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CULTURE

Pride of the Heartland: How Kansas City's Divided LGBTQ Scene Reflects Queer Culture As a Whole

BY: **KEVIN O'KEEFFE**

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Within just a few hours of arriving in Kansas City, Missouri, I wound up at a porch party. A couple dozen gays and allies gathered to drink ahead of going out — and they were mostly white, as I expected of a midwestern party. It's Pride in the state's largest city, so people were decked out in their best rainbow garb. Beers were plentiful; hosts passed jello shots around. It was a perfect slice of queer Americana.

But unlike what you might find at a New York Pride, or a Los Angeles Pride, a lot of the attendees are wearing Pride-themed Kansas City shirts. Probably about half of the few dozen people there were in such shirts. KC lettering in rainbow hearts. Kansas City-themed baseball tees. It was as much a Kansas City pride party as it was a Kansas City Pride party.

I was immediately taken with and inspired by the display. If so many queer people were wearing Kansas City shirts voluntarily at this party, certainly that's a sign of great love for their home, yes? That they were people invested in making their city — and more specifically, its queer scene — as great as possible?

"I think that's very generous," D. Rashaan Gilmore, president and founder of Kansas City advocacy group [BlaqOut](#), told me. He's being kind; I'm being naïve. "Kansas City has a self-esteem problem. And it probably pre-dates the [Arch](#), but certainly when St. Louis got the Arch. Kansas City went through an identity crisis."

What I learned over four days in Kansas City was that I should have paid greater attention to the demographics of that porch party. The young, mostly white crowd had reason to be proud of their city — as I would find, the city makes plenty of room for cute white queers. The Kansas City LGBTQ+ scene is effectively racially segregated and offers few exclusive spaces for trans people and/or queer women. That isn't uncommon, of course; plenty of cities



female, trans, gay, queer, lesbian — everyone agreed it's a problem.

What barriers stand between Kansas City and a more inclusive queer scene, then? For one, the lack of funds available to marginalized communities within the LGBTQ+ umbrella. For another, the existing bars are entirely owned by white gays, and thus remain a space primarily for them. And most crucially, while everyone knows there's a problem, actually doing something about it would require engaging with the problem and admitting some ugly truths. Gilmore knows from experience with BlaqOut just how tall an order that is.

"It's Kansas City. Nobody wants to be confrontational," he said. "I'm not saying it has to be forcefully confrontational, but we've got to call a thing a thing, right? We have to be able to say, 'This is a problem. This is how we're going to deal with it.'"

"But people don't want to be uncomfortable."

Kansas City pride is BIG. As in, pride in the actual city. Half the people at this pregame are wearing KC shirts.

pic.twitter.com/GFsmK3hsvX

— Kevin O'Keeffe (@kevinpokeeffe) [June 2, 2018](#)

I ventured to Kansas City because of one Monique Heart, the [ooh-ah-ah sensation](#) and fan favorite of *RuPaul's Drag Race* Season 10. Heart is the first queen from not just Kansas City, but Missouri as a whole, to appear on the show, and spoke frankly about her experience in the city while on the reality competition program.

"I have not done a lot of political work, because I live in a former slave state," she said on the season's seventh episode. She explained that she wanted to wear a take on RuPaul's Rachel Tensions [Confederate flag dress](#) from *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* for a challenge. But she was worried about potential consequences back home. "Tensions were really high in Kansas City, and I didn't want to come back and just get shot."

