

On listening as performance



Drag queen and intuitive reader Kiki Slugqueen on balancing a drag career with a spiritual practice, paying attention to your instincts, and realizing that all of your passion projects can exist within the same creative ecosystem

March 2, 2020 -

As told to Kathryn Thayer, 3463 words.

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What is a slugqueen? Is that a thing? How did you become Kiki Slugqueen?

Like a lot of drag queens, Kiki was born on Halloween. For years I loved doing these conceptual, DIY, interactive group costumes. One year my friends and I were different types of babies with Spice Girls-esque personas—leather baby, cowgirl baby, pregnant baby. We wore adult diapers out to bars and poured our drinks into baby bottles. Another year we were *Reno 911*-inspired cops and would write people tickets for cute things like dancing too fierce or being too sexy in public without a permit.

So two years ago when Halloween was coming up, I saw this meme of a little kid dressed as a slug. They're walking away from the camera with this little iridescent snail trail behind them, and the caption says, "Guess I'll just escargot then..." It was so dumb and cute, I sent it to my friends and was like, "Let's be a pack of slugs for Halloween!" But all my friends were like, "Nah, I don't have time to make a slug costume." They also maybe just didn't want to be slugs. Who knows.

I still wanted to be a slug, and figured that if I was going to be the only slug I should make it more exciting and be a slug queen. I didn't know what that meant exactly, but I decided to roll with it. I designed this cute iridescent, velvety look but by far the wildest part was going to Petco and buying live snails. I put them into these snowglobe-like orbs, and then strapped them into a headpiece that I wrapped five wigs around. I remember leaving the store, looking at these snails I had just bought and being like, "What the actual fuck am I doing right now?" And I also suddenly had pet snails that I had to take care of.

I think a big reason I was willing to go all out with this kind of bizarre concept was because of the improv comedy classes I was taking around that time. Improv challenged me to make a choice and figure out what it means afterwards. It's based on instinct, a feeling, and then the work is to examine it and understand where there is something you can build on. I was terrible at comedic improv on stage, but it definitely seeped into other areas of my life, and Kiki is definitely one of them.

How was that first Halloween as Kiki? Where did your improv instincts take the character?

When I got to the party, I realized I didn't actually know who Kiki was. Like, what does she say? How do I "be" Kiki? So I did the improv method of observing the choices I had already made about the character. "Ok, if I have snails on my head and I'm a slugqueen... Why is that?" I decided the reason Kiki has these snails on her head is because snails and slugs are typically viewed as these gross pests, and Kiki is here to celebrate them in a glamorous way and bring them into spaces where they're not normally welcome.

This is so different from how I was used to approaching creative work. I used to start by thinking about the "point" of the work, and then make a form to match. But because Kiki was already embodied in this playful, whimsical way, it forced me to be true to that, and from those qualities figure out what the "point" of it was and how to behave as Kiki. So Kiki actually became this way for me to access a more vulnerable and less judgmental creative process that I wasn't able to access before.

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And I still remember the day after the Halloween party, having coffee with my friend and being like, "Holy shit, drag is powerful." Being Kiki didn't require a stage or a setup, but people would see me, suspend their disbelief, and jump right into Kiki's world. Thinking about it in terms of the hero's journey, it was like when people encountered Kiki it was this immediate inciting incident. I felt like there was so much potential to go further from there.

Do you see your work in terms of the hero's journey? What is that?

It's this story arc that a lot of narratives follow. I learned about it mostly from Robert McKee in this great book he wrote on screenwriting called *Story*. He describes the hero's journey as starting out with the world in a particular kind of state—things are chill—then there's the inciting incident, this moment that changes everything. It creates a gap between reality and expectation for the hero. And throughout the rest of the journey, the hero is trying to close that gap to bring reality and expectation back together, and they're constantly met with more gaps that occur as soon as they start to knit things back together. The floor falls out from under them again.

The journey ultimately leads to some climax of reckoning with a truth that's at the core of all that, then a resolution where we're back to normal, but in a profoundly changed or transformed way. I feel like Kiki can invite people on this type of journey, and on another level I also see Kiki as a key part of my own hero's journey.

That sense of reckoning and understanding yourself in new ways seem very central to the Queer Readings you do as Kiki Slugqueen. Tell me about those.

A Queer Reading is type of intuitive reading. The person I'm reading will share a topic they want clarity on or guidance around, and we look to some symbols—either a handful of personal objects the person has on them or some cards from an oracle deck I designed—and discuss them for about 15 minutes.

I don't use existing symbols like tarot or astrology because as queer people in the world, we find ourselves placed into a very binary and patriarchal society where there is no space for us. We aren't provided a framework so that we can thrive as our fullest selves. And so we're always in this practice of having to create that space for ourselves from what's personal, from the inside out. So these readings are embodying that queer practice, that skill of saying, "How can I draw what is personal and from myself, to identify a path and possibilities for myself in this world?"

