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## That's Ru-volting! how reality TV reimagines perceptions of American success

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THAT'S RU-VOLTING! HOW REALITY TV REIMAGINES PERCEPTIONS OF  
AMERICAN SUCCESS

A Thesis

Presented in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

June, 2016

BY

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“Colored people on TV! You never saw anything like that in the 1960s—three women of color who were totally empowered, creative, imaginative ... beautiful[, p]oised ... As a small colored girl, the only influences I had on TV were characters like ‘Buckwheat.’ To see the Supremes and know that it was possible to be like them, that black people could do that ...” —Oprah Winfrey on seeing Diana Ross and the Supremes on The Ed Sullivan Show in *Diana Ross: A Biography*

“In a ballroom you can be anything you want. You’re not really an executive but you’re looking like an executive. You’re showing the straight world that I can be an executive if I had the opportunity because I can look like one, and that is like a fulfillment.” —Dorian Cory explains “Executive Realness” in *Paris Is Burning*

“I’m a successful drag queen, and not some bitch who has to show for a dollar.” —Willam Belli, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* season 4

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## INTRODUCTION

*Born to Lose: Failure and Success as an American Birthright*. Social mobility, career opportunity, and strong familial bonds are all benchmarks toward achieving the American Dream, a nationalized concept contingent on the belief that it's an opportunity afforded to all enterprising individuals "regardless of ... social identity" (Carter 466). People come to know American Dream ideology through what Michel Foucault refers to as the "manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body" (93). Television is one such power. From *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952–1966) to *The Bachelor* (2002–present), the medium inundates viewers with images that reify who deserves success in the United States. During television's first Golden Age, "good citizens" who willfully submit to a prescribed lifecycle of gender rigidity and social respectability were deemed worthy of American Dream achievement. Fifty years separates the premieres of the Nelson family sitcom and the ABC reality show. However, both share similar views on who deserves success (white, straight, cisgendered, able-bodied, conventionally attractive, family-minded), thus omitting a substantial portion of millions of Americans who fail to meet these expectations. The exclusionary representation found on *Ozzie and Harriet* and *The Bachelor* is symptomatic of a majority of television programming.<sup>1</sup> Based on this televisual observation, one might surmise that the

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<sup>1</sup> Current popular television programs that boast diverse casts, such as *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–present), *Empire* (2015–present), and *Transparent* (2014–present), suggest a spike in diversified representation. But according to a recent study conducted by USC, the current Hollywood landscape "is one of pervasive underrepresentation, no matter the media platform, from CEOs to minor characters" ("Damning Study Finds a 'Whitewashed' Hollywood").

hegemonic notion of who deserves to succeed contradicts the equal-opportunity inclusivity that American Dream ideology alleges to uphold.<sup>2</sup>

To be branded a failure in the United States is, according to *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* author Scott Sandage, “the most damning incarnation of the connection between achievement and personal identity” (4). With minimal exception, mainstream America considers drag queen entertainers hegemonic failures.<sup>3</sup> Oftentimes drag queens’ families are unwilling to accept not only their sexual identity, but also the defiance of rigid gender boundaries their chosen line of work entails. Familial alienation, coupled with drag’s status as a transgressive, low-paying profession, means drag queens face marginalization not only within mainstream society but also within their own LGBTQ community. The lowly drag queen figure may be the scourge of gay respectability, but as a reality television personality on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, the drag queen transforms into an aspirational superstar with a fervent fanbase that excels while subverting the prescriptive pathway to success imparted by mainstream America. This thesis will show how the reality television program *RuPaul’s Drag Race* recontextualizes the drag queen from a hegemonic failure into an American success.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Homogenized images of American Dream achievement found in TV programming contradict its promise of inclusion, regardless of one’s socioeconomic status. However, they also corroborate the notion that social mobility is rarely contingent on acumen or ability but socioeconomic status (for further reading, see *The Meritocracy Myth* by Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller).

<sup>3</sup> For the sake of this project, a drag queen is defined as a female impersonator assigned male at birth whose identity falls under the LGBTQ umbrella, as these are the queens who currently qualify to compete on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.

<sup>4</sup> This thesis endorses a relatively cynical viewpoint that, in the age of disparate wealth inequality, media convergence and personal branding, mainstream America equates success based on the perception of one’s earning potential combined with one’s cultural reach.

*I'll Be Your Mirror: Reality Television Reflects What We Are*. The ubiquity of reality television in the past 20 years makes the genre feel like a brainchild that developed during the twenty-first century; however, nonfiction shows starring everyday people have been a major fixture on TV since its inception. On *Queen for a Day* (1948–1964), middle-class housewives watched women less fortunate than themselves have their domestic dreams come true, if only for twenty-four hours. Intrusive voyeurism was played for laughs on the long-running *Candid Camera* (1948–1954).<sup>5</sup> *The Original Amateur Hour* (1948–1970) found virtual unknowns hoping their talents would save them from obscurity. Modern revamps of prevenient reality programs include *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* (2003–2012), *What Would You Do?* (2008–present), and *America's Got Talent* (2006–present); however, reality television as we know it today feels markedly different from its predecessors. Although contemporary shows such as the ones just mentioned operate to elicit warm feelings in their audiences by selling them dreams-come-true happy endings (not to mention promotional sponsors' products), a large portion of modern reality fare caters to audiences starving for schadenfreude. Jennifer Posner, media critic and author of *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth about Guilty Pleasure TV*, writes that the more exploitative reality shows are a fantastical escape where viewers can “revel in the bizarre antics, pitiful tears, wild hookups, and self-loathing insecurities ... with none of the guilt” (16). Those who get pleasure by indulging in “trainwreck TV” find it on programs such as *Toddlers and Tiaras* (2008–2013) and *Mob Wives* (2011–present); however, watching reality TV is more than

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<sup>5</sup> This marks the original run of *Candid Camera*; however, both *Candid Camera* and *Queen for a Day* enjoyed several successful and not-so-successful reboots on multiple networks as recently as 2014.



just a way to feel superior. Posner continues, “we ... watch because these shows frame their narratives in ways that both play to and reinforce deeply ingrained societal biases about women and men, love and beauty, race and class, consumption and happiness in America” (17). Shows such as *What Not to Wear* (2003–2013) and *The Biggest Loser* (2004–present), for example, reflect a society composed of citizens who believe self-improvement, professionalism, physical attractiveness, fitness, emotional vulnerability, shopping, and stick-to-itiveness all play integral roles in the pursuit of happiness. “At a time when privatization, personal responsibility, and consumer choice are promoted as the best way to govern liberal capitalist democracies,” write Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, “reality TV shows us how to conduct and ‘empower’ ourselves as enterprising citizens” (15).

Despite its reputation, the reality genre is one of the more diverse media spaces on television. Some reality fare digs even deeper, working to legitimize life experiences beyond hegemonic representations of American success. In 1973, PBS premiered *An American Family*, a miniseries depicting the real-life trials and tribulations of the aptly named Loud family. The reality docu-soap was the first of its kind and a prototype for modern reality television. The family’s eldest son, Lance, was a gay man living in New York City. The depictions of Lance and the queer spaces he inhabited were some of the first televised moments in American history featuring gay men who appeared unashamed of their sexuality. In *An American Family: A Televised Life*, Lance Loud discusses the impact of his television appearance, writing that while many disapproving viewers sent him Bibles, he also “got a lot of letters from gay guys ... who thanked [him] for being a voice of outrage in a bland fucking normal middle-class world” (Ruoff

127). Pedro Zamora, star of *The Real World: San Francisco* (1994), was not the first openly gay cast member on the long-running MTV docu-soap, but some would argue he remains the most impactful. A direct descendent of *An American Family*, early incarnations of *The Real World* framed the show as a social experiment: “the true story of seven strangers picked to live in a house and have their lives taped,” as the series opening credits prefaced. The show debuted during the beginning of the 1990s, a time when youth-centric media tackled social issues such as racism, safe sex, and homophobia.<sup>6</sup> With his participation in a reality series, housemate Zamora, an HIV+ AIDS activist and Cuban immigrant, humanized the AIDS crisis in a way that no one on television had done before. His relationship with his partner, Sean Sasser, gave a realistic depiction of two men in love. Scripted programming of the same era such as Aaron Spelling’s *Melrose Place* (1992–1999) and the made-for-TV movie *An Early Frost* (1985) were landmark media events because they featured gay men as central characters. Unfortunately, for *Melrose Place*’s Matt Fielding (Doug Savant), being gay meant chronic loneliness, abuse, and assault. For *An Early Frost*’s Michael Pierson (Aidan Quinn), it was a compartmentalized secret that became a death sentence.

As a reality television competition featuring colorful, campy drag queen contenders, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* stands in stark contrast to *An American Family* or *The Real World*’s stony-faced stabs at cinéma vérité. Hosted by RuPaul, arguably the world’s most famous drag entertainer since his pop hit “Supermodel (of the World)” dropped in 1993, the show transcends

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<sup>6</sup> As a straight, cisgendered woman who spent most of my adolescence engaged in unsupervised television watching, I attribute the formation of my queer worldview primarily to MTV’s socially conscious programming in the early 1990s, as well as its gender-bending 1980s video stars such as Boy George, Madonna, Prince, and Grace Jones.

just being an entertaining reality game show competition.<sup>7</sup> Premiering in 2009, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has proven itself as a potential gateway to global exposure for drag entertainers, who, prior to the show's success, were deemed American failures not only by heteronormative mainstream U.S.A. but also within their own marginalized community (Newton 25). Instead of ascribing to societal expectations, the queens on *RuPaul's Drag Race* choose to do as queer theorist Jack Halberstam suggests and “imagin[e] other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being” (88). In his scholarship, Halberstam employs lowbrow media such as kiddie cartoon *Spongebob Squarepants* (1999–present) and stoner film *Dude, Where's My Car?* (2000) to position queerness as a liberating alternative to the rigid trappings of hegemonic normativity.

While embracing one's queerness has the potential to be liberating, historically it comes with risks of discrimination, disenfranchisement, and worse. In midcentury America, gender was heavily regimented; anyone who deviated from the norm was branded a pervert. “By the 1950s and '60s psychiatry had developed a massive weight of theory establishing that marriage—and, within that, the breadwinner role—was the only normal state for the adult male,” Barbara Ehrenreich writes in *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*. Ehrenreich continues, “outside lay only a range of diagnoses, all unflattering” (15). Gayness, if depicted on TV at all, was treated like an abnormal epidemic and a threat to American decency.

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<sup>7</sup> For the sake of clarity, this thesis refers to RuPaul, born RuPaul Andre Charles, by his mononymous celebrity first name. Feminine pronouns will only be used for RuPaul when discussing action that takes place on the show when RuPaul is in drag, as that is the preferred method in drag queen culture. As for *RuPaul's Drag Race* contestants and any other named drag queens, feminine pronouns are used when referring to action that takes place on the show, in drag performances, or in any situation in which they're identified by their drag persona. When addressing situations in which the queens are out of drag (i.e., interviews or social media interactions), the contestants will be referred to by their given names and preferred pronouns.

In 1967, CBS aired a news documentary called *The Homosexuals*. Hosted by Mike Wallace, the program showed men discussing their gay lifestyle, their faces and voices obscured in shameful shadows.<sup>8</sup> Results from a poll the documentary conducted concluded that American citizens felt homosexuality was “more harmful to the United States than adultery, abortion, or prostitution” (*The Homosexuals*). Wallace interviewed medical experts decrying homosexuality as a mental illness brought on by poor parenting. The documentary concludes with Wallace discussing a sentiment he referred to as the homosexual’s dilemma: [He is] “told by the medical profession he is sick; by the law that he’s a criminal; shunned by employers; rejected by heterosexual society ... At the center of his life he remains anonymous. A displaced person. An outsider” (*The Homosexuals*). In 1960s America, gay men were considered not only failures but also societal dangers. The complete absence of women or people of color on *The Homosexuals* makes it apparent they weren’t considered at all.

At the time *The Homosexuals* aired, public drag was still illegal in many U.S. cities. This created a rift within the drag community; those who considered themselves “respectable” female impersonators distanced themselves from the so-called street fairies who defied social convention and publicly flaunted their gender nonconformity. As Esther Newton writes in *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, in New York City, the street fairies were the “underclass of the gay world” (8). Newton remarks on her lack of surprise that “the ‘battle of the Stonewall’ was instigated by street fairies. Street fairies have nothing to lose” (19). Despite a

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<sup>8</sup> All but the first interviewee, Lars Larson, who spoke proudly of his sexuality, his face and voice unobscured.

recent film depicting a corn-fed cisgender gay man throwing the first brick, it was drag queens/activists Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, both trans women of color, who were among the forefront of this watershed moment for queer civil rights. American media overlooked their heroism, instead fashioning headlines that paid them little respect. “Homo Nest Raided, Queen Bees Are Stinging Mad” read the title of the *New York Daily News*’ account of the uprising. “The queens had turned commandos and stood bra strap to bra strap against an invasion of the helmeted Tactical Patrol Force,” wrote *Daily News* columnist Jerry Lisker. “Queen Power reared its bleached blonde head in revolt ... hurling anything they could get their polished, manicured fingernails on.” Lisker further patronized the rioters, reporting the queens used “bobby pins, compacts, lipstick tubes and other femme fatale missiles.”<sup>9</sup> The Stonewall reportage in the New York tabloid was at best inaccurate and at worst scurrilous. It wasn’t bobby pins and lipstick that forced the policemen and women to retreat and barricade themselves into the bar. The rioters fired coins, bottles, bricks, and Molotov cocktails at the cops. They slashed tires and busted windows. They ripped a parking meter out of the sidewalk and used it as a battering ram to knock down the door. They flipped cars and formed Rockette kick lines against the riot squads as a united front, demanding to be heard (Carter 177). “The sound filtering in [didn’t] suggest dancing faggots any more,” a *Village Voice* eyewitness account reported. “It sound[ed] like a powerful rage bent on vendetta” (Stuart, “Full Moon Over Stonewall”).

