It's Soulful and It's Survival: A Conversation with Four Drag Artivists in the South

Brooke Shaffner

I grew up in the mid-90s, cheering on a drag queen friend in my small Texas-Mexico bordertown's only gay bar. Witnessing the transfiguration of drag, I understood what it was to be an artist—to throw open the borders of the known world. Though it was long before I realized I was queer, I felt free and embraced in that space. That experience inspired my novel *Country of Under*, about the transformative friendship between two intelligent, misfit young people carving out their place in the world, in their small Texican town and later in New York City.

Fast-forward to 2022. After 20 years in NYC, I was ready for a change. My partner had an opportunity to transfer to Charlotte, North Carolina, so we traveled there. During his lunch break on his first visit to the Charlotte office, he met Derek Kramer/Onya Nerves, who was soon to leave a career in real estate to found the drag collective DKO Entertainment. That weekend, we went to a drag bingo hosted by Onya Nerves and watched Oso Chanel, a Salvadoran-American drag king, perform to Selena, whose death had devastated my high school. It felt like home and some magic all Oso's own.

We've now lived in Charlotte for over a year, where we've enjoyed many drag shows and watched our favorite drag performers ascend to new leadership platforms.

As the first immigrant crowned Mr. Charlotte Pride, Oso Chanel (he/him) is focused on advocating for immigrant justice and helping LGBTQIA+ immigrants to access health resources.

As National MX, Nova Stella (they/them) is focused on HIV advocacy, prevention, and care. They are an Executive Assistant at Dudley's Place, which serves individuals living with or at risk for HIV in the Charlotte area.

As the first Latine person to win Mx Charlotte Pride, Lolita Chanel (they/them) is focused on bringing drag to underserved smaller cities and being a beacon of Pride, body positivity, and love.

As the founder of DKO Entertainment, Onya Nerves (she/they) strives to create safe spaces for new drag entertainers to grow and thrive, especially POC and trans performers.

These drag artists create drag that breaks the mold, enlarging the space for queerness, for all of us. In the South, that has the power to transform culture—a power sadly evidenced by the death threats and protests they face. Amid the rise of drag bans and anti-queer legislation and attacks, performing drag *is* activism. But these four performers also advocate for immigrants, HIV care, body positivity, POC performers, and performers who live with disabilities. They create small-town Pride celebrations and fight drag bans at city council meetings, urge their audiences to vote, and organize boycotts against racist bars. What follows is a brief excerpt from our four-hour conversation.

Brooke: What excites you most about drag as an art form?

Nova: The transformation of who the person is, before and after getting into drag, and the passion when someone pours their heart out and commands the room.

Onya: The possibilities. When I started producing shows, my thing was drag in unusual places. I like to push the envelope of what people think is acceptable or where we can do shows, where we can be visible as queer people. This year, I've gotten into full Broadway productions. I don't have time to audition for plays, but with drag, I can produce my own play, perform whatever part I want, and make drag an even bigger part of the art, which is what I really like, because people get so pigeonholed in what they think they can or can't do.

Oso: The storytelling and the act of recording queer history. We're posting our pictures on social media and people are tagging us in their stories. I genuinely love listening to other people's stories. There are so many ways to define what being queer is. Through our art form, and individually, we bring so many different things that we're recording. That way, two, three generations down the road, they won't have to deal with what we're dealing with. We'll be a small part of that change.

Nova: We have the opportunity to rewrite the future for the people who come after us.

Lolita: For so long, queer history has been a hush-hush topic, something that was pushed away. By demanding to be taken seriously, we are changing history. What excites me is drag's power to impact people. In 2016, 2017, AFAB (Assigned Female at Birth) people doing drag as hyper-feminine performers was a hot topic. They weren't taken seriously; people thought drag was easy for them. Which is not the case. One of those performers said something that stuck with me: "Drag is the power of commanding the space that you're in." I want to be something that, in my everyday life, I don't know if I have the power to be. But in drag, I can walk on stage in my outfit and catch everyone's eye. In that moment, it's irresistible for people to look at you. That's what I love: commanding that space.

Brooke: I wanted you to end my book launch with "Because the Night" because you make people cry with your soulful ballads.