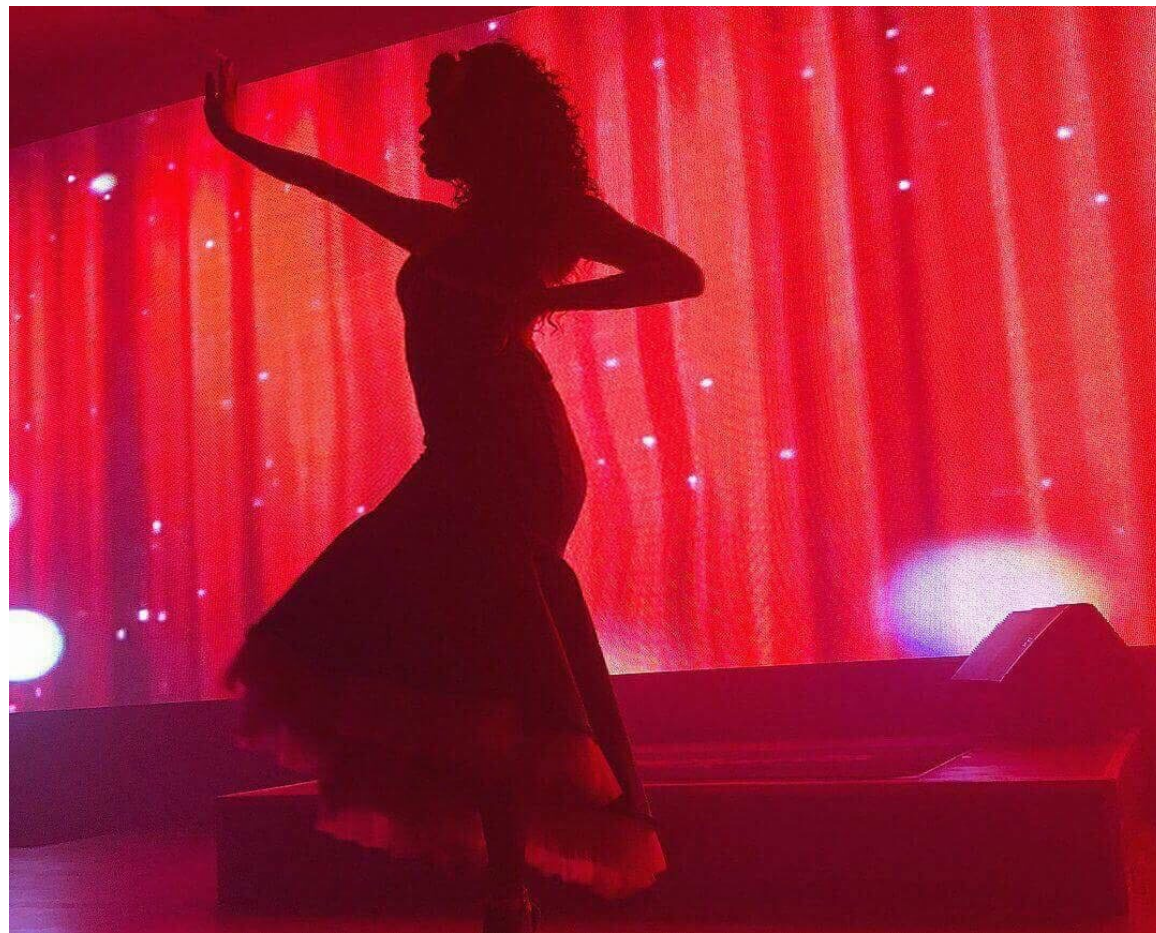
Considering the crowd and enthusiasm for Heart during her set at Kansas City Pride, it's hard to imagine her facing any such consequences now. But it's still very much a present reality in the city. Gilmore pointed to the [March murder](#) of 24-year-old Ta'Ron "Rio" Carson as such a threat, one in a series that has been happening for years now.

"He was just sitting on a wall" waiting for friends, Gilmore said. "An SUV pulls up, two or more individuals jumped out and they fill him full of bullets. ... Talk about the world spinning because I can't imagine anybody would not liking him. He's the kind of person if you told me you didn't like Rio, I would look at you like, 'Okay, something's wrong with you.'"



something many of my sources bring up in our interviews, sometimes off the record. When I talked to Lance Pierce, one of the founding board members of Kansas City's Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce, he acknowledged the perception of a spike in suicides, saying the issue was previously swept under the rug.

All of this suggests one thing to the LGBTQ+ citizens living there: There need to be more spaces for marginalized groups. Pierce himself said there's a need for more positive and inclusive spaces in Kansas City. And that's exactly what [#GetWoke](#) is trying to create.



Started just over one year ago, and originally hosted by Monique Heart herself, #GetWoke is a space for queer and trans people of color to express themselves — be it through dance, spoken word, other performance, and more. The group was founded after four murders of queer and trans POC in Kansas City, as well as in memory of the victims of the shooting in Orlando's Pulse nightclub two years ago.