The riots galvanized unprecedented gay solidarity. Despite Sylvia Rivera and her sisters’ fearlessness, some post-Stonewall gay and lesbian assemblages distanced themselves from those

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<sup>9</sup> [www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/stonewall-queen-bees/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/stonewall-queen-bees/).

who strayed from gender conformity as they strove for homonormative respectability. We see the repercussions of this played out thirty years later in the documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990). Their sexuality cost them their families, but the street kids profiled in *Paris Is Burning* made new homes in the “houses” that competed in the ballroom circuit in 1980s New York City. More than twenty years later, *Paris Is Burning*’s legacy continues to endure on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*; the show regards the documentary an integral part of drag knowledge, what the show refers to as “herstory.”

*Paris Is Burning*, *The Homosexuals*, reportage on the Stonewall Riots, *The Real World: San Francisco*, and *RuPaul’s Drag Race* reveal how media is both influential in and reflective of the discursive formation and hierarchy of sociocultural identity. Based on the rigidity of accepted gender expression in America, by virtue of its existence, a TV show starring drag queens succeeding is a triumph. By reframing drag as a reality television competition, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* elevates the status of the queen from lowly loser to fearless iconoclast who excels while challenging limiting notions of American success. The following section examines ways in which academia has already engaged with Drag, RuPaul, and *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.

*Review of Previous Scholarship on Drag, RuPaul, and RuPaul’s Drag Race*. The art of drag is subversive by design; its playfulness with gender and sexuality ruptures norms of feminine and masculine essentiality. Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* is one of the most referenced academic texts about drag. In it, Butler writes that the act of a man dressing and gesticulating in the manner of the culturally agreed upon clothing and manner

assigned to women belies the notion of a “feminine essence.” Butler contends that drag evinces gender’s performativity. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” (Butler 137).

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler references another important work about drag, Esther Newton’s groundbreaking American anthropological study, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. Published in 1972, a critical time in the gay rights movement, *Mother Camp* not only humanized a much maligned American population but also addressed the social hierarchy within gay culture at that time. Newton delineates between overt and covert gay people, explaining that the covert gay who could “pass” as a straight man stood to achieve American success more so than the overt gay who flaunted his sexuality.

Drag queens were low on the pecking order, but even the drag world was classed. At the top stood the female impersonators who treated drag like it was their job and nothing more. Once the show ended and the heels came off, the female impersonators strove for respectability like their straight-passing counterparts for fear of others mistaking them for “street fairies” (Newton 10). Street fairies were the homeless young hustlers and artists who risked arrest by flaunting their effeminacy while wearing gender-nonconforming clothing in public. “Respectable gays” regarded street fairies as contemptible freaks who, despite the repercussions of societal discrimination, arrest, assault, and worse, showed zero interest in gaining approval from straight America (Newton 11). Regardless of where the queen landed on drag’s social strata, Newton writes that drag exposes gender identity not to be fixed but rather plastic and adaptable. “The gay

world, via drag, says that sex-role behavior is an appearance; it is ‘outside.’ It can be manipulated at will” (Newton 103).

Some queens, such as terrorist drag provocateur Vaginal Davis, use drag as a means of political performance art. Others treat drag as a show business gig, with the intention to get paid to entertain audiences much like burlesque dancers, stand-up comedians, or clowns (Newton 4).

When RuPaul became one of a handful of famous drag queens in the early 1990s, scholarship framed him as a queer black figure whose drag aesthetic either challenged or reaffirmed hegemonic notions of race, gender, and sexuality (Magubane: 2002; Schewe: 2009). My thesis will elevate the star discourse of RuPaul from drag queen figure to media influencer whose reality show elevates the drag profession beyond his own initial success in the early 1990s.

Despite a rise in work on reality television and drag in general, there is only a smattering of scholarship that directly addresses *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. Rather than a gestalt analysis remarking on the show’s influence as a queer cultural artifact, present scholarship on the show primarily posits an intersectional analysis of the show’s treatment of identity (Eir-Anne: 2011; Jenkins: 2013; Strings and Bui: 2013), language (Simmons: 2014; Goldmark: 2015), and HIV/AIDS (Hargraves: 2011). A reality television competition about drag queens is surely a playground for critical, even damning discussions of its portrayal of class, race, sex, and gender; however, my thesis does not explore these well-tread discussions. This thesis contends that an oppositional analysis of the show’s representation of identity overlooks *RuPaul’s Drag Race’s* standing as an entryway to unparalleled professional opportunities for its historically



marginalized cast of drag queen contestants. The following section gives a brief synopsis of how each chapter will reveal the strategies *RuPaul's Drag Race* employs to broaden perceptions of who is worthy of American success.

*Chapter Summaries.* When RuPaul first started performing in drag, his aesthetic was abrasive and punk rock. In order to achieve the success he desired, RuPaul softened his style, which catapulted his career into the mainstream consciousness. By virtue of removing drag from its usual environs, nightclubs and pride parades, and airing it on television, the reality show recontextualizes not only drag but also those who practice it. Chapter 1, “Disneyland Realness: TV Drag Queens as Homonormative Hustlers,” addresses why, in order to succeed, *RuPaul's Drag Race* must give audiences an incomplete, sanitary portrayal of the subversive art form. Despite *RuPaul's Drag Race's* intentional “Disneyfication” of drag, this chapter will illustrate how it manages to escape the exclusionary trap of homonormativity.

Chapter 2, entitled “What Makes a Man a Queen? Drag Queens as Neoliberal Citizens,” continues to address how *RuPaul's Drag Race* avoids ascribing to homonormative displays of identity despite reality television's status as a neoliberal technology. Media scholars Laurie Ouellette and James Hay position reality TV as a neoliberal technology that instructs citizens how to self-manage by embracing a pro-consumer lifestyle free of governmental intervention, where the good of the individual supersedes that of the community. This chapter will reveal how *RuPaul's Drag Race* subverts homonormative notions of sex and gender by queering concepts associated with neoliberalism.

Finally, this project's conclusion, "Legendary Children of the Ru-Volution: Drag Fandom," examines ways in which the show's cult success has the potential to not only broaden perceptions of American success but also redefine discourses on drag, participatory studies, identity, and relationality.

*RuPaul's Drag Race* does not yield the ratings of contemporary reality juggernauts such as *The Voice* (2011–present) or *Survivor* (2000–present), but it boasts a fierce following that, as its social media presence suggests, skews younger with each passing season. A reality show featuring drag queens as contestants might not seem that out of the ordinary for younger viewers, but for those older audiences who remember a time where their sexual identity was either ridiculed or made invisible in American media, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is revolutionary television. With eight seasons and counting, the reality competition breaks down societal perceptions of gender essentiality, satirizes both the reality genre and the commodification of everyday life, celebrates creative ingenuity, and advocates acceptance and self-love. In a patriarchal society that devalues femininity, drag queens are hegemonic failures. On *RuPaul's Drag Race*, they're larger-than-life superstars, self-made entrepreneurs, and inspirational beacons of hope for die-hard fans who pine for a path to success other than the homogenous one imparted by mainstream America. This thesis will show how the queer "failures" of *RuPaul's Drag Race* broaden perceptions of American success by turning a historically maligned profession into a legitimate livelihood.

## DISNEYLAND REALNESS: TV DRAG QUEENS AS HOMONORMATIVE HUSTLERS

Long before they became reality television personalities, drag queens “played a central role in the construction of a public gay identity” (Taylor and Rupp 2118). Drag queens are ubiquitous staples of gay nightlife, daytime Pride parades, and political protests, further evincing their vast influence in the formation of queer culture. Aside from brief passing fancies such as the Pansy Craze in 1930s New York City and RuPaul’s initial celebrity in the first half of the 1990s, hegemonic American discourse denigrates the drag queen figure.<sup>10</sup> Contempt for queens is not exclusive to straight America; drag performers also face stigma within the LGBTQ community. Some drag queen detractors regard their overt, liberated effeminacy at Pride events as an embarrassing obstruction on the road to gay respectability (Taylor and Rupp 2117-8). Others accuse drag queens of perpetuating transphobic misogyny, an allegation directed not only at *RuPaul’s Drag Race* but also the show’s host.<sup>11</sup> While the show’s treatment of trans women is an issue worthy of exploration, an examination of the show’s potentially problematic representation of identity is beyond the scope of this project. Further, dismissing drag queens as trans misogynists erases a sizeable portion of trans women who are also drag performers, including

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<sup>10</sup> The brazen trespassing of rigid gender boundaries in drag performance belies America’s patriarchal notions of masculine and feminine essentiality (Butler 170), making the drag queen a sexual deviant whose effeminate spectacle is the epitome of masculine failure.

<sup>11</sup> Season 3 contestant Carmen Carrera, a trans woman, took to Facebook to express her disgust over a segment called “Female or ‘She’-male,” that aired March 17, 2014, during the season 6 episode “Shade: The Rusical.” This sparked a controversy that fans and media outlets referred to as “Trannygate.” While Logo TV expressed remorse over the insensitive use of transphobic language like “shemale” (a word the segment used to refer not to trans women but to drag queens who identify as cisgender men), RuPaul dismissed accusations of transmisogyny, telling Marc Maron on his WTF podcast that “my 32-year career speaks for itself ... I believe that everybody, you can be whatever the hell you wanna be ... but don’t you dare tell me what I can do or say” (Nichols, “RuPaul Responds to Controversy”).

Amanda Lepore and former *RuPaul's Drag Race* contestants Kylie Sonique Love, Jiggly Caliente, and Monica Beverlyhillz.

Bringing drag queens to the small screen removes them from their usual milieu in LGBTQ spaces, placing them in a sanitized, brightly lit television studio. For many of the show's younger and/or straighter fans, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is their first brush with drag queen culture. Drag as seen on TV, especially in the show's nascent seasons, is a "Disneyfied" version, stripped of any sexual or political danger. At first blush, this limited purview of accepted gender presentation could be interpreted as a televisual facsimile of the homonormativity plaguing the LGBTQ community. In "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," Lisa Duggan defines homonormativity as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions ... but upholds and sustains them" (179). Homonormativity intimates that the absorption of gay culture into mainstream consciousness serves to benefit only those LGBTQ individuals whose lifestyles best resemble conventions of hegemonic "normalcy." These "respectable gays" are able to assimilate into mainstream culture with some relative comfort. In turn, those who fail to meet expectations based on their social strata are further marginalized, despite being the most at risk and therefore the most in need of institutional support and advocacy.

Continued mainstream absorption of LGBTQ culture converts ignored groups into a niche consumer demographic, which in turn yields shows such as *RuPaul's Drag Race*. As the show continues to prove its viability as a career launchpad, its Disneyfication of drag queen culture reveals itself not as an act of queer assimilation but rather a cunning queer strategy in

achieving American success. At eight seasons and counting, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is the brightest jewel in Logo TV's crown. Once a small, rarely watched boutique channel airing in limited markets, according to a Logo TV press release posted on [thefutoncritic.com](http://thefutoncritic.com), Viacom channel prides itself as "the only cable network to post ten consecutive quarters of year-over-year growth" thanks in part to the reality show's cult success ("Logo Makes History"). After securing a sizeable, loyal fan base, in its later seasons, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is able to broaden its definitions of drag, allowing a more inclusive, queerer representation of it while still retaining its family-friendly appeal. This chapter will show how *RuPaul's Drag Race*, with its host's career trajectory as a template, hustles homonormativity to achieve American success by recontextualizing drag into an accessible reality competition.

*A Life in Drag: The Drag Queen Experience in America*. When RuPaul transforms into his "Glamazon" drag queen persona, the padded curves, cinched waist, teased wig, false lashes, and face paint create the illusion of the feminine shape on a masculine body. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler writes that drag "disrupts the very boundaries that determine what it is to be a body at all" (169). By exaggerating, lampooning, and assuming the gestures, movements, and clothing that are culturally designated to the female sex category, drag exposes the "feminine essence" for the fabrication it is. Those who do not wholly identify with certain culturally agreed upon qualities associated with their assigned gender identity might find this notion liberating. However, instead of allowing drag's gender queering to redefine the possibilities of the body or sexualities beyond the "heterosexual ideal," those who

defy bodily boundaries are often punished “through exclusion and domination” (Butler 170). Because of their devalued social status, aside from a fortunate few, most drag queens don’t earn enough to turn drag into a full-time job (Taylor and Rupp 2117). A drag queen’s socioeconomic situation, combined with the “heavy drinking, drug use, [and] sexual promiscuity” prevalent in nightlife culture, makes for an existence that is “economically precarious” and often rife with romantic failure (Taylor and Rupp 2121).

In *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, Esther Newton lays out the social hierarchy within gay America as the 1960s ended; those who were able to pass as the hegemonic ideal (white, masculine, middle-class, professional) stood to benefit the most. Below them stood female impersonators. Although drag was “a source of dishonor” (Newton 3), the money both straight and gay audiences paid for their entertainment, along with the fact that they limited dressing like a woman to the stage, somewhat legitimized their lowly profession. Despite the advancements made by LGBTQ activists since *Mother Camp*, this harmful hierarchy still persists under the guise of homonormativity. Homonormativity works to divide within queer communities to further alienate those who don’t live up to conventional expectations of American living.