Lolita: When I do a ballad, I'm doing it from a place of hurt. Something that's hurting me is what I bring on stage. I want everyone in the crowd to feel what I'm feeling. Sometimes someone tries to do a number that's emotionally charged and it doesn't carry because they're not sharing their story; they're sharing their sob story. I've been attacked mercilessly online, like most of us here. I have a number dedicated to Christians who've targeted us and made us out to be evil. I have another number I call my Big Girl Mix. It's a spoken word number that moves into song, where I'm talking about what it's like for a plus-sized person, specifically a plus-sized woman, to go to a doctor and be dismissed, like, "Oh, you're not really sick. You're just fat." It's a way to say I've faced this, and I know someone else has also faced this. So, take this moment to find connection.

One of my favorite things about my more emotional numbers is that, in that moment, I can provide comfort. I don't know who you are or your story, but if I see that what I'm bringing to the stage is impactful, I'm not ashamed to kneel down and hug someone. Sometimes the whole number, all I'm doing is hugging people and letting them have a moment to let it all out.

Brooke: Tell me about the origin of and motivation behind your activism.

Nova: *Silence*. Silence for so long. I was taught by my family, who are extremely conservative, that silence was the only option. If you didn't agree, silence. They didn't want the conflict or the discourse in the family. When I found my footing as a drag entertainer and found out what it meant to be at the forefront of our queer community, the silence of my childhood, and disagreement with how I was raised and the politics where I was raised, drove me to activism and speaking out against the things I disagree with.

Onya: My mother's motto was, "If you're not helping, you're hurting." Growing up, I saw her advocate for domestic violence victims and take care of children who didn't have the necessities to live day to day. There was never a day growing up that we didn't have 13, 14 kids with us at snack time and running around our yard. Everyone knew that if their child wasn't at their house, they were at ours. And it just so happened that a lot of the kids were from low-income families. So my advocacy started with that. I always want to help however I can, sometimes to a fault. Everyone needs a little help sometimes.

Oso: For me, the origin is being an immigrant and a child of immigrants. My parents came to this country for a better future for me and my siblings. But I don't think I've reached that better future. Back then, there was no social media, no real internet. People who crossed borders to come to the US wrote letters back that money grew on trees; it was truly the American dream. I think now, that American dream for immigrants, especially from Latin America, is more of an American sacrifice. I acknowledge that my life would be totally different had I stayed in El Salvador. I wouldn't be here in this room with you. I wouldn't be here. I'd probably be dead because in El Salvador back then, being queer, trans was a death sentence, and it still is in some parts. But what drives my activism is that I'm still searching for that better future. There are times when I am out in public and I can pass for straight, which is a privilege, but if I can live a day where I don't need to pass as a self-defense, I'm getting closer to that better future.

Of course, I'm the first one in both my parents' families to graduate high school. I didn't go to college because we weren't educated about the application process. In New York at that time, I could not go to college. I was too old when DACA started. I think you had to be under eight when the program got introduced by Obama. Our family had to find a different path. I'm a legal resident now—still can't vote—but I use that to educate people. A lot of people are surprised that I can't vote. The first time I spoke about it in Monroe, I had a panic attack in the back afterwards because I was standing in front of a room of majority white people who would never have thought, after seeing an amazing performance, that the performer couldn't vote. I'm still searching for the better life that my parents sacrificed so much to give me and that's what I use to motivate myself.

Lolita: My motivation is similar to Oso's, being that we're both Latine, with parents who came to this country because they bought the fantasy of the American dream. I'm motivated by seeing what my family and the people I grew up with had to show up through, like the constant fear of being stopped by the police, the constant fear when every day in this country was a gift because the next one they could be found and sent back, and if they were sent back, they were going to be killed, because if you made the journey to America and returned to Chile, you were seen as a traitor and killed. For a long time, Chile was under a dictatorship by Pinochet. I lost an uncle

because of him. He was very involved in activism and spoke out about how things were not okay in Chile. He came to this country for a little bit, was quickly found by immigration, and was sent back. Two days later, the military squad killed him. No investigation or anything. If you're found by immigration and sent back, if you have any life at all, you're not going to have a good one. The reason I try so hard to be an activist, even though I'm a citizen because I was born here, is that I see my family and friends struggling and not having the same power. Like I often say at shows, my grandmother has lived in this country for 50 years and cannot vote.

Brooke: There's no path for her?

Lolita: It's not that there's no path, it's that it is a very expensive path. To become a citizen, it would cost, I think, anywhere between $1,200 and $2,000. That's just for an application, that's not even a guarantee of citizenship. That's a whole separate process.