"#GetWoke got started from a group that was called [Brown Voices/Brown Pulse](#). And as the name would suggest, it's connected to remembering and trying to do events that would elevate awareness about the tragedy in Orlando — but also bring communities together," explained co-founder Randall Jenson. We spoke on Saturday, after the group's one-year anniversary event the night before. The event was a dance party, complete with performances by *Drag Race* veterans Jujubee and Monica Beverly Hillz, but also offered community resources to attendees for the first three hours.

"Our focus became doing events like parties, but party with a purpose, to put it succinctly," Jenson said of the group's evolution.



#GetWoke co-founders, David Seymour. When asked about the mission of the program, Seymour emphasized the need to speak to the needs of everyone who attends the event.

“What is the good that’s going to touch everybody in that room?” he asked. “That’s why we get so many people coming up to us and being so truly thankful and appreciative for the feeling, and the event, and what they experienced because they feel comfortable, they feel safe, they feel welcome, they feel happy, they feel supported.”



Even programs like #GetWoke have their limits, though.

Their Pride event cost minimum \$15 to get in, with meet-and-greet and table packages costing even more. That charge is quite literally the cost of doing business; booking talent, venue, food, and more requires funding. But as noted by Star Palmer, executive director of LGBTQ assistance non-profit [Our Spot KC](#), even \$15 is a barrier for some.

“I had a ton of friends stop by and they were like, ‘They’re charging \$15 to \$20 to get in here. I’m not going. I’m going down here where it’s \$5,’” Palmer said, referring to a non-specifically queer space elsewhere. The same problem applies to Pride itself, which costs \$10 to get into when buying a ticket at the door. “LGBTQ youth represent more than 40% of the homeless population. And of that more than half are also of color. If I was who I am at 15 now, I would most likely not be able to afford to go to these events.”

Another barrier: the labeling of the group itself (which is named [“Get Woke: Queer and Trans People of Color”](#) on Facebook). “If I’m black and brown, I may not know anything about #GetWoke. Because they are certain circles and certain status quo of those individuals,” Palmer said. “I may not know what being queer is, it may be offensive to me. I may not know that.”

This, of course, doesn’t invalidate #GetWoke. Far from it; instead, it proves the limitations of just one quarterly event. It proves there’s a need for 20 such programs, all of differing sizes and for different



during our chat.

"When we do our events, we're thinking, 'How do we engage with black folks? How do we engage with Latinx folks? What kind of music do we play? Do we play house music? Do we play salsa, bachata, merengue, cumbia? Do we play hip-hop?' That's the attention that exists, just in that music," Jenson said. "We've got to make sure it's curated to different styles."

"People are not used to thinking about everybody and what that really means," Seymour added. "That's everybody. Let's face it, we're humans. You focus on what you like and what matters to you. When you're putting on an event for the public and especially when you're trying to do it with intention and purpose that takes some thinking. That takes some planning."

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Because there are so few events and spaces for LGBTQ+ people of color in Kansas City, the pressure to be something for everyone is amplified. But nothing can truly be for everyone; the city needs more specific spaces, rather than attempting to shoehorn everything and everyone into fewer events.

Palmer herself is trying to add another such space. In July, Palmer and Our Spot KC are launching a new festival, [Outskrts](#), specifically for women, both cis and trans, and anyone who identifies as an LGBTQ+ woman. (The G has been purposefully left out of the acronym.) The festival will feature performers, food, vendors, and more, but like #GetWoke, will also provide resources to attendees, particularly regarding both physical and emotional wellness. The goal with Outskrts is, quite simply, "to just offer a safe space for women. To have our own space."

"I had a position as an outreach manager, and we did a lot of surveys. We did a lot of talking and events in the community, and that's one of the biggest voids for women: we don't have anything," Palmer said. "Our last all women's club closed, it had to be maybe eight to 10 years ago. ... I wanted to create something that folks could look forward to the same as with Pride."

More spaces for specific groups is the obvious solution. Literally everyone quoted here agrees on that point. But who finances the creation of these spaces? What systems are in place to help people of color, queer women, and trans people get the resources they need to make a more diverse Kansas City LGBTQ+ scene possible? Therein lies the rub.

INTO

project here,” Palmer said. “There’s so many foundations here, there’s so many headquarters here but they don’t fund us, us being folks of color. I don’t care if you are LGBTQ or not, folks of color have to work twice as hard to get to sit at the table and then to be taken seriously. Which is sad. Because I know a lot of folks who work at those organizations who disburse these funds and they disburse them to the same folks.”