Newton observes that street fairies’ overt queerness deprived them of certain privileges afforded to gay men whose outward appearance met the standard of American masculinity. Despite this drawback, Newton writes that the street fairies were “in a strategic position to experience the numerous discrepancies between the ideals of American culture and the realities” (15). In a 2014 *New York Times* feature, RuPaul substantiates Newton’s observation, revealing

how his disenfranchised position of being born poor, black, and gay enabled him to see societal expectations as fabrications meant to keep people feeling less than. RuPaul explains, “There are only two types of people in the world. [T]here are the people who understand that this is a matrix ... and then there are the people who buy it lock, stock and barrel” (Schulman, “In Drag, It Turns Out, There Are Second Acts”).

Despite the overt divisiveness of homonormativity, when an individual chooses to live a life that does not abide by its standards, therein lies the possibility of liberation from its ruinous trappings. Jack Halberstam expands upon this in *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, writing “part of what [makes] queerness compelling ... has to do with the way it has the potential to open up new life narratives” (2). RuPaul’s 1995 memoir, *Lettin’ It All Hang Out*, exemplifies one such narrative. Growing up, RuPaul did not embody the American ideal. As a self-professed alien outsider, RuPaul refused to base his self-worth on the constant systemic reminders of his body’s failure to meet America’s societal expectations. He writes, “I am black, I am gay, and I am a man. But I cannot be defined by these things” (190).

*Drag, Dragged: Out of the Club and onto the Small Screen*. The drag evolution of RuPaul’s *Drag Race*’s host supports the assertion that the Disneyfication of drag is not an appeal to homonormative convention but a canny strategy that allows for professional success without compromising drag’s iconoclastic spirit. RuPaul left Atlanta for New York City for the first time in 1984. He was 23 years old. With nowhere to stay, he survived by couch surfing and sleeping in Central Park by day and working in bars at night. He go-go danced in divey nightclubs such as

the Pyramid in the East Village for as little as \$40 a shift (RuPaul 79). On one of his evenings out, he met a fellow Southern transplant named Nelson Sullivan, a champion of New York's exciting art scene who often let young artists, including RuPaul, use the run-down building he rented in Manhattan's then-blighted Meatpacking District as a crash pad. "Nelson was our New York liaison, and he introduced us to the city" (RuPaul 82). The club kids, art stars, and drag queens excited Sullivan so much he bought a video camera and lugged it around everywhere he went, documenting their antics.<sup>12</sup> One of Sullivan's videos, entitled "RuPaul Explains the Difficulties of Go-Go Dancing in 1988," features its subject freshening up in a dingy dressing room after a sweaty night of work. His wig is platinum and ratty, his white bustier and matching garter soiled and sweat-stained. Seemingly inebriated, RuPaul laments the hazards of go-go dancing, telling the camera, "I let these men touch all over me for the money. Just because I want the money. Isn't that terrible? What am I gonna do? I'm in show business. These guys, they look at you, they wanna touch you. Charge them, dammit."<sup>13</sup> Today, RuPaul's career and lifestyle are starkly different from those heady early days in New York City; however, his ideology remains the same. As he sings in his 2014 single "Sissy that Walk," "unless they're paying your bills, pay those bitches no mind."

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<sup>12</sup> Nelson Sullivan died suddenly of a heart attack in 1989, at the age of 41, but his videos live on, hosted on the 5ninthavenueproject YouTube channel. The collection, featuring intimate looks into the lives of these starving street kids who later became the tastemakers of New York City nightlife, exist as a valuable time capsule twenty years before anyone with a smartphone could call themselves a documentarian.

<sup>13</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=mANejj6o3Xs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mANejj6o3Xs).



In the beginning of his career, he adopted a style called genderfuck, an abrasive, androgynous brand of drag whose origin dates back to the 1970s. RuPaul describes the genderfuck look he wore while walking the streets and dancing in the clubs of downtown Manhattan: “I [put on] football shoulder pads, wild voodoo-style makeup, with ‘Fuck Off’ and ‘Asshole’ written on my arms as tattoos. And apart from that I was butt naked, except for a tiny jock strap and thigh-high wader boots” (90). In “Do You Want Queer Theory (Or Do You Want the Truth)? Intersections of Punk and Queer in the 1970s,” cultural critic Tavia Nyong’o ties queer radicalism to 1970s punk politics. Nyong’o argues that embracing a punk rock ethos can inspire queer individuals to go beyond “the binary stalemate of having to choose between resisting the hegemonic fantasy of the homosexual or acceding to it” (226). As San Francisco street artist Christopher Long wrote in a 1970s street zine called *Gay Sunshine*, genderfuck’s iconoclastic sneer worked “to ridicule and destroy the whole cosmology of restrictive sex roles and sexual identification.”<sup>14</sup> RuPaul’s genderfuck style satisfied his hegemonic angst, but he stalled professionally. RuPaul divulges that during this time he developed a dependency on drugs and alcohol. Dejected and suicidal, he returned to California to live on his sister’s couch. After convalescing with family, RuPaul returned to New York in 1989, reinvigorated and determined to make it in show business.

As the 1980s came to a close, the AIDS epidemic continued to devastate LGBTQ communities. RuPaul ditched genderfuck for a more hyper-feminine, glamorous look and, along with fellow Atlantan drag queen export Lady Bunny, sought to spread positivity within New

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<sup>14</sup> [www.everything.explained.today/Gender\\_bender/](http://www.everything.explained.today/Gender_bender/).

York City nightlife. At club kid stalwart Larry Tee's weekly revue, "Love Machine," their drag performances merged sweet southern charm with scathing social critique, bringing "a new freedom that totally liberated and reinvented drag" (RuPaul 110). RuPaul's towering grandeur and "Everybody Say Love" positivity eventually endeared the drag queen to an audience that transcended dingy basement clubs in New York's East Village, earning RuPaul the professional success he so desired. He imparts this strategy to his legacy, the drag queens who compete on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. In order to appeal to "Betty and Joe Beercan," the cheeky epithet RuPaul reserves for mainstream America, *RuPaul's Drag Race* gives an incomplete, watered-down portrayal of drag queen culture. "I've been able to sell something that has been thought of as subversive, and somehow I've tweaked it," RuPaul explains in a June 2015 interview with *Dazed Digital*. "I've taken certain things out of it so that 'Betty and Joe Beercan' can invite it into their home" (Myers, "The Subversive Genius of RuPaul").

The phrase "Disneyland realness" in this chapter's title is both a nod to the ballroom categories documented in *Paris Is Burning* and a remark on the manner in which *RuPaul's Drag Race* depicts drag queen culture.<sup>15</sup> Dorian Cory, one of the veteran queens featured in *Paris Is Burning*, explains "realness" as an opportunity for impoverished queer people of color to indulge in the fantasy that they are giving "the society that they live in what they want to see ... rather than have to go through prejudices about your lifestyle. You can walk around, comfortably blending in with everybody else. You erase all the mistakes, all the flaws, all the giveaways, to make your illusion perfect" (*Paris Is Burning*).

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<sup>15</sup> The drag ball category "Executive Realness," for example, awards the participant who best passes as a straight, masculine, professional businessman, based on his look, body language, and runway presentation.

*RuPaul's Drag Race* is drag queen culture Disneyfied. The crass irreverence toward taboo topics such as sex and drugs, as well as an open contempt for the straight world, both of which are highly commonplace in drag queen culture, become sober and sunshiny double entendres. This is evident on an episode of *RuPaul's All Stars* (2012), an abbreviated season of the show where 12 popular contestants from the first four seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race* compete to determine who among them will be inducted into the “*Drag Race* Hall of Fame.” In the penultimate episode, “Dynamic Drag Duos,” the final four are tasked to create a look and narrative for a comic book “she-ro” and “superfoe.” Season 4’s Chad Michaels, a Cher impersonator from Los Angeles, and Shannel, a season 1 showgirl from Las Vegas, decide to go blue, creating characters with the decidedly raunchy names “Fire Pussy and Lactasia Megatits.” The two plan their concept with enthusiastic laughter, but when RuPaul, in his “Tim Gunn mentor mode,” arrives to the You Better Workroom, the set location that simulates a drag venue’s backstage dressing room, he expresses concern that “Betty and Joe Beercan might find it a little provocative.” The queens heed his advice, changing the characters’ names to the less prurient (but still suggestive) “Fire Crotch and Lactasia.”<sup>16</sup> This stab at temperate drag is not a grab for homonormative respectability in the way that the female impersonators distanced themselves from the street fairies as profiled in *Mother Camp*. Removing drag’s subversive sting makes the drag queen figure appear telegenic to an audience that usually scorns them, thus affording drag queens unparalleled opportunities only ever made available to small handful of drag queens, including the show’s titular host.

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<sup>16</sup> *RuPaul's All Stars* season 1, episode 5, “Dynamic Drag Duos.”

When RuPaul ditched the punk rock, downtown snarl for a more glamorous aesthetic, his kinder, gentler drag granted him a level of professional success that is often inaccessible not only for drag queens but also for people of color with a disrupted formal education and parents of low economic status. RuPaul calls his alter ego “The Monster,” aped after the celebrity supermodels of the time, including Cindy Crawford, Naomi Campbell, and Linda Evangelista. In his book, *Workin’ It! RuPaul’s Guide to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Style*, RuPaul describes how the Monster came to life, writing “I added two parts Diana Ross, a pinch of Bugs Bunny, two heaping spoonfuls of Dolly Parton, a dash of Joseph Campbell, and three parts Cher. It worked, I worked” (87). Some influences are more obvious than others, but it’s the pinch of Bugs Bunny, that cartoon cross-dressing leporine hustler, that allows the drag queen to transcend social boundaries of gender, class, and race by appealing to while simultaneously mocking their bourgeois pretensions. In *Hip: the History*, a racialized chronicle of cool in popular culture, author John Leland discusses the origins of American animation.<sup>17</sup> Bugs Bunny is a cunning trickster who bests his opponents by navigating “the gulfs between high culture and low, male and female, power and sass” (Leland 265). In “The Signifying Rabbit,” author Eric Savoy positions Bugs Bunny as a queer icon whose chicanery is indebted to the Signifying Monkey from Black American folklore.<sup>18</sup> Since the 1940s, Warner Bros.’ wily rabbit outfoxed opponents like Elmer Fudd by “consistently manipul[at]ing cultural law in order to survive” (Savoy 193).

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<sup>17</sup> Freed from the trappings of history and fixed time, cartoon characters are often referenced by scholars such as Jack Halberstam who advocate forgetfulness and looping as a new kind of queer temporality.

<sup>18</sup> The Signifying Monkey is a descendant of Esu, a trickster figure in Yoruba mythology, whose stories survived passage into slavery. Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes, “Free of the white person’s gaze, black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms” (xxiv).

Bugs Bunny and RuPaul don drag to appeal to heteronormative conceptions of the woman as a glamorous object of masculine desire in order to reach their goals of hunting season survival and professional success, respectively.

Instead of exploiting racial stereotypes in its mid-twentieth-century cartoons, Warner Bros.' rival, the Walt Disney Company, sought to silence race altogether (Leland 261). In its early days, Disney did not hire black or Jewish people, which is what led to the creation of Warner Bros.' animation house in the first place. Where Bugs Bunny shucked and schemed while accompanied by a rollicking bebop soundtrack, Mickey Mouse told the truth, left the high heels to his chaste girlfriend, Minnie, and played nice with others. When Disney did feature people of color in its films, namely, *Song of the South* (1946), it made race relations between liberated slave and white Southerner in the era of Jim Crow appear amiable and the institutionalized slavery of Africans seem like a genteel American tradition. Leland describes Disney's treatment of race and ethnicity as "stereotyping without curiosity, theft without love" (261).

When *RuPaul's Drag Race* Disneyfies drag queen culture, it's not a whitewash of the violence and anguish perpetrated upon a marginalized group in an effort to appease their oppressors like *Song of the South*. Recontextualizing the drag queen into a reality TV personality is not unlike Bugs Bunny the queer trickster getting a Mickey Mouse makeover. Drag as seen on TV is more wholesome compared to what takes place in LGBTQ spaces, but by appealing to a wider audience, *RuPaul's Drag Race* creates the illusion of drag being accessible in order to secure an unprecedented level of professional reach unheard of for drag performers. *RuPaul's*

*Drag Race* now airs internationally, in countries including the United Kingdom, Brazil, Australia, and the Philippines. Global reception of the show allows its contestants unparalleled opportunities to perform their live act for audiences all over the world, be it intimate appearances in small clubs or large-scale, sold-out tours in mid-sized theatres like the Battle of the Seasons and Divas of Drag tours.