Making space for yourself is no small task. How did you land on the readings as a way of doing it?

The readings came about because my friend Yolanda Velázquez in Puerto Rico asked me to do a performance at her 50th birthday party. She's an amazing artist and used to perform as this super radical drag persona, Lyngotee Hurtado, back in the mid-2000s.

Lyngotee Hurtado did a lot of performance interventions that dealt with colonialism or capitalism in public spaces. And so I was thinking about how I could do something to address those themes through Kiki, and I came up with this whole lip-sync mashup involving Bad Bunny and the Tainos (the native people of Puerto Rico) and Columbus. I had it all written out, but stopped myself and was like, "This doesn't feel right, this is not

sitting right with me."

Talking with some friends, I realized it didn't sit right because it wasn't my story to tell. I am not someone who is from Puerto Rico. I have not endured the violences of colonialism and capitalism in those ways. I am a white guy from Pennsylvania—there's no power in me telling that story because it's not coming from what's personal to me. And so I let go of that but was like... now what?

It sounds like you were about to do a performance you would have regretted, but you intuited yourself out of that, with some help.

Exactly, and it's so important to pay attention when those internal 'check your engine' lights go off during the process, not just because the work you make will probably not be great, but you're actually missing out on creating something much more powerful. Settling for the thing you've already sunk time into doesn't actually come from an authentic place. That gut feeling is not just saying "there's something wrong," but also "there's something better," even if you can't see what that something is yet.

So a week before my performance I had no idea what to do, and a friend gave me a tarot reading. I think because I had fully let go of all the work I had done before, I was in very fertile soil, and the reading was very powerful. Things started to click. I suddenly had this idea to do a hyper-capitalist take on a tarot reading, where I would give *adivinaciones fiscales*—financial readings. I asked people to hand me their wallet and I would pull out all their cards and money and do a reading based on that. So I was still playing with this concept of capitalism and fortune, but it felt more playful and more Kiki.

What surprised me about the readings was that I thought they were going to be pretty silly and comedic, but people were actually asking me real questions. It brought me back to moments in church when people would ask for me to pray with them. That night I realized, from the response and the conversations, that there was some power in this, so rather than doing lip-syncs on stage as Kiki I started setting up a little table at drag shows to offer readings using a handful of objects that people were carrying with them, and that was the beginning of Queer Readings.

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We've talked about improv, intuition, and story arc, but I understand religion has also had a big influence on the evolution of your work. How does that experience weave in?

I was raised Christian and continued attending church for most of my 20s. There were parts of my faith and the church community that I really loved, particularly the way that my church encouraged a lot of personal reflection and prayer. I was a member of the prayer team, which was basically a group of people who had read some texts, practiced praying with each other, learned from elders, and then offered to pray with people in the wider community who wanted it.

To me, praying for someone is about acknowledging that person is an embodiment of god in a unique and singular way. They have gifts and potential that only they can express.

When the person is sharing what they're desiring or fearing or hurting about, it's basically hardcore listening while holding the perspective of how valuable this person in front of me is, and being sensitive to any lies they might be believing about themselves that make them feel shamed or stunted and calling the lies out and replacing them with a truth.

But there are also aspects of Christianity that have resulted in a lot of shame around sex and sexuality that I'm still healing from—and the feeling that my queerness was not OK.

Discovering drag and the queer community in Brooklyn became a place for the other parts of myself to come alive that couldn't in church. So I was going to drag shows in Brooklyn on Saturday nights, and then joining the prayer

team on Sunday morning.

I started to notice some similarities between church and drag shows. For example, the musical worship in church is kind of similar to a lip-sync performance in drag. There's someone fully living their truth on stage and leading everyone through this communal, musical experience based on some shared cultural references, be it Jesus or Gaga. But in queer nightlife, what I didn't experience was a way to develop more deep and personal connections with people outside of the drinking and dancing. In church I was able to find that in large part due to our culture of prayer, but there's no real equivalent for that in a gay bar.

I was really conflicted because I felt like I was the only person standing with one leg in each of these places, and couldn't figure out how to make sense of them together. It was a frustrating tension to sit in, but I think not giving up on either space is what ultimately brought me to Queer Readings.

When you describe the process of prayer, you talk a lot about listening. I think that a lot of people want to listen more closely to themselves and to others, but don't know quite how to do it. What have you learned about listening?

Some of the most recent things I've learned about listening are actually through the other work I do in Puerto Rico, outside of Kiki. Nine months after Hurricane Maria, I moved from New York to Puerto Rico to work with El Departamento de la Comida, which is a grassroots collective that's been active for ten years supporting regenerative agriculture projects around the island to advance food sovereignty.

Through that work, in terms of listening, I've learned that step one is really letting go of your vision or expectation of what the solution or outcome looks like. People come to Puerto Rico and think like, "Oh, it doesn't look or work like how things work where I'm from, so the answer is to make it work like where I'm from."