Gilmore was even more explicit, naming a set of groups — including the [Mid-America Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce](#) and the [AIDS Service Foundation](#) — that he feels could be doing more, but are just paying lip service instead. “There are five or six groups who should be taking a definitive position and a posture that says, ‘We are going to lead in this way.’ They are not,” he said. “Now, if you were to impanel all those groups that I mentioned, have all their presidents and CEOs here, I bet you each and everyone of them could point to some little thing they’re doing, and they would hold it up like a kindergartener with a gold star.”





during our interview. When I asked him about the segregation of the queer scene, he spoke of a distrust between parties involved.

"The way someone explained it to me is that unfortunately, because of our history, there are white man spaces and black man spaces. If anyone of those groups is found in the other space, there's suspicion," Pierce said. "It's like if I show up at a ball, it's like, 'Why is he here? What's his agenda? What's he—?' The same goes the other way. ... You have to be really careful that you're watching two things: your intention, and that you're running your intention by people from other perspectives, and then your impact. Because you can have all the right people on the committee, all the right things going with your intention and then impact never translates and it does the complete opposite."

That unease with one another, Pierce said, leads to dissension over how best to move forward. "How do we elevate our community through economic development? How do we give everybody a piece of the pie? How do we give everybody a piece of the opportunity? It's delicate," he said.

The truth is, even if foundations immediately moved to create new and specific spaces for marginalized communities, the divide in Kansas City's LGBTQ+ scene would still need much time to heal. It goes beyond bars and parties and speaks to something far deeper-seated. It's ingrained in history. As Monique Heart said on *Drag Race*, no matter how liberal Kansas City is, or how far people have come, Missouri will always have once been a slave state.

"We're already aren't great at creating spaces that people of color feel comfortable."

As evidence of that deeper divide, even some of the most inclusive groups in Kansas City still have trouble with diversifying their membership. Clinton Welby, one of the creators of a men's nudist group in the city, said that even while creating an accepting space for men to bare all with each other, diversifying the group has been difficult.

"We're already aren't great at creating spaces that [make] people of color feel comfortable. This is yet another instance of how do we create space that they are comfortable in a place where we're already comfortable in," he said, speaking for the group. "It's something that we strive to work for when we invite everyone we have in different groups. I wouldn't be surprised at all if they're saying, 'I would feel uncomfortable going to this space.'"

There's an inclination to say that such separate spaces aren't needed; that existing spaces should be redesigned to be accepting for all instead. But the needs of the few don't always fit the needs of the many. And when there are contradicting needs, whose are going to be the ones heard? The ones who already have a megaphone: wealthy, white, cisgender men.



enough barbecue to sustain me on my flight home. On our way, my Lyft driver, an artist booker with a queer daughter, asked me a bevy of questions. What did I do for work? What did I think of Kansas City? What did I think of Kansas City's queer scene? Then, after I told him a bit of what I observed in the city, and what I was thinking about writing, he asked: "Are we going to feel ashamed?"

The answer, of course, is no. Because if anyone comes away from this piece thinking Kansas City should be ashamed of its LGBTQ+ scene, then I haven't done my job. There are problems in the scene, of course, some of them even deadly. The lack of more specific spaces is coming at a literally fatal cost. But that's happening on a national scale. Plenty of other cities don't have adequate space for non-gay, cis, white men. And not all of those spaces that do exist are sufficient.

As progress marches on for LGBTQ+ rights, white faces dominate media coverage. Cis male voices are heard first. Queer women [don't feel comfortable](#) at Pride celebrations. People of color aren't being given seats at the table. It's our responsibility within our communities to boost those people of color, trans people, and queer women who aren't depicted as leaders, but have actually been doing the leading all along. Because those are the people fighting hard to be recognized, as can be seen in Kansas City. They're fighting for the queer soul of their city. But they need the help and funding to make it happen.

I've thought a lot about all the Kansas City shirts I saw — not just at that first party, but all weekend — since I left. I think about how, despite their frustrations, Kansas City natives like Palmer and Gilmore give so much of themselves to help make it better. Be it out of pride, shame, love, insecurity, or whatever else, there's lots of passion for Kansas City within it. The challenge now is channeling that passion to truly, substantially change things for the better.

Header image by Bronwyn Lundberg.

Images courtesy of Khalif Gillett and Joss Barton.



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