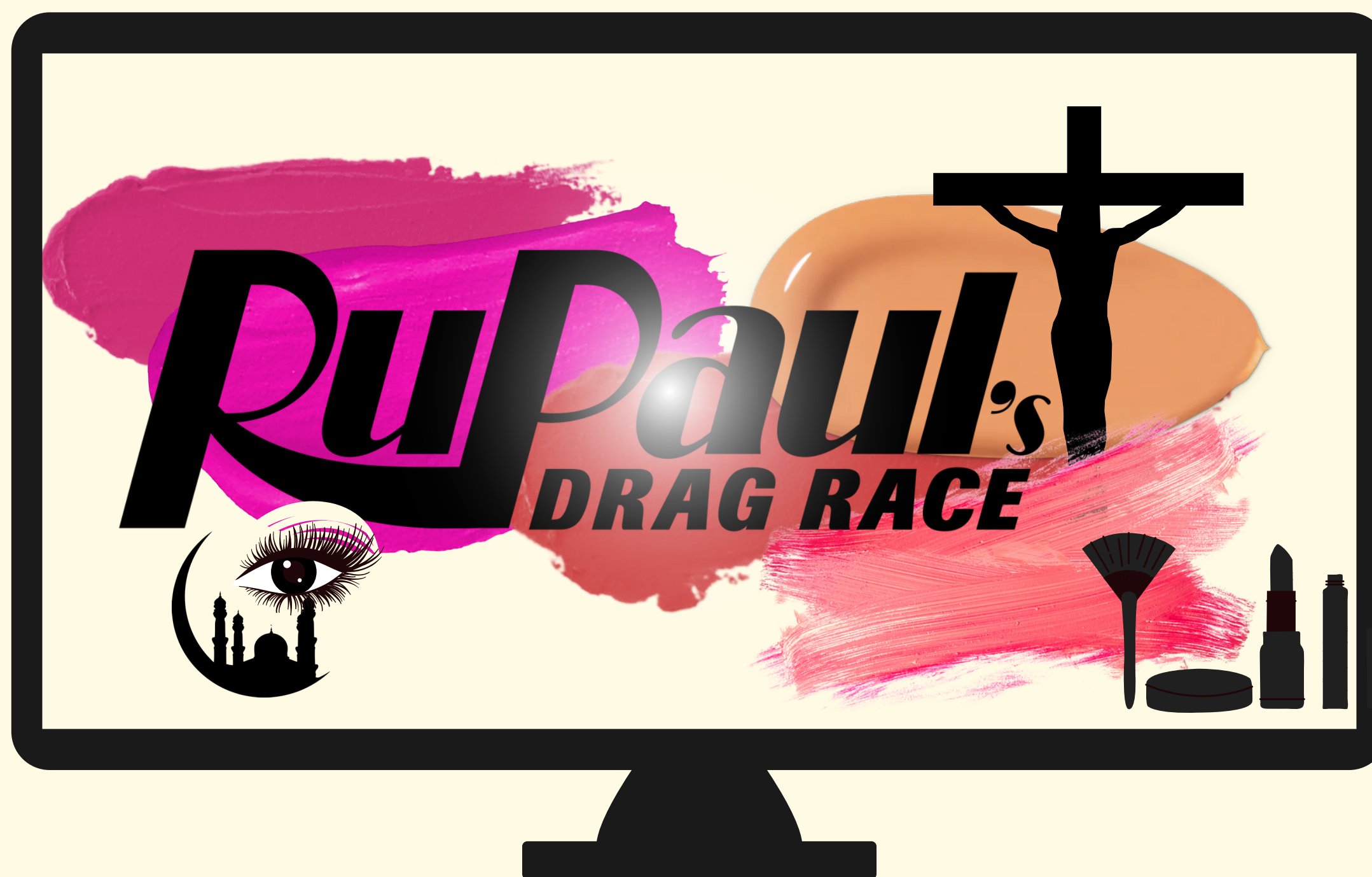
In trying to reconcile my own complicated experiences with religion and queerness, I had desperately tried to tap into spaces that shared this duality. Considering the usual dearth of positive, healthy associations between Islam and queerness, finding sites that navigated this intersection initially felt nearly impossible — at least without rhetoric that wasn’t sharply antagonistic or combative. That is why my immersion into the art of “drag” felt like serendipity — an oracle that fell into my grasp at the right place and the right time. I had been using drag entertainment as a form of guidance on my own queer identity, an educational medium that helped nurture me to a point of (reluctant) self-acceptance. I had never really contemplated its potential for catharsis from trauma until it was right in front of my face. I would find Muslim drag queens, clad in sequined hijabs and tattooed with mehndi, performing hit “item numbers” as part of their Friday night bar sets,

signaling to the audience their pride in both their queerness and their religious heritage. Witnessing the visual of a queer Desi Muslim both embracing and subverting the aesthetics that confounded my own religious experiences felt like finding a missing puzzle piece in the mosaic of my life. I had always tried to decrypt my Brownness and my queerness with different codes; seeing these drag queens use the same language to engage with their own intersections felt both empowering and culturally affirming. Seeing my own experiences animated through people who not only look like me but share similar religious baggage made me realize one essential truth: **I am only a speck in a greater collective narrative — one that spans the sprawling intersection of religion, queerness, and drag.**



For those unfamiliar, “**drag**” is the performative expression of gender — a dramatic, political, and therapeutic display of defiance against longstanding institutions of subjugation and subordination. Considering its rigid hegemonic discourses on gender and sexuality, religion seems to be fundamentally at odds with the principles of drag

performance. Drag has long been a uniting practice for trauma-wounded queer and trans people; a means of pursuit for a community that embraces one for their most ostentatious and performative queer sensibilities. However, as the partitions separating religion and queerness become more obscured, drag has emerged as both a tool for queer people to either heal from their religious trauma or reconcile with their complex religious identity.



At the close of each episode of global queer phenomenon *RuPaul's Drag Race*, host and drag matriarch RuPaul asserts an empowering mantra: “If you can't love yourself, how the hell can you love somebody else? Can I get an amen?” It's a riff on congregational gospel speak, one that's part tongue-in-cheek yet oozing with maternal sincerity. With so much of contemporary religious convention being undergirded by violent practices of queer antagonism, this empowering reclamation of liturgy into a predominantly queer space is radical. Especially amidst a relative void of positive associations of queerness and faith, the use of drag expression as a canvas for this duality has emerged as its own unique queer catharsis. On a personal level: being able to see my own stories animated through the spectacle of drag has helped me vicariously unpack my own knotted experiences, identities, and emotions.

It's a common trope for a certain sect of queer people to self-brand as "sprawling" — volatile and heedless agents of self-sabotage with myriad moving parts. As a monolith, I feel like I'm probably obligated to fiercely reject this narrative. As it relates to me, though? I think it's the perfect reflection of my own queer anatomy — a little tangled, a little bit more faulty, but arranged in a manner that highlights the beauty amidst all the chaos. I see this zine as an extension of myself with its own arms, its own legs, and its own rugged charm. This zine is comprised of three parts that follow this preface:

I. "Religion as a Source of Trauma"
II. "Drag as a Source of Queer Healing" and
III. "Navigating the Grey Area"

— a concluding passage and reflection. My goal is not to offer definitive answers to these questions because there is no one true lived experience. Rather, this zine holds a mirror to the luminous constellations that thread many of our narratives together. With the help of testimonials from queer people past and present, I hope to spotlight narratives that have long been cast to the fringes in both queer and religious discourses alike. In doing so, I hope to also lead you onto the footpaths that have outlined the jagged maze of my own stories for all twenty years of my life.