If you don't listen to the actual vision and values of the community, you're going to build something that's totally missing the mark. Even if it accomplishes your goal, it's the wrong goal. That's why I wanted to work with an existing organization that was led by people from here. I didn't want to be one of these gringos who comes over and starts their own thing and thinks they have all the answers for everyone.

I've also learned that listening can only happen when you are in a relationship with people in that community, in that place. People are not necessarily going to open up to you off the bat about real shit when there's a history of being exploited and taken advantage of. There's a very valid skepticism. It's really important to recognize that and prioritize building those relationships, and if you don't want to be in a relationship with the people that you're working with, then you should probably be doing something else.

You need to be really aware of the whole situation. I've been thinking about this recently in terms of a permaculture design course I participated in on a farm in Puerto Rico. That course was all about listening to the land—and how it's important to observe the land through a bunch of different lenses for an entire year before making any major design decisions around how to design your farm. Once you finally start to design, there is a lot of value and attention placed on the "edges" within the ecosystem. Wherever you have "zones" you're creating—like the commercial zone where you grow things to sell or trade, next to the forest zone you let grow wild—the edge in between them is where there's the most diversity. The edges are like fountains of energy, these thresholds where things pass in and out and sometimes create unexpected interactions or new microzones.

It's something I think about in my drag too because Kiki and Queer Readings were kind of born on the edges of the queer world and spiritual communities.

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How do you deal with tending to those "edges" as Kiki?

I think my "edges" in regards to Kiki have been about understanding how to find the right relationship of my

spirituality with my queerness, and not necessarily having to eliminate one or the other. The edge is a hard place to exist in because you're not in an established zone, you're not part of the blueprint, but it's also where there's life and newness and the ability to birth something that doesn't exist in the ecosystem. And just because it's not in the blueprint doesn't mean it shouldn't be there. Honoring what emerges in the edges, queerness basically, challenges us to expand our blueprint. The edges in the ecosystem are valid and necessary, even though in our culture the people on the edges or margins are not usually treated as such and are not encouraged to think or believe of themselves as such.

So what do you do to put that philosophy into practice?

For the past six years I've been in the practice of journaling. The day I started journaling was actually the same day that I ever told someone I was bisexual. The person I told was the pastor of the church that I had just started going to at the time, which then became my church home for the rest of my time in Brooklyn. He told me, "I don't have answers for you, but just start writing down how you feel and what you're thinking every day." So I started doing that and also started doing morning pages from Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* around that time. It's a book that's about relating to your artistic self, taking yourself on dates. Over time all of this helped to work through a lot of the things swirling around in my head. It made things that felt very separate become more connected.

And intuition. To me, intuition is a way to listen and trust and have faith in an experiment even if you can't rationally articulate what you're going for yet. Trusting what you feel, even if you don't know where it's coming from, actually is a path. That's honestly what's led me to a lot of the people and synchronistic things that have happened on this whole journey.

Another thing that's helped me connect my work lately is this umbrella concept of "queer practice" as a container for all the work I do. I define queer practice is any methodology that questions or subverts existing power structures to create more possibilities for more people. Kiki does that work in one way, what I'm doing at El Departamento de la Comida does it in different ways. It helps me to think of the commonalities. I'm not doing a million different things—they're all part of the same ecosystem, even though they occupy very different spaces, they're all embedded in the same values and vision.

Kiki Slugqueen Recommends:

Three exercises for your intuition. Think of these as an invitation to take a path that your rational mind wouldn't normally lead you down, like following the white rabbit into wonderland. Being curious and open as you perform these exercises is the most important thing, and there's no right or wrong place for them to take you to.

INNER CHILD: What's something you loved as a kid but haven't experienced in a long time? It could be a movie, a book, an album, a snack, a toy. Spend some time experiencing that thing again. Notice how it makes you feel, what ideas, memories and parts of yourself it reminds you of. If you're having a hard time thinking of something specific to re-experience, pick a particular year and quickly jot down memories that come to mind during that time, there's probably something there.

ANIMAL: Go to your nearest park and observe or follow an animal for at least ten minutes. Even when it seems to be doing nothing new, keep observing and noticing. What surprises you about the animal's behavior? What similarities and differences do you observe between yourself and the animal? What can you learn from the animal?

PURGE: Get a pen and paper and take no more than 5 minutes to write down all the things that make you anxious or afraid or sad that you want to let go of. Go find a place outside where you can (safely) set the paper on fire. Ideally you should dig a small hole and burn it inside the hole, then cover it up. Whenever you walk past this spot, you can be reminded of the things you've burned and buried. You may want to take a photo of the list before you burn it so you can remind yourself in the future of the things you're no longer holding onto.

Name

Kiki Slugqueen

Vocation

Drag queen and intuitive reader

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Chris Sorensen