In a March 2016 interview with CNBC.com, RuPaul shares that his show's initial objective "was to elevate and put focus on the artistry of drag and ... its political and social implications" (Chang, "RuPaul's Rise"). The "political and social implications" RuPaul mentions are what *RuPaul's Drag Race* refers to as "Herstory." Herstory comprises a specific body of queer knowledge, including events such as Stonewall, activists such as Marsha P. Johnson, celebrities such as Divine, and a vernacular that borrows heavily from *Paris Is Burning*. Herstory is reminiscent of Michel Foucault's work on genealogy, an integral contribution to the formation of LGBTQ studies. Foucault challenges marginalized groups who don't see themselves represented in the annals of history to carve out their own histories to make their lives known. "A genealogy should be seen as a kind of attempt to emancipate historical knowledges from that subjection, to render them, that is, capable of opposition and of struggle against the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse" (Foucault 85). For adolescent audiences, Disney's animated films are simplified primers to the more complex historical narratives that shape their world. The facile storytelling, animated woodland creatures, and uplifting musical numbers that make slavery (*Song of the South*) and colonial genocide (1995's *Pocahontas*) suitable for children sugarcoat the devastating systemic brutalities

committed in the name of American progress. Herstory, on the other hand, acts as a refresher for its straighter and/or younger fans oblivious to the generations-long LGBTQ fight against erasure, alienation, and oppression suffered at the hands of hegemonic America's stymied views on sexuality.

*RuPaul's Drag Race's* 100 queens and counting represent a wide swath of queer identities who buck conventions of American normalcy. By transforming them into reality television competitors, *RuPaul's Drag Race* elevates them from hegemonic failures to aspiring superheroes. In order to satisfy the generic framework of a reality television competition, the show simplifies and reframes drag, a historically unprofitable form of queer entertainment, into a viable money maker. As a reality competition, *RuPaul's Drag Race* works within a generic framework whose content symbolizes mythic rituals of mainstream American success. "Every [reality competition] has a specific myth about how it represents the social world," writes Nick Couldry in "Teaching Us to Fake It: The Ritualized Norms of Television's 'Reality' Games" (88). The workroom preparations, runway judgments, and intermittent confessional interviews where contestants reveal their inner dialogue and narrate the course of action are all generic elements already familiar to reality television audiences. Couldry remarks these elements make up rituals that are "organized around key media-related categories and boundaries whose performances suggest a connection with wider, media-related values" (85). Unblinking patriotism, rugged individualism, and hearty ambition are examples of core principles competitive reality programming might associate with successful American living. However,

since the contestants on *RuPaul's Drag Race* do not fit within traditional standards of success, the myths presented are viewed through a skewed, outsider's lens.<sup>19</sup>

Its format a mash-up of *Project Runway* and *America's Next Top Model* (2003–2015), each episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race* includes a challenge testing the queens' mettle in acting, singing, dancing, modeling, and/or design. This is followed by a return to the workroom, where they prepare for the runway to be evaluated for their performances that week. The current season's judging panel includes a dragged-up RuPaul, his longtime second banana, Michelle Visage, and media personalities Ross Matthews and Carson Kressley, former star of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007). Each week the panel is joined by guest judges, with past appearances from celebrities such as Chaz Bono, La Toya Jackson, Bob Mackie, and Blondie. After walking the runway, the queens line up while the judging panel evaluates each queen's individual performance that week. After the evaluation, the queens are briefly dismissed to the backstage area while the judges deliberate. When they return to the runway, RuPaul declares that week's winner, who is usually gifted a trip, a shopping spree, or some drag-related swag provided by show sponsors. The two queens who fared the worst that week go head-to-head in a "Lip-Sync For Your Life" (LSFYL), where the two perform to a predetermined song. The queen who gives the superior performance stays ("shantay you stay"), while the other queen is

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<sup>19</sup> A season 3 episode called "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Style" finds the queens challenged to create a patriotic promo that will be seen by soldiers who are stationed overseas. The episode aired months before *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* was dissolved, and one of the queens, Alexis Mateo, uses a personal story about dating a closeted man in the military. The challenge called for the queens to show pride and support for an institution that, at the time, denied gay people the right to enlist unless they concealed their sexuality. In a season 4 episode, the remaining five queens participate in a presidential debate. The runway theme is "Inaugural Ball." Queen Sharon Needles opts for a futuristic look, her reasoning being "a drag queen's not going to be president for a hundred years, so I had to think ahead."



dismissed from the competition (“sashay away”). Each season begins with 12–14 queens and culminates in a finale extravaganza taped in front of a live studio audience where the cast reunites to reflect on the season, announce Miss Congeniality, and, among the top three finalists, crown America’s Next Drag Superstar. Along with the title, the winner receives \$100,000 as well as prizes from the show’s sponsors.

While *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is the first televised drag race competition, it’s hardly the first time drag has been made competitive. The international pageant circuit as depicted in documentaries *The Queen* (1968) and *The Pageant* (2008) and the drag balls shown in *Paris Is Burning* (1990) are storied institutions of competitive drag. But not all queens participate in pageants or drag balls. Most work in nightclubs. In drag bars, queens’ acts traditionally consist of a lip-synched performance to a prerecorded song with a feminine vocal. The crowd is encouraged to tip the queens during their numbers; this transaction is often integrated into the performance, much like the monetary exchange between an exotic dancer and her patron (Hankins 441). Whether at a Miss Gay America pageant, a Harlem drag ball, or a basement nightclub in West Hollywood, a drag performer’s merit is based primarily on appearance, execution of aesthetic, and, perhaps most importantly, her ability to connect with her audience.

When *RuPaul’s Drag Race* first premiered in 2009, it became clear that “America’s Next Drag Superstar” not only required “Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve, and Talent” (C.U.N.T.) but also a skill set not usually expected out of drag queens. Being the most compelling live performer was not enough to guarantee the crown. This is evident when season 5 competitor Alyssa Edwards, a 32-year-old pageant queen who runs a dance studio in Mesquite, Texas, kept

landing in the bottom for her underwhelming performances in challenges. Like most reality show competitors, the queens expressed feelings of fear and anxiety when faced with the possibility of elimination, but Alyssa welcomed the chance to LSFYL. The beginning of episode 9, "Drama Queens," takes place immediately following the prior episode's conclusion, in which Alyssa Edwards bested Ivy Winters in a LSFYL to Gwen Guthrie's "Ain't Nothing Going on but the Rent." Back in the workroom after Ivy's elimination, Alaska asks Alyssa if having to lip-synch for a second time horrified her. Alyssa shakes her head, explaining, "I'm a performer, baby; this is what I do." Coco Montrese and Roxxy Andrews accuse Alyssa of not trying hard enough when performing challenges that fall outside her comfort zone. Alyssa objects, telling them that she's confident in her skills as a dancer and lip-synch performer but has never pretended to be a talented actor or comedian, which is why she keeps underperforming in challenges that call for both. The scene then cuts to a confessional interview where Alyssa's rival, Coco, equates Alyssa's attitude not with an honest self-evaluation of one's strengths and weaknesses but laziness.

As the title "Drama Queens" suggests, this episode's main challenge involves acting. The remaining six queens split up into two teams of three to star in a prepared scene written in the style of a telenovela. On the runway, Alyssa once again lands in the bottom, criticized not only for her poor acting in the telenovela but also for her look on the runway. Judge Santino Rice, who rose to renown as a rabble-rousing reality show competitor on the second season of *Project Runway* (2004-present), declares it the worst dress he's seen in all five seasons of judging the show. Alyssa defends herself, countering, "When you go to the clubs ... you don't ask the

[queens] ... did you make [your dress]? Were you funny the other night to get here? [...I]f I'm able to stay I'll [lip-synch] every damn week because I am an entertainer." Coco interjects, telling Alyssa that "lip-synching all the way to the crown is not what [the competition] is about." RuPaul calls Alyssa the "total package" but then expresses doubt over whether Alyssa knows "how to connect the pieces."<sup>20</sup> After a fierce LSFYL to Paula Abdul's "Cold Hearted" against her rival, Coco, Alyssa is eliminated from the competition.

Within the confines of the nightclub, a fierce lip-synch performance is often the sole deciding factor in whether a drag queen is talented. On *RuPaul's Drag Race*, lip-synch prowess is only ever tested when a queen fails to meet the judges' expectations. This means those who excel week to week are succeeding in a drag queen competition without ever really demonstrating their ability to give a commanding performance, arguably the most important skill for working drag queens. Tyra Sanchez, winner of season 2, Alaska, runner-up of season 5, and Violet Chachki, winner of season 7, each made it to the finale without ever having to LSFYL.

Until *RuPaul's Drag Race* transformed the reviled drag queen figure into an esteemed reality television competitor, the professional ambition and character attributes of the person underneath the wig and makeup are irrelevant when determining whether a drag queen's performance is a success or a failure. In some ways, diminishing the importance of the lip-synch performance is a misrepresentation of what qualifies a drag queen's skill level. But *RuPaul's Drag Race* strives to be more than just a televised drag queen competition. The reality show aims

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<sup>20</sup> *RuPaul's Drag Race* season 5, episode 9, "Drama Queens."

to be a career launchpad for drag queens who aspire to attain a level of American success unheard of in their field—the exception being its titular host, of course.

The challenges on *RuPaul's Drag Race* mirror real-life moments in its host's prolific show business career. After his initial fame as an MTV video star and media darling in the early 1990s, RuPaul went on to add radio DJ, talk show host, print model, ad campaign spokesperson, actor, executive producer, shoe designer, and author to his résumé. After appearing on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, many queens have followed in its host's esteemed footsteps, successfully breaking the drag queen glass ceiling by expanding their career reach beyond lip-synched performances to other people's songs. Because of its proven status as an effective launchpad for younger generations of drag queens to careers as far-reaching as his own, RuPaul calls *RuPaul's Drag Race* his biggest accomplishment (Chang, "RuPaul's Rise"). Queens Sharon Needles, Adore Delano, Willam Belli, and others have released multiple full-length albums, some of which have charted on Billboard and iTunes. In 2013, season 5 winner Jinkx Monsoon wrote and starred in *The Vaudevillians*, an off-Broadway show whose initial run at the Laurie Beechman Theatre was extended six times (Hetrick, "Cult Hit"). Others have been are hired as spokesmodels in ad campaigns for American Apparel, Absolut Vodka, and Magnum ice cream. Shangela Laquifa Wadley, a queen who competed on both seasons 2 and 3, landed small speaking roles on *Glee* (2009–2015), as well as the return of *The X-Files* (2016). Pearl, a young queen who resembles James Dean out of drag, recently signed to the prestigious modeling agency Wilhelmina International. Other queens have also pursued entrepreneurship, like season 4's Miss

Congeniality, Latrice Royale, who runs LRI, a talent and management company, and season 6's Courtney Act, who oversees Wigs by Vanity, an upscale wig line.

In order to establish *RuPaul's Drag Race* as a legitimate gateway to unprecedented American success for drag queens, the show needed to secure a large, loyal fan base that transcended Logo TV's demographic. In its early seasons, the Disneyfication of drag meant a disapproval of any style that ruptures hegemonic notions of the gender binary, despite its storied place in drag queen culture. On a June 18, 2014, episode of RuPaul's podcast, "What's the Tee?" RuPaul justifies this decision, explaining, "[The show introduced] drag to the world, but for 'Betty and Joe Beercan' ... we wanted to ease them into the terminology and the genres and the different shades of drag. They would know the 'femme' queen and the 'pageant' queen—those were easy sells ... [The popularity of season 4 winner] Sharon Needles, who does sort of a genderfuck version of it, made it possible to introduce [more subversive brands of drag]." <sup>21</sup> By only rewarding queens with a hyper-effeminate aesthetic, the show's Disneyfied drag is misrepresentative of its gender fluidity. However, as each season progresses, the show is able to broaden its definition of what drag is by providing an increasingly queerer representation of drag beyond the small screen.

On the very first episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, "Drag on a Dime," audiences meet Ongina, a young queen whose androgynous aesthetic does not include a padded, feminine silhouette or a wig for her shaved head. During judging, RuPaul tells Ongina that her drag makes her look like a "little boy." The judges' feedback encourages Ongina to feminize her look if she

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<sup>21</sup> [www.rupaulpodcast.com/episodes/2014/6/18/episode-6-perseverance-and-oil-pulling-with-alaska](http://www.rupaulpodcast.com/episodes/2014/6/18/episode-6-perseverance-and-oil-pulling-with-alaska)

wants to succeed in the competition. Criticizing a queen for being wigless overlooks legendary drag artists such as club kid performance artist Leigh Bowery, whose avant-garde “tranimal” drag continues to influence art and fashion icons such as Lady Gaga, David LaChapelle, and John Galliano. When Milk, a New York tranimal queen who appeared on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* season 6, shares with her fellow competitors that she plans to wear a beard on the runway, they decry her decision. Their derisions deny the storied legacy of bearded queens in drag culture, including 1970s San Francisco drag troupe the Cockettes, as well as the elegant, bearded drag of Mathu Andersen, RuPaul’s long time makeup artist. Critiquing queens’ looks as “too masculine” dismisses several subgenres of drag, all established well before the advent of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, including the genderfuck look RuPaul himself flaunted in 1980s New York. Female illusion is an important drag element, but defining drag within the narrow confines of masculine male bodies impersonating feminine female bodies denies queer notions of gender fluidity. Further, it reaffirms the hegemonic notions of “correct” displays of gender that seek to marginalize gender-nonconforming individuals like drag queens in the first place.

Queerer approaches to drag performance that met harsh criticism in past seasons typically gain acceptance in later seasons. Although Milk faced reprimands from her fellow season 6 competitors when she chose to don a beard on the runway, the following season found a runway challenge with a bearded queen theme. In a season 5 episode the queens are tasked to write and perform sketches for a racy kiddie program in the spirit of *The Pee-Wee Herman Show* (1981). Season 5 runner-up Alaska chooses to perform as a Pee-Wee Herman-type character called Buffalo Bill, itself a reference to the transsexual serial killer from *Silence of the Lambs* (1991).