Oso: A lot of places provide waivers for your residency status or citizenship, but there are so many hurdles. You have to make less than a certain amount and it's a very unconventional amount. A lot of people who have a resident status cannot have a social, which makes it difficult when it comes to tax returns and getting paid.

Lolita: Not knowing the cost or understanding the process of becoming a citizen of this country is a privilege. Because of those privileges, I want to be a voice for people who cannot or are afraid to speak. There's such a fear in the Latine community of being caught by the police if you're undocumented, and even sometimes if you are documented. While I have the privilege of citizenship, I'm going to make sure that their stories are told. That's why I always make speeches saying, "If you don't feel like voting, vote for my family, friends, and neighbors who can't because they are not seen as humans in this country."

Oso: These parents protesting an immigration ruling had duct tape over their mouths and a sign that read, "Dear son, Thank you for screaming what we have silenced for years." Our immigrant parents, because they don't know the law and language, because of all these barriers, they tend to be silent. I have conversations with my parents all the time and they're, like, "We're proud that you're doing all these things, but please be safe," because the more vocal I am, especially as someone who is documented but unable to vote, all it's going to take is somebody calling ICE. They know my government name, and especially now with how the immigration system is, not only is it expensive, but it's extremely difficult because any interaction with law enforcement is a flag through the process.

Still, I think, as children of immigrants, we are the ones to resist because Lolita's family couldn't do that in Chile. My family couldn't do that because I was born at the end of a civil war in El Salvador, because of the tactics used to contain communism. So, I think it's very important for us to be vocal, to be loud, regardless of whether it makes other people, specifically our white counterparts, uncomfortable. There's so much noise and a lot of our voices are silenced. But we have to continue to be loud. There's no other way. We've tried being patient. We've tried signing the petitions. We get arrested for protesting, but there's no other way than to shake the system in the way that it needs to be shaken to either find a path to fix it, or to just completely start over.

Brooke: The drag I've seen in Charlotte feels really meaningful and powerful. What do you think is unique about performing drag in the South?

Nova: Our lived experiences. We're in the Bible Belt where we were taught to bottle up our feelings. I think we are a prime example of using art as an outlet for expression. I get to take years of trauma or grief, or just a hard day at work, put my feelings in front of the crowd, and let them feel with me. That joint effort of feeling the same thing for three minutes makes you feel seen.

Onya: You moved to Charlotte in what I would call the renaissance of the South. For a city that's 250 years old, it's just hit its walking steps. It's being revitalized and the arts have taken off. Over the last six years, public art and other creative expressions have acknowledged historic wrongs toward marginalized communities. Seeing the skyline change and communities find their own spaces has been exciting.

Oso: There's so much cultural history in the South—the history of the formation of America, of colonization. In Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, there's a blend of American, Mexican, Chicano culture. Black artists couldn't perform in white venues, so they created songs and art to pass down their stories. I think we are continuing that legacy in the South. And it's beautiful because it's soulful, impactful, and everything drag needs, nationwide, to grow and be more progressive and accepted.

In New York, drag is art. It's performative, while here, because of the things that are happening in the South, it's more of a protest.

Nova: They do it to entertain an audience. We do it for ourselves.

Oso: I'm gonna get that on a shirt. It's survival. You go to the West Village, how many queer spaces?

Nova: Oh my god! One on every corner. I walked through Hell's Kitchen and was like, Gay bar, gay bar, gay bar.

Oso: L4 Lounge, which closed recently, was the last lesbian bar in Charlotte. Our queer venues are fighting to survive, while in New York, they're just competing against each other. Here we're competing against the community.

Nova: The legislation. The churches.

Lolita: Drive down The Plaza, one of the most progressive streets in Charlotte, and how many churches do we have?

Onya: But their churches are progressive.

Lolita: Still, we have the same number of churches that New York has gay bars. In New York, you want to make a quick dollar? Open a gay bar. In the South, you want to make a quick dollar? Make a church.

Nova: So Onya, when are you making The Church of Drag?

Onya: *Listen...*

Oso: When Lolita and I went to DC, The National City Christian Church had five banners that made the progressive Pride flag.

Nova: I would never expect that. My little Southern Baptist preacher's son heart would absolutely burst and then implode.

Oso: The person who booked us said that most of DC's churches are queer-accepting.

Lolita: So maybe the other Christians got it wrong?

Onya: Well, I mean, *obviously*.