During judging, Alaska appears flummoxed over the judges' disappointment in her for "going boy" in a drag competition. Two seasons later during "Snatch Game," the show's annual send-up of the 1970s bawdy celebrity game show *Match Game*, Kennedy Davenport chooses to impersonate Little Richard. Her fellow queens express their horror over the decision, since Little Richard is a man and performing as a man "isn't drag." The choice is considered risky, despite the fact that Little Richard's audacious performance style, biting sexual innuendos, and outlandish, feminine aesthetic made him a mainstream queer icon before there was such a thing. In *Role Models*, John Waters's collection of essays on the cultural figures who inspired the legendary "bad taste" filmmaker, Waters reflects on the time he interviewed Little Richard for *Playboy*. He remembers his own introduction to the musician when he played "Lucille" for his family on his grandmother's hi-fi as a child in 1957. "In one magical moment, every fear of my white family had been laid bare: an uninvited, screaming, flamboyant black man was in the living room" (Waters, "Little Richard, Happy at Last"). Waters recounts Little Richard's sentiments on his own queerness, telling Waters:

I believe I was the founder of gay. I'm the one who started to be so bold tellin' the world! You got to remember my dad put me out of the house because of that. I used to take my mother's curtains and put them on my shoulders. And I used to call myself at the time the Magnificent One. I was wearing makeup and eyelashes when no men were wearing that. I was very beautiful; I had hair hanging everywhere. If you let anybody know you was gay, you was in trouble; so when I

came out I didn't care what nobody thought. (qtd. in Waters, "Little Richard, Happy at Last")

Little Richard's impossible stardom in the 1950s epitomizes the revolutionary potential when America broadens its perceptions of who deserves success. Like the street fairies of *Mother Camp*, Little Richard flaunted his gender fluidity shamelessly, societal expectations be damned. Kennedy ignores her fellow contestants' objections and excels in the Snatch Game challenge, sharing her win with Ginger Minj, who impersonated UK pop star Adele. The following season's Snatch Game found an increasingly positive attitude toward genderqueer drag, for example, season 8 contestant Thorgy Thor impersonating Michael Jackson; her celebrity choice was met with zero fanfare or controversy.

*RuPaul's Drag Race* soft build of increasingly queerer representations of drag hustles a normative audience whose notions of gender as essential and binary are antithetical to drag's blurred lines between the masculine and the feminine. Its "Bugs Bunny in Mickey Mouse drag" strategy enables the show to change hegemonic attitudes toward drag queens, transforming them into respectable role models. In doing this, *RuPaul's Drag Race* transcends reality television's status as "mindless entertainment," becoming a springboard to American success for queer artists and entertainers.

*Punks in Pumps: Drag on TV is Still Dangerous*. By creating a Disneyfied drag that appeals to the Betty and Joe Beercans of the world, *RuPaul's Drag Race* elevates the marginalized drag queen's cultural influence and career scope beyond Pride parades and go-go dancing gigs. Some



might decry the “family-friendly” drag on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* a symptom of queer assimilation. And while its titular host did not reach the celebrity he desired until he abandoned his genderfuck look, that doesn’t mean he no longer endorses its defiant ethos. “Drag is punk rock,” RuPaul stresses in an interview for *The Independent*. “The mainstream is skeptical of drag, and rightly so: drag is making fun of it” (Quine, “RuPaul Interview”). The relationship between punk and drag was discussed at length during a panel at RuPaul’s DragCon 2016. Fittingly called “Drag Is Punk,” the session featured author and musician Henry Rollins, who discussed the connections between punk and queer culture, sharing that both “were met with violent opposition” from not only heteronormative street aggressors but also institutional authorities.

Although Rollins identifies as a straight cisgender man, he told the audience that his feelings of alienation growing up punk in 1970s Washington, D.C., led him to form a close bond with the LGBTQ community, as he explains, “because I [was] running myself.” When moderator Lyndsey Parker posed a question regarding the commercialization of subcultures, Rollins, made famous as the frontman for seminal 1980s hardcore outfit Black Flag, praised punk’s absorption into the mainstream during the 1990s. While many rock purists cried “sellout” at bands who dominated MTV and radio airwaves, punk’s rise in popularity allowed influential punk icons such as Rollins and Iggy Pop “to ride the coattails” of the wildly successful 1990s pop punk bands they inspired. “I greatly benefitted from all that commercialization because it brought more people to my shows. I didn’t get in music to not get heard,” Rollins mused. The mass popularity of bands such as Green Day made punk accessible to a wider audience. And while the mainstream reduced punk’s spirit to a saying on a T-shirt, Rollins smirked, “We kind of used that

against them. It was great.” Green Day’s pop formula diluted punk just enough to make an art form rooted in anarchic rebellion radio-friendly. Taking a page from pop punk’s book, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* dulls drag’s subversive bite without defanging its power to dismantle hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality.<sup>22</sup>

*RuPaul’s Drag Race’s* Disneyfied gender bending makes it suitable for television, but that doesn’t necessarily extend to the queens’ live acts. Season 4 favorite Willam Belli’s club gigs often culminate in the California queen fisting an audience volunteer live onstage. Alaska Thunderfuck 5000 (her own name Disneyfied to the less profane “Alaska” on TV) is known to strip completely naked during her act. On the Divas of Drag March 2016 tour stop in Chicago, season 7 contestant Trixie Mattel, a 25-year-old Milwaukee comedy queen whose look resembles a clownish 1970s Barbie doll, told the House of Blues audience that “saying you like drag and only watching it on TV is like saying you like singing but only watch [people sing on] *The Voice*.”

There are some detractors who claim *RuPaul’s Drag Race* hurts drag at the local level, including season 7 contestant Jasmine Masters, who took to YouTube in January 2016 to announce that “*RuPaul’s Drag Race* has fucked up drag.” In the video, the Los Angeles-based performer admits she auditioned for the show because she “needed a goddamn pay raise.” While Jasmine, a polished pageant queen, could have provided a wealth of reasons as to why the show might be a threat to queer culture, her argument devolved into putting her own objective

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<sup>22</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbOSDpQ6LnI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbOSDpQ6LnI).

parameters on what is and isn't drag.<sup>23</sup> Like Masters's flaming of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, as the 1990s wore on, critics blamed the commercial success of artists such as "punk princess" Avril Lavigne as the final nail in punk's coffin. Despite its assimilation into the mainstream, punk continues to thrive in local "DIY" scenes from San Francisco to Baltimore. And like the subterranean DIY basement shows, more subversive drag scenes continue to flourish at offbeat revues such as Queen Kong in Los Angeles.

Veteran queens who came up during RuPaul's initial celebrity stardom in the early 1990s, likely too seasoned to compete on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, also reap the benefits of the show's hustling of homonormative conventions to make drag accessible to a wider audience.<sup>24</sup> As Henry Rollins's and Iggy Pop's careers enjoyed a second wind thanks to punk's commercial success in the 1990s, drag doyennes such as Peaches Christ, Coco Peru, Jackie Beat, and Lady Bunny enjoy a higher profile thanks to the show's rising popularity and are able to hop on national tours, appearing alongside the "Ru-Girls" they inspired.<sup>25</sup>

The popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race* has ushered in an unprecedented level of visibility for drag queen entertainers, but the show is still considered a cult hit. Its season 8 premiere, the highest-rated premiere episode to date, netted 377,000 viewers (Metcalf, "Updated: Showbuzzdaily's Top 150"). A popular network reality competition such as *The Voice* usually

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<sup>23</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gf25Xzhpz\\_k&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gf25Xzhpz_k&feature=youtu.be).

<sup>24</sup> These queens also enjoyed a slightly higher profile, appearing alongside RuPaul on daytime talk shows of Geraldo and Phil Donahue and starring in the indie documentary *Wigstock: The Movie* (1995).

<sup>25</sup> "Ru-Girl" is the name of a 2013 single released by *Drag Race* season 5 runner-up Alaska. The song is a tongue-in-cheek anthem about life as one of RuPaul's "Legendary Children."

boasts a viewership of 12 million (O’Connell, “TV Ratings: *The Voice* Drives Monday”). Drag queens are experiencing an unparalleled level of career opportunity, but the ups and downs in its host’s own career trajectory, as well as the public’s tendency to be fickle in their favor of reality TV personalities, suggest that these opportunities won’t always be available. By turning drag into a reality show competition, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* plays to and undermines hegemonic conventions of gender and sexuality in order to hustle the favor of audiences perceived as too young and/or too straight to embrace drag’s queer subversiveness. The following chapter will further elucidate how transforming drag performers into reality stars works to redefine so-called queer failures into American successes.

#### WHAT MAKES A MAN A QUEEN? DRAG QUEENS AS NEOLIBERAL CITIZENS

“Should a homosexual be a good citizen?” Leo Bersani opens the final chapter of *Homo* with this question (113).<sup>26</sup> He seeks to answer it by examining characters in classic literary works by gay authors Marcel Proust and Jean Genet. For Proust, Bersani observes that gay men are self-loathing loners whose mutual revulsion for their own kind compels them to “see with disgust their unnatural selves reflected in the specular presence of their fellow inverts” (Bersani 129). Proust compares the gay figures in his work *Sodome et Gomorrhe* to early twentieth-century European Jews who worked exhaustively to assimilate into a society steeped in anti-Semitism. Bersani jokes he won’t be presenting Proust’s queer groupings based on communal self-loathing

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<sup>26</sup> Bersani uses the arguably antiquated term “homosexual” in *Homos* as that was the standard nomenclature of the twentieth-century authors he discusses. While Bersani primarily addresses gay men in *Homos*, this project treats his use of “homosexual” to define any and all LGBTQ identities.

as “a model of gay cohesiveness” anytime soon; however, it serves as a caution “about the values we may be perpetrating in our hard-won community” (Bersani 130).

Collective self-loathing of overt queerness or any gender expression that strays from the American standard of what a “good citizen” looks like is part of what leads to the pervasion of homonormativity within the LGBTQ community. Lisa Duggan’s essay “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism” opens with a description of a 1999 assemblage organized by the right-wing gay Log Cabin Republicans. During the conference, speakers alluded to a new movement within the gay community at that time, referencing the Independent Gay Forum (IGF), whose members include *A Place at the Table* author Bruce Bawer and conservative journalist Andrew Sullivan. Duggan observes that the speakers greatly exaggerated the size of this new right-wing group of gays who renounced the political queer radicalism that informed LGBTQ politics in America during the 1970s and 1980s. “By invoking a phantom mainstream public of ‘conventional’ gays who represent the responsible center,” Duggan writes, “[IGF has] worked to position ‘liberationists’ and leftists as irresponsible ‘extremists’ or as simply anachronistic” (179). Duggan’s essay illustrates what’s at stake when gay political groups abandon queer radicalism in favor of politics that endorse a “normalized” definition of good citizenship. Neoliberalism, as considered by Duggan, is a political philosophy that is exclusionary to those who don’t adhere to hegemonic notions of success. Ironically, these are the people who are most often in need of political representation and advocacy.

The 100 queens who’ve competed on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* represent a wide swath of varying social strata, familial situations, races, ethnicities, corporeal sizes, and sexual identities.

Their drag queen lifestyle does not align with homonormative standards of propriety and domesticity. Many of the contestants mirror those American citizens who risk disenfranchisement from a culture that endorses a neoliberal ideology. However, by reframing these drag queens into stars on a reality television show, a neoliberal technology, *RuPaul's Drag Race* queers notions of neoliberalism, turning these hegemonic failures into “good citizens.”

*Airwave Indoctrination: Trash TV as a Technological Tool.* Reality television detractors often dismiss the genre as trashy and mindless. However, media scholars such as Laurie Ouellette and James Hay position reality programming as a useful cultural technology that, among other things, instructs audiences how to be good citizens. Their work, *Better Living through Reality TV*, argues that reality television is an effective, instructional resource that services its country by extolling the virtues of neoliberal citizenship. Ouellette and Hay contend that reality television instructs its audience how to be good citizens “by presenting individuals and populations as objects of assessment and intervention, and by soliciting their participation in the cultivation of particular habits, ethics, behaviors, and skills” (13). *RuPaul's Drag Race's* winners' and losers' narratives portray success and failure as empowerment dependent on believing in one's own self-worth. As RuPaul proclaims at the end of every episode, “If you can't love yourself, how in the hell are you going to love somebody else?”

In a neoliberal government, self-empowerment is an individual's “most pressing obligation to society” (Ouellette and Hay 3). Placing the onus of American success on the individual fails to acknowledge the systemic oppression faced by those who fail to live up to the

hegemonically accepted standards of class, race, gender, size, sexuality, and so forth. *RuPaul's Drag Race* acknowledges this by using generic reality devices as a conduit for contestants to display feelings of alienation indicative of queer pain. Despite this acknowledgement of systemic oppression felt by LGBTQ persons, the show ultimately advocates that it is the individual's responsibility, as season 4 Miss Congeniality winner Latrice Royale says, "to get up, look sickening, and make them eat it."<sup>27</sup> Out of drag, Latrice Royale is Timothy Wilcots, a large and looming ex-con who grew up black, gay, and poor in a single-parent home in Compton, California. According to American standards, Wilcots would not be regarded as a "good citizen." But on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, as Latrice Royale, Wilcots is a voluminous superstar who glides down a runway like a sleek ocean liner and is an inspiration for those made to feel less than for failing to live up to American expectations of how to be.

Another tenet of neoliberalism is to uphold the needs of the individual over those of the group while enforcing self-discipline as a kind of social order. To do this, it relies on special apparatuses that enable the state to enforce ideals and values without directly addressing its subjects. Michel Foucault referred to these apparatuses, most notably in his work "Two Lectures," as the locations where knowledge is cultivated and hierarchized to form power or influence (93). These different systems make up the networks in which power is articulated to and informed by its subjects and include social institutions such as the media, religious bodies, and the education system. Modern technologies found in the domestic sphere are particularly

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<sup>27</sup> *RuPaul's Drag Race* season 4 finale.

powerful neoliberal tools. The image of the TV set as the centerpiece in American living rooms and other common domestic areas evinces its influence.

Of course, the image of the family circling around the TV set for some communal tuning in is rather antiquated in the age of media convergence. As our government model places favor on the interests of the individual as opposed to the group, much of today's television consumption by its citizens takes place privately on a laptop or smartphone. Programming that encourages an "ever greater reliance on self" (Hay 54) endorses neoliberalism by favoring individuals who are self-sufficient citizens capable of policing their own behavior. By making "ordinary citizens" its stars, reality programming improves upon the ineffectual educational television of America's past that aimed to reach a "gullible mass that needed guidance" (Ouellette and Hay 3) in order to grasp civic concepts. Makeover shows such as *What Not to Wear* and *The Biggest Loser* teach the individual that she is not living her best life so she must change. This is best achieved by equating happiness to a pro-capitalist consumer lifestyle and rigorous self-discipline. Fox's home cooking competition, *MasterChef* (2010-present), champions narratives of culinary amateurs with humble means whose big dreams are inhibited by personal hardships (blindness, poverty, single motherhood). *MasterChef* depicts the winners as hard-working, self-determined American heroes for overcoming personal adversity to make good food.

As a neoliberal technology, reality television proves itself to be much more beneficial than escapist entertainment. Its rituals of gameplay reinforce rules that mirror societal conduct. As Ouellette and Hay explain, "[reality TV] becomes a resource for inventing, managing, caring



for, and protecting ourselves as citizens” (4). Television is a beneficial tool advocating self-government, but its foremost purpose is to act as a conduit between product and consumer. Earlier shows featured one sponsor integrated into a program’s framework; however, overt product placement can be a turnoff for modern viewers who demand content more compelling than an elaborate commercial (Gianatasio, “RuPaul Dresses up Product Placement”). Advertising agencies dream up new marketing schemes like integrative immersion, a concept *AdWeek* describes as a “highly creative hybrid that fuses content and commerce by making brands intrinsic elements of the drama, excitement and storyline of prime-time programs” (Gianatasio, “RuPaul Dresses up Product Placement”). Reality competitions are especially primed to make advertising appear seamless; *Top Chef* (2006-present) and *Project Runway* make sponsor products, such as Healthy Choice and Banana Republic, respectively, integral parts of their challenges. By proving themselves as effective promoters of both themselves and others’ commercial goods, the queens of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* legitimize their worth as good citizens in a society where money rules.

In her landmark 1964 essay, “Notes on Camp,” Susan Sontag writes that the queer aesthetic “sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman’” (Sontag, “Notes on Camp”). *RuPaul’s Drag Race*’s camp sensibility enables it to indulge in blatant plugs of not only sponsor products but also its host’s various commercial enterprises, from his albums on iTunes to his line of shoes to his signature candy bar. In a feature for *AdWeek* praising *RuPaul’s Drag Race*’s cheeky camp promotional skills, RuPaul explains, “we have fun with it in a way that we know what we’re doing [and] they know what we’re

doing” (Gianatasio, “RuPaul Dresses up Product Placement”). In our increasingly privatized capitalist country, “the self becomes more important as a flexible commodity to be molded, packaged, managed, reinvented and sold” (Ouellette and Hay 7). When MAC Cosmetics chose RuPaul as the first drag celebrity spokesmodel for a national campaign in 1994, the decision was heralded as not just savvy advertising but also a step toward social progress (Maddeaux, “Hiring RuPaul”). Broadening the concept of who is worthy of becoming a corporate shill is an arguably pessimistic view of social change. However, advertisers tapping marginalized groups to sell their products indicates that their American success is powerful enough for marginalized viewers who see themselves in these “hegemonic failures” to realize their own self-worth.

*RuPaul’s Drag Race* has the power to change the trajectory of drag from an expensive hobby into a legitimate moneymaker. Thanks to its fierce cult following, being a Ru-Girl propels drag performers from local bar obscurity to concert halls all over the world. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is a “golden ticket,” an unprecedented opportunity for steady work and increased booking fees. In a *Huffington Post* interview, season 6 winner Bianca Del Rio, whose brash insult comedy recalls stand-up luminary Don Rickles, shares, “I had never been to London. I had never been to Australia. I had never been to Scotland. All of this has happened because of the show” (Kacala, “Bianca Del Rio, Interviewed and Reviewed”).

*I Look Spooky, But I’m Really Nice: Drag Queens as Neoliberal Role Models.* Career opportunities for drag queens beyond the show increased with the advent of its fourth season, which premiered on Logo on January 12, 2012. While previous seasons of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*

crowned queens who most resembled RuPaul's "Glamazon" aesthetic, season 4 winner Sharon Needles, whose drag name suggests back alley drug use, was branded a true individual. Her subversive, "spooky" drag was presented as unique and uncompromised. Instead of Beyoncé as her muse, Sharon's drag referenced subcultural icons such as the self-mutilating, coprophilic punk rocker G.G. Allin and B movie horror queen Elvira, Mistress of the Dark. In the season 4 premiere, "RuPocalypse Now," the queens are tasked to create runway looks inspired by a world-ending event. As they construct their looks, the scene cuts away to competitors, including Sharon's eventual rival, a fiesty showgirl named Phi Phi O'Hara, who dismiss Sharon as strange or subpar; competitor Jiggly Caliente exclaims she needs to "pray the rosary" when Sharon is nearby. However, the judges are wowed by Sharon's zombie runway presentation, as they are heard audibly gasping as fake blood pours out of the spooky queen from Pittsburgh's mouth. She is declared the winner of the challenge.<sup>28</sup>

Sharon, whose real name is Aaron Coady, went on to win four main challenges, the most of any contestant on the show to date, before eventually winning her season. How did Coady, a high school dropout from small-town Iowa, who, on Sharon's official Facebook fan page, describe his drag persona as an "example of current social anxieties," become America's Next Drag Superstar? How did a self-described "punk rock sex clown" become a role model for *RuPaul's Drag Race* viewers, specifically those who are bullied gay youth?<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *RuPaul's Drag Race* season 4, episode 1, "RuPocalypse Now!"

<sup>29</sup> [www.facebook.com/SHARONNEEDLESisDEAD/info?tab=page\\_info](http://www.facebook.com/SHARONNEEDLESisDEAD/info?tab=page_info).

If Jean Genet were alive today, he would likely revel in Sharon's irreverent wickedness. In *Homo*, Leo Bersani writes that for Genet, his homosexuality made him an outlaw whose "criminality is designed to transform a stigmatizing essence imposed on him by others into a freely chosen destiny" (152). This stigmatic essentiality could be considered a queering of neoliberalism's notion of freedom as a "well-regulated and responsabilized liberty" (Barry, Osborne, and Rose 8). Both the outlaw homosexual and neoliberal citizen are made to feel that their lifestyle choices are based on personal freedom. In no way is this an inference that one's sexuality is a choice; however, the brave decision to display one's queerness publicly in a society that opposes it is. Discursive formations of sexuality throughout history color the gay lived experience, despite movements in academia to redefine queerness unconnected from its relationality to heteronormativity. And although neoliberal citizens are self-governing agents, they are still expected by the state "to choose order over chaos, and good behavior over deviance" (Ouellette and Hay 10).

Sharon Needles, as seen on TV, is the perfect marriage of the drag queen as gay outlaw and neoliberal reality television personality. The life story she divulges to *RuPaul's Drag Race* viewers both in confessional interviews and in interactions with her competitors is rife with feelings of queer pain paired with an uncompromised artistic individuality.<sup>30</sup> She describes her upbringing in small town Iowa as hellish due to feelings of alienation brought on by the

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<sup>30</sup> The confessional interview is a device often utilized in reality television where producers interview cast members in a private space separate from the action and away from their fellow castmates. Here they share internal dialogue, commenting either on a scene that just transpired or action to come. This is the space where producers encourage the reality personality to be her most authentic self, ultimately revealing her role on the program as either "villain" or "hero."

relentless bullying inflicted on her by her peers for being not only gay but also weird.<sup>31</sup> Instead of administrators disciplining classmates who bullied her, they encouraged her to drop out of school because her presence was a “distraction.” Sharon’s story is one shared by queer youth in America who are chastised, assaulted, and even murdered merely because their sexuality and/or gender expression does not align with hegemonic expectations.

Media, with the power to alter perceptions of historically marginalized individuals, works to act as more than just an hour of entertainment with ad space. Throughout her season, Sharon took advantage of her media visibility to make her time on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* as something more than being a contestant on a televised game show with a cash prize. In the episode “Frock the Vote,” the queens receive a visit from journalist/gay rights activist Dan Savage of the “It Gets Better” campaign, an LGBTQ anti-bullying nonprofit organization. Savage coaches the queens as they prepare for a challenge in which they’ll participate as presidential candidates in a mock debate. After the challenge, the queens discuss politics’ place in drag as they ready themselves for the runway. Chad Michaels, a veteran Cher impersonator from West Hollywood, explains, “I’m out to entertain people and make them feel good. Not to spread my political beliefs at the gay bar.” Chad’s sentiments negate the notion that a male figure embracing femininity in a patriarchal society is a politically charged act “akin to treason,” as RuPaul often remarks in interviews and on social media.<sup>32</sup> Sharon demonstrates her awareness of media’s powerful influence, countering Chad with the observation “we are given an opportunity that no

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<sup>31</sup> *RuPaul’s Drag Race* season 4, episode 10, “DILFs: Dads I’d Like to Frock.”

<sup>32</sup> [www.twitter.com/rupaul/status/328192842814062592](https://www.twitter.com/rupaul/status/328192842814062592).

other drag queen is given and that's a platform ... If I can just help one child, I've done my part."

<sup>33</sup> Sharon's "unapologetic loser" narrative made her a poster child for "freaks and weirdos" ostracized not only for their sexuality but also for their subcultural predilections. Sharon's catchphrases "When in doubt, freak 'em out" and "Boos are just applause from ghosts" encouraged viewers who've ever felt like failures to defy conventionality and embrace the very characteristics that define them as societal others.

This sentiment runs through the dark, comedic narratives in the work of John Waters. Waters's low-budget movies are set in a dystopic utopia called Baltimore, where the "scumbags" of America are the superstar successes and the heteronormative Goody Two-Shoes the losers. Divine, Waters's drag queen muse, was a morbidly obese, bald gay man named Glenn Milstead out of drag, but in *Pink Flamingos* (1972) and *Female Trouble* (1974), Divine is glamorous, powerful, and sexually desired. In *Shock Value: A Tasteful Book about Bad Taste*, Waters describes his characters, remarking, "My idea of an interesting person is someone who is quite proud of their seemingly abnormal life and turns their disadvantage into a career" (Waters 85). By refusing to play along, these queer figures not only legitimize their own lives but also inspire their viewers to follow suit. Jack Halberstam notes that while embracing the notion of queerness as hegemonic failure can be a liberating alternative for LGBTQ individuals, it "certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair" (3). But, with that painful loss comes a potential to broaden notions of good citizenship beyond its exclusionary, limited definition.

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<sup>33</sup> *RuPaul's Drag Race* season 4, episode 9, "Frock the Vote."

In American Dream ideology, a strong family unit is a major factor contributing to one's success (Beeler 31). Many contestants on the show, such as season 3 queen Mimi Imfurst, share stories of being violently ousted from their homes only to find a loving family within the drag community. *RuPaul's Drag Race* queers real-world relationality by redefining the family beyond the conventional nuclear unit. During the season 5 episode "RuPaul Roast," queens Alyssa Edwards and Roxxxxy Andrews find themselves up for elimination. The queens LSFYL to the song "Whip My Hair" by Willow Smith. After the photo finish lip-synch, Roxxxxy breaks down, telling the judges she's always felt unwanted after being abandoned by her mother at a bus stop when she was just three years old. A visibly moved RuPaul tells the room that "as gay people, we get to choose our family" and decides to let both queens remain in the competition.<sup>34</sup>

Throughout each season, there are tender moments on *RuPaul's Drag Race* in which contestants exhibit queer pain caused by familial estrangement. And although these stories work to evoke audience empathy, they also reaffirm neoliberal values of individualism. Growing up a pariah shunned by family and peers is not a prerequisite to appearing on the reality competition. However, its host and the judging panel repeatedly stress that the ability to display vulnerability as a strength is an essential element in becoming America's Next Drag Superstar. Stories of personal hardships become feats of neoliberalism like self-sufficiency and a tenacious work ethic, as well as a resolve, as season 5 winner Jinkx Monsoon says, not to live life "governed by a dark past but enlightened by a bright future."<sup>35</sup> Season 7 contestant Tempest Dujour echoed

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<sup>34</sup> *RuPaul's Drag Race* season 5, episode 7, "RuPaul Roast."

<sup>35</sup> *RuPaul's Drag Race Untucked* season 5, episode 7, "RuPaul Roast."

Sharon's sentiments of *RuPaul's Drag Race* as a political platform when sharing her story as a gay Mormon youth whose parents made her undergo conversion therapy. "It nearly destroyed me," she shares while having her makeup done by her challenge partner, Jaidynn Diore Fierce. Jaidynn was a young queen who, as of the episode's taping, had not come out to her strict, religious parents. In a confessional interview, Tempest explains that *RuPaul's Drag Race* allows its contestants the opportunity to "show those kids who are struggling themselves that there is someone who can empathize with what [they're] going through. If [I could] help one kid live another day, then [the trauma was] worth it."<sup>36</sup> In the same episode, Tempest's fellow contestant Trixie Mattel shares a story about her abusive stepfather:

If I was being too sensitive or acting too feminine, he would call me a "trixie."

For years that was one of the worst words I could think of, so I took that name

that used to have all this hurt to it, and I made it my drag name and now it's

something I celebrate, something I'm proud of. If I hadn't gone through the

horrible shit that happened when I was little, Trixie Mattel might not even exist.<sup>37</sup>

In a 2014 *Guardian* interview, RuPaul discusses why fans are drawn to *RuPaul's Drag Race*, explaining, "We're dealing with people who have been shunned by society and have made a life regardless of what anyone else thinks of them ... It shows the tenacity of the human spirit ... I think that's what's so captivating about it, seeing how these beautiful creatures have managed to prevail" (Rogers, "RuPaul: *Drag Race* 'Has Exactly the Effect We Thought'"). Many critics and

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<sup>36</sup> *RuPaul's Drag Race* season 7, episode 8, "Conjoined Queens."

<sup>37</sup> *RuPaul's Drag Race* Season 7, episode 8, "Conjoined Queens."



academics continue to dismiss reality television as ignominious claptrap. But it is one of the few media locations where disenfranchised Americans have a voice. *RuPaul's Drag Race* emboldens drag performers of varying racial, ethnic, and gender identities with the power to redefine how America perceives the historically devalued profession. Instead of reaffirming hegemonic notions of the drag queen as a social deviant, *RuPaul's Drag Race* shows them triumphing in spite of the systemic hardships suffered at the hands of a society that devalues them. These displays of individualism and self-sufficiency reaffirm qualities of neoliberalism; however, as drag queens, they subvert notions of what a good citizen looks like.

Like reality television, many consider the daytime talk show a contributor to America's cultural dearth. In *Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity*, Joshua Gamson extols the benefits of the often exploitative morning fare. Like reality TV, daytime talk shows cater to a predominantly female audience and feature a range of diverse identities often underrepresented in so-called prestigious television programming. "For people whose life experience is so heavily tilted toward invisibility, whose nonconformity ... discredits and disenfranchises them," Gamson writes, "daytime TV talk shows are a big shot of visibility and media accreditation. It looks, for a moment, like you own this place" (5). The contestants of *RuPaul's Drag Race* might be dismissed as freaks in the real world, but on the show their detractors are the ones who wear that label.

In a season 4 episode, the five remaining queens are tasked to transform straight, cisgender fathers into pregnant drag queens on an episode called "DILFs: Dads I'd Like to Frock." Sharon's partner is a muscle-bound and boisterous middle-aged man named Mike. Mike

decides to infuse what he refers to as “a little drag queen drama” into his interactions in order to intimidate the other queens, namely, Chad. As the exchange escalates, Mike asks Sharon, “Are you going to let this bitch talk to me like this?” Instead of coming to her DILF’s defense, Sharon snaps at him, telling Mike not to call her sister a “bitch.” This scene works to satisfy oppressed audiences by showing a cisgendered straight man attempting to insert his authority over gay men in a (simulated) queer space and failing. This recalls the chapter “Sitting Ducks and Forbidden Fruit” from Gamson’s *Freaks Talk Back*. In it, Gamson discusses the uniquely progressive atmosphere in 1990s daytime talk shows such as *Ricki Lake*. Gamson, who refers to Lake as a “former fat girl, honorary drag queen, and John Waters protégé” (58) explains that on Lake’s talk show, the LGBTQ guests were applauded for their courage while their detractors were treated like “the freaks” (Gamson, 130).

During a segment on *Untucked, RuPaul’s Drag Race* behind-the-scenes aftershow, the DILFs share their initial feelings of anxiety over the possibility of a drag queen being a man who wants to be a woman.<sup>38</sup> All admitted relief, with transphobic connotations, over the fact that drag queens are “real men” who wear women’s clothing only as a means of entertaining, like a clown or burlesque dancer. Later, when they are joined by the queens, they thank them for this unique experience. DILF Mike proclaims, “You guys are real people. You’re not freaks. You’re real people with real feelings, with real desires, with real affection, with real love. You’re real

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<sup>38</sup> *Untucked* aired on Logo TV from the second season until the sixth, with subsequent seasons running on YouTube. While the televised version is a saucy soap-operatic supplement to *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, the web version’s grittier, cinema verité style sets a somber tone to convey the competition’s strain on its drag queen contestants.

people.” The delivery of his sentiment that “queers are people too” makes it seem as if this is a nascent thought for him. The DILFs’ willful ignorance of gay culture within a queer piece of media reverses the power balance of real-world relationality, making the heteronormative masculine figure the freak.<sup>39</sup>

The stars of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* may not personally endorse a neoliberal philosophy. However, by placing hegemonically reviled figures such as the drag queen into a television genre whose makeup reifies principles of neoliberalism, the show broadens the possibilities of what a successful, “good” citizen can look like in America. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* shows disenfranchised Americans succeeding within a neoliberal technology while transcending homonormativity, “a new kind of political sedative” (Duggan 189) that allays the most privileged of the LGBTQ community into apathetic inaction. By awarding a “freak” like Sharon with the crown, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* redefined what it meant to be “America’s Next Drag Superstar.” Along with possessing C.U.N.T., the winner must embody neoliberal ideals, namely, relying on one’s own strength to self-improve and overcome systemic hardships. Being the most fashion-forward, fishiest, or adept at makeup no longer guaranteed victory.<sup>40</sup> This was made apparent by the following season’s winner, Jinkx Monsoon. Billing herself as “Seattle’s Premier Jewish Narcoleptic Drag Queen,” Jinkx excelled in challenges that tested the queens’ theatrical, musical, and comedic chops, but her fashion aesthetic and makeup skills were criticized harshly not only by the judges but also her fellow competitors.

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<sup>39</sup> *RuPaul’s Drag Race* season 4, episode 10, “DILFs: Dads I’d Like to Frock.”

<sup>40</sup> “Fish” is drag queen slang for queens who look convincingly feminine, a pejorative play on the vagina.

During the judge's deliberation in season 5's second episode "Lip Synch Extravaganza Eleganza," Michelle comments on Jinkx's poor contouring skills, remarking her nose is shaded to look like Alice the Goon.<sup>41</sup> When fellow queen Coco calls Jinkx's quirky runway looks "bullshit," Jinkx expresses exasperation over "defend[ing] a style of drag that's completely valid. Every time I step into something new, I have to fight this fight again."<sup>42</sup> That same episode, Michelle describes Jinkx's runway look as "pedestrian." In later runways, Michelle continues to express frustration over Jinkx's sartorial hiccups; when Jinkx finally delivers a look Michelle approves of, it's treated like a monumental triumph.<sup>43</sup>

Scenes of Jinkx breaking down in the confessional interview are frequent; she repeatedly expresses tear-filled frustration over feeling misunderstood and underestimated by her fellow competitors. In the season 5 "Snatch Game" episode, a workroom scene finds multiple queens expressing condescending bewilderment over Jinkx's celebrity choice, Edith "Little Edie" Beale. It feels disingenuous that a roomful of queer people would be unfamiliar with a camp icon like Beale, the eccentric cousin of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and subject of the Albert Maysles documentary *Grey Gardens* (1975).<sup>44</sup> However, this editorial decision builds to the narrative of Jinkx as the queer neoliberal underdog who triumphs by embracing self-improvement while still

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<sup>41</sup> Alice the Goon is the hulking, bald, hairy-armed character from E.C. Segar's Popeye comic strips, whose nose resembled that of a proboscis monkey.

<sup>42</sup> *RuPaul's Drag Race* season 5, episode 5, "Snatch Game."

<sup>43</sup> *RuPaul's Drag Race* season 5, episode 7, "RuPaul Roast."

<sup>44</sup> This is made even more apparent when recalling the season 4 episode "Dragazines" Sharon portrayed an Edie Beale-like character in the challenge. In a scene from that episode's *Untucked, RuPaul's Drag Race* after show, Jiggly remarks to Sharon that her "crazy cat lady" look reminded her of *Grey Gardens*.

staying true to her artistic individuality. Like “Boo is just applause from ghosts,” Jinkx’s self-appointed credo, “water off a duck’s back,” reemphasizes the notion that it’s ultimately the responsibility of the individual to protect oneself from external harm. In a confessional interview, Jinkx explains that she adopted the idiom because “words can’t hurt you; only your perception of those words can hurt you.”<sup>45</sup> Despite detractors such as Michelle, who continually questioned her makeup skills and sartorial taste, Jinkx’s self-reliant mobilization earned her the title of “America’s Next Drag Superstar.”

In order to build the narrative of Jinkx as the dark horse of her season, she was often shown as the passive recipient of bullying from fellow finalists Detox Icunt and Roxxy. After Detox’s elimination aired, she responded to how *RuPaul’s Drag Race* framed the episode, explaining that the “magic of the cut-and-paste process” exaggerated what transpired between the three. Detox added, “Jinkx never sat back and let anyone attack her. She was always very upfront about sticking up for herself ... The fact that they didn’t show any of that is shocking ... It makes her look weak, and she never was. She was always self-assured and headstrong” (Virtel, “*RuPaul’s Drag Race* Fourth Place Queen”).

Reality television narratives often rely on generic character archetypes like heroes and villains. But instead of depending on writers to produce scripts, editors cull from hours of raw footage in order to satisfy their storylines. Depicting Jinkx as the passive recipient of her fellow queens’ taunts and insults compels the audience to admire the queen for her “water off a duck’s back” self-reliance. This in turn framed Roxxy as the season’s “bully,” causing fans to attack

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<sup>45</sup> *RuPaul’s Drag Race* season 5, episode 9, “Scent of a Drag Queen.”

her on social media, despite the fact that Roxxy was shown overcoming her own personal hardships (Jones, “The Internet Hates”). As neoliberal ideology decrees, mobility is possible no matter the external, systemic hardships one might encounter based on one’s socioeconomic standing. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* reaffirmed this by crowning Jinkx the winner of her season.

*Citizen Drag: Queering the Limits of Neoliberalism*. “Should a homosexual be a good citizen?” (Bersani 113) *RuPaul’s Drag Race* shows queer bodies succeeding within a neoliberal technology as money-minded entertainers who rely on their own individuality and inner strength to persevere and self-improve. While increased media visibility of individuals who defy hegemonic standards of gender and sexuality works to legitimize otherwise misrepresented groups, Bersani wonders whether “some useful friction—and as a result some useful thought—may be created by questioning the compatibility of homosexuality with civil service” (152). From the 1930s Pansy Craze, when Manhattan’s straight elite packed drag houses, to the derided 1960s street fairies who sparked a revolution at the Stonewall Inn, drag serves to provoke as much as it entertains. Transgressional provocation is not necessarily synonymous with good citizenship; however, drag’s defiant boundary crossing sheds light on the oppressive limitations of dominant culture’s negotiations of gender, race, class, and sexuality.

During her tenure on the show, Sharon excelled by queering tenets of neoliberal citizenship by equating punk rock irreverence with fierce individualism. While this made her an inspirational figure for the show’s hundreds of thousands of fans, after Sharon’s time on the

show, accounts of unruly behavior and accusations of racism surfaced throughout the Internet.<sup>46</sup>

In a January 2013 interview with James St. James, the New York City 1990s club kid turned media personality, Sharon explained the anxieties of post-reality TV fame. “It’s embracing, it’s ridiculous, and it’s also very taxing at times. I never set out to be a role model,” she admitted. “I’m not even that good of a person. If anyone knows a real drag queen, we’re not the greatest people. But I think that’s why people love us. We remind them of severe beauty and tragic flaws.”<sup>47</sup> By framing a potentially problematic queer punk rock transgressor like Sharon as a model of neoliberalism, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* broadens what it means to be a successful American citizen beyond homonormative domesticity. American success as seen on the reality competition stands in contrast to the stifling notions of homonormative domesticity where gays “go home and cook dinner, forever” (Duggan 189). The concluding chapter focuses on *RuPaul’s Drag Race’s* relationship with its diverse, rabid fan base. In this age of media convergence, both show and spectator broaden perceptions of American success by redefining the discourse of drag while also acting as a springboard to larger conversations on identity, sexuality, and relationality.

## CONCLUSION: LEGENDARY CHILDREN OF THE RU-VOLUTION: DRAG FANDOM

As previously explored in this thesis, drag queens have historically been punished by mainstream America for their transgressive gender bending with a shaky socioeconomic status,

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<sup>46</sup> [www.newnownext.com/sharon-needles-life-ball-interview/05/2013/](http://www.newnownext.com/sharon-needles-life-ball-interview/05/2013/),  
[www.reddit.com/r/rupaulsdragrace/comments/2u49ij/visage\\_and\\_raven\\_calling\\_out\\_sharon\\_needles\\_as\\_a/](http://www.reddit.com/r/rupaulsdragrace/comments/2u49ij/visage_and_raven_calling_out_sharon_needles_as_a/),  
[www.reddit.com/r/rupaulsdragrace/comments/2kr2ls/so\\_tonight\\_i\\_met\\_sharon/](http://www.reddit.com/r/rupaulsdragrace/comments/2kr2ls/so_tonight_i_met_sharon/),  
[www.newnownext.com/sharon-needles-attacked-in-atlanta-breaks-down/06/2012/](http://www.newnownext.com/sharon-needles-attacked-in-atlanta-breaks-down/06/2012/).

<sup>47</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=br2AOZ1dYn0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=br2AOZ1dYn0).

which often leads to scenarios rarely associated with American success, including drug abuse, prostitution, and jail time. The phenomenal cult following of *RuPaul's Drag Race* transforms drag queens from maligned masculine failures into adored media darlings. This affords unparalleled entryways to American success for drag queen entertainers while also broadening the notion of what kind of Americans can be framed as an aspiration for its youth culture.

*Unconventional Conventionists: Fan Engagement at DragCon and Beyond.* During the second weekend of May 2015, the Los Angeles Convention Center played host to the first ever RuPaul's DragCon. According to DragCon organizers, nearly 14,000 drag queens and devotees (Nichols, "RuPaul's DragCon") braved long lines to snap selfies and seek autographs from their favorite *RuPaul's Drag Race* stars. Fittingly, DragCon culminated in a keynote address from the show's eponymous host. As we sat down and waited for RuPaul to take the stage, I couldn't help but overhear the conversation between the three middle-aged men sitting directly behind me. Each expressed their astonishment at how young the DragCon's attendees skewed. The men, who appeared to be in their early 50s, agreed that while they were growing up gay in the 1970s, never in their wildest dreams could they have ever imagined a show existing that celebrates overt gayness in the manner of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. They mused that perhaps if something like *RuPaul's Drag Race* had been on the air back then, it would have made their adolescence less lonely. RuPaul also brought up the show's younger fanbase during his keynote. He explained that when show producers World of Wonder planned the seventh season, they intentionally cast young, conventionally attractive queens already established on social media (Max, Miss Fame,



Pearl, and season winner Violet Chachki) and celebrity judges such as pop star Ariana Grande to entice younger viewers. And while the strategy worked, RuPaul expressed dismay over what he perceived to be a disconnect between the show's message and young fans' online engagement with not only each other but also the queens. "We've noticed that ... there is a certain hurtfulness young people display on social media," RuPaul explained. Throughout his address, RuPaul repeatedly expressed his horror over what he believed to be a culture of meanness permeating throughout the show's fervent adolescent fandom, prompting him to emphatically declare kindness as "the new cool." He entreated older viewers to enlighten the youth as to why violent speech was not on the show's message, to teach them about those "whose blood was spilled" so a show starring a bunch of drag queens could even exist.<sup>48</sup> While RuPaul expressed disappointment over the very audience demographic the show intentionally chose to target, many fans and critics shared their own disappointment over season 7's production and casting choices, calling it "tremendously disappointing" (Wortham, "'RuPaul's Drag Race' Highlights").

Instead of continuing a decline in quality like many long-running shows before it, the show bounced back the following year. Season 8's queens represented a wide array of varying racial, economic, and artistic backgrounds. Its top four finalists were all people of color: Chi Chi DeVayne, a self-proclaimed "trash queen" from backwoods Louisiana; Kim Chi, a Korean American virgin whose own mother doesn't know she does drag; Naomi Smalls, a young, black modelesque 21 year-old; and Bob the Drag Queen, a New York comedy queen whose brazen confidence and unapologetic blackness secured her the title of America's Next Drag Superstar.

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<sup>48</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xLYaCmtAdA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xLYaCmtAdA).

While the keynote speech RuPaul delivered at the inaugural DragCon felt motivated by RuPaul's disappointment in the hateful online discourse he witnessed among the show's younger fans, his keynote the following year was decidedly more jovial. Season 8 reenergized *RuPaul's Drag Race*, a franchise the *New York Times* calls "the rare space on television that relishes honesty and exploration, that doesn't subscribe to the notion that all is well now that we live in a post-marriage-equality world" (Wortham, "*RuPaul's Drag Race* Highlights"). At RuPaul's keynote address at DragCon 2016, which took place on Mother's Day, he was moved to tears several times expressing his gratitude to those fans who choose to embrace "laughter, love, beauty, and magic" in a culture whose limitations of identity alienate and harm those who trespass boundaries of acceptable gender presentation. While he urged his audience to "play with all the colors in the crayon box," his radiant positivity does not turn a blind eye to the culture's pervasive darkness prevalent in a bigoted culture that often responds to misunderstood individuals with discrimination and violence. RuPaul remarked on the duality of our culture, explaining, "[the world is] horrible, but it's also absolutely gorgeous."<sup>49</sup>

DragCon 2016 boasted 10,000 more attendees than the year before, with a reported 22,575 fans filling the Los Angeles Convention Center.<sup>50</sup> The positive reception of *RuPaul's Drag Race* humanizes the drag queen figure during a particularly polarizing time in America, where its emerging youth culture is becoming increasingly queerer while stories surrounding

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<sup>49</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4EXGiZkGFTw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4EXGiZkGFTw).

<sup>50</sup> [www.bluebay700.com/2016/05/09/rupauls-dragcon-2016-broke-last-years-attendance-with-22575-guests/](http://www.bluebay700.com/2016/05/09/rupauls-dragcon-2016-broke-last-years-attendance-with-22575-guests/).

transgender bathroom rights flood the daily news cycle.<sup>51</sup> Reframing drag queens into in-demand entertainers whose professional opportunities transcend the traditional scope of a drag queen's career trajectory broadens perceptions of what kind of American citizens deserve success.

Further, it changes the hegemonic perception of the drag queen from a sexual deviant to an acceptable role model for children. While this too broadens perceptions of American success, it also complicates drag's place in the queer sphere as a celebrated, counterhegemonic art form.

The influence of *RuPaul's Drag Race* on contemporary discourses surrounding drag, fandom, sexuality, and relationality opens up the possibility of several future projects.

*Drag Queens on TV, After TV: RuPaul's Drag Race's Cultural Legacy.* *RuPaul's Drag Race* was created to appeal to a wide swath of viewers, including those whom its host refers to as "Betty and Joe Beercan." Although it's possible that these heteronormative "nice folks" might not let a drag queen in their house to use their phone, they'll revel in her tenacity, beauty, and colorful humor as seen on TV. For the Betty and Joe Beercan syndicate, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is a pleasurable if simulated glimpse into a sliver of the gay lived experience. By transforming drag entertainers into stars on a reality competition, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has been a previously unheard of launchpad for queens of varying gender expressions and identities to future career success. While this is professionally beneficial for those who appear on the show, does it help or hinder careers of drag queens who don't count themselves among RuPaul's legendary children? Jasmine Masters, who was already a divisive character within the show's fandom, created quite a

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<sup>51</sup> [www.broadly.vice.com/en\\_us/article/teens-these-days-are-queer-af-new-study-says](http://www.broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/teens-these-days-are-queer-af-new-study-says).

stir with the YouTube post blaming the show for “fucking up drag,” prompted several negative responses from all corners of the drag community. Nina West, a popular Midwestern drag queen who has auditioned multiple times but has never been cast on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, countered Jasmine’s video on her podcast. “We all come from somewhere and something,” West explains. “Our experiences are different. Our inspirations are vast. From club kid to pageant queen, why would we want to limit what is as colorful as that rainbow flag we proudly fly?”<sup>52</sup>

During a gig in Los Angeles, Sharon Needles relayed to the crowd her thoughts on the legacy of the show that made her famous. “What I think *RuPaul’s Drag Race* did was invite everyone to the party, especially women,” she explained. “And I think that’s probably the coolest thing that the show’s ever done. It made drag not just be here for [Sharon points to the preppy gay man whose “veneers, gelled hair, and tan skin” she made fun of moments ago] but it also brought it for girls like you, girls like you, and girls like you. And I know that you stood up for your gay brothers and sisters in high school, and I think that is so much more a part of the drag community.”<sup>53</sup> While there are no set figures, based on social media presence on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* social media groups found on Facebook and Reddit, a large contingent of the show’s fans are straight adult women. Currently, there is scant scholarship about relationships between straight women and gay men (Fackler and Salvato 59). However, the reality competition’s presence of a sizeable straight cis female fanbase might demand more attention be paid to the friendships between gay men and straight women. In “Fag Hag: A Theory of Effeminate

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<sup>52</sup> [www.superdragqueen.com/2016/02/01/getting-outraced-by-the-race/](http://www.superdragqueen.com/2016/02/01/getting-outraced-by-the-race/).

<sup>53</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=FG1dD-S6GWU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FG1dD-S6GWU).

Enthusiasms,” authors Maria F. Fackler and Nick Salvato question why contemporary queer theory is hesitant to reconsider the contentiously named fag hag figure:

[A]ny possible (recuperative or conciliatory) theoretical work on the figure of the fag hag gets swiftly and summarily undercut by the twinned assumptions that since the etymology of the term reveals both its homophobic and misogynistic origins (woman as an evil spirit, a witch, an ugly repulsive old crone, and, figuratively, a personification of vice) and the woman’s relationality and incidentality to her gay male counterpart, the term fag hag must always already enact the woman’s erasure from gay male spaces as anything other than a supplementary, contingent figure. (Fackler and Salvato 60)

The term “fag hag” is inflammatory for obvious reasons; however, *RuPaul’s Drag Race’s* popularity among straight women merits a reconsideration of relationality between both herself and her gay male counterpart.

Although their celebrity scope is nowhere near the level of mainstream commercial pop stars such as Miley Cyrus, the queens of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* nevertheless command a large, dedicated following of fans of all age groups, gender identities, and sexual orientations from all over the world. Unlike A-list celebrities whose exalted status entitles them to a level of protection and physical distance from their fans, the life span of reality TV stars’ relevance has proven to be much more fleeting, meaning they must work harder to stay in their fans’ favor. This includes a drag queen interacting directly with her fans on social media or in person at meet-and-greets held before and after live shows, at events such as DragCon, and even on

Caribbean cruises (Al and Chuck Travel’s “Drag Stars at Sea”). While a staged interaction between drag queen and fan can be rewarding, it can also be tedious and exhausting, which is why it usually comes with a hefty price tag.<sup>54</sup> One could argue that these paid-for interactions replace the tip transactions between the drag queen and her nightclub crowd.<sup>55</sup>

The bulk of this project was researched and written during *RuPaul’s Drag Race’s* admittedly uninspiring seventh season, which regrettably excludes commentary on season 8, whose colorful cast of queens represented multiple backgrounds, social identities, and drag aestheticism, rekindling the show’s revolutionary potential that season 7 seemed to lack. As I continue to forge my path from *RuPaul’s Drag Race* superfan to media and cultural critic, I intend to keep engaging with the show’s “Ru-Volutionary” political potential to change the discursive formation of the drag queen from marginalized social deviant to American success.

*RuPaul’s Drag Race*, like all things, will come to an eventual end. The cultural impact of an event or media artifact is not always fully realized until after distance from it is created with the passing of time. During the Drag Is Punk panel at DragCon 2016, Henry Rollins called the queer self-expression in the face of hegemonic adversity “civil rights” and *RuPaul’s Drag Race’s* cult popularity a “social revolution.” Rollins explained that drag’s trouncing over conventions of self-expression “frees everyone else. Even if they don’t admit it.” *RuPaul’s Drag*

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<sup>54</sup> According to pricing information on their respective websites, two-day admission to RuPaul’s DragCon is \$50 (does not include travel accommodations or VIP add-ons); one general admission ticket to see RuPaul’s Battle of the Seasons 2016 Extravaganza, a large scale tour spanning Europe, North America, and Australia, starts at \$39.50 for U.S. tour stops, with VIP meet-and-greet packages ranging from \$199–\$299; 2016’s Drag Stars at Sea Tour starts at \$439.

<sup>55</sup> Also of note: Another observed outcome of the show’s popularity is that the larger scale of shows like The Battle of the Seasons Tour changes dynamic between queen and audience, making audience less inclined to tip the performer.

*Race* succeeds in “nicing up” the transgressive art with its Disneyfied representation of drag, transforming its competitors into upstanding citizens within a system whose neoliberal ideology favors homonormative gay respectability over queer radicalism. Under the guise of an accessible reality competition, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* enters the homes of “Betty and Joe Beercan” a queer Trojan horse. TV drag queens entertain and endear while also exposing conventional standards of identity for the social fabrications they are to some viewers who, prior to their introduction to the show, were perhaps unwilling or unable to understand gender and sexuality beyond the binary. Alaska, who also participated in the Drag Is Punk panel, predicted that the show’s continued gain in popularity not only untaps unparalleled professional opportunities for drag queen entertainers but also advances the social progression of the human race. “Drag is shaking up the social norms that have been in place for a long time,” Alaska observed. “I think the more that we blur those lines between what is acceptable for a man to do and what is acceptable for a woman to do, the more evolved our planet will be, and hopefully there will be less war. Hopefully, it will be more like *Star Trek*.” As history shows, culture is not linearly progressive but cyclical, and as the pop culture pendulum makes its eventual swing back to favor more conservative-minded media, the inevitable farewell of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* may squelch advances toward mainstream acceptance of gender as a fluid personal choice unbound by the rigid confines of normative convention. Drag queen culture may eventually be forced to retreat back to the underground from where it came, but for the time being, the drag queens of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* are enjoying their place in the sun, or in this case, the television studio lights.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> This thesis was completed days before the shootings that claimed the lives of 49 and injured 53 more at Pulse, a popular LGBTQ nightclub and drag venue in Orlando, Florida, June 16, 2016.

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