

National Symbol or Brand?:
Tracing the Drag Queen in Media and Communities
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation project examines the cultural labor of the drag queen in the United States (US). I explore how the drag queen can be understood as a heuristic to understand the stakes and limits of belonging and exceptionalism. Inclusion in our social and national belonging in the US allows for legibility and safety, however, when exceptional or token figures become the path towards achieving belonging, it can leave out those who are unable to conform, which are often the most vulnerable folks. I argue that attending to the drag queen's trajectory, we can trace the ways that multiply-marginalized bodies navigate attempts to include, subsume, and erase their existence by the nation-state while simultaneously celebrating and consuming them in the realm of media and consumer culture. In the first chapter I introduce the project, the context and the stakes involved. Chapter two examines representations of drag queens in films to unpack how these representations have layered over time for American audiences, and positions these films as necessary building blocks for queer semiosis for viewers to return to and engage with. Chapter three analyzes RuPaul and *RuPaul's Drag Race* to outline RuPaul labor as an exceptional subject, focusing on his investment in homonormative politics and labor supporting homonationalist projects. Chapter four centers questions of trans* identity and race, specifically Blackness to analyze how *Drag Race* renders certain bodies and performances legitimate and legible, constructing proper drag citizens. Chapter five utilizes ethnographic methods to center local drag communities, focusing on The Rock and drag performers in Phoenix, Arizona to analyze how performers navigate shifting media discourses of drag and construct a queer performance space all their own.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Drag is the art form of the queer imaginary.”

-Sasha Velour, RuPaul’s Drag Race Season 9 winner

“I’m a marketing genius! I marketed subversive drag to 100 million muthafuckas in the world.”

“In 9 years, Drag Race has launched the international careers of 113 multicultural performers”

-RuPaul

In my work, I have found myself repeatedly returning to contend with and consider the art and transformative possibilities of drag. It was, perhaps, inevitable for me, considering how drag sits at the nexus of gender, queerness, performance, with a knowing wink at manipulating societal constructions. In my undergraduate years, I organized a drag “beauty pageant,” where non-drag and drag contestants alike competed in the same category- an idea supported by a professor who kindly offered \$20 anonymously towards prizes for the winners. In my research as well, I have found myself returning to drag, and particularly drag queens. Previously, I have focused on negotiations of drag performances online and queer politics in the wake of the transphobic mini-challenge fallout of a season six *RuPaul’s Drag Race* episode. I built further on that work to consider RuPaul’s cultural labor as an exceptional subject for the nation and a figure that capitalizes on the slippages between drag and trans. These were the building blocks for the research and discussion of this dissertation.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2016 election, I questioned the implications and the stakes of my research. Surely, in this particular political climate, there was other work that was more pressing, more urgent. However, in the days, weeks and months since, I was better able to marshal my thoughts. It can be helpful, in moments of

disruption, to take a step back and consider the larger picture and the patterns that have worked to produce this moment. Like many in the aftermath of the election, I sought solace in my community, and as communities tend to do, together we mourned, and we rallied. Indeed, rather than experiencing the Inauguration alone, I found myself at a special drag show scheduled for that day where the theme was along the lines of a “throwback to better times,” featuring old hits as an alternative inauguration space. It is perhaps unsurprising that the gay bar continued to be a locus and haven for queer communities. The gay bar remains precarious, where particular bars become associated with particular strands of the LGBTQ community. The gay bar remains marked as well by tragedy, consumption, and capitalism. One such staple of the gay bar is and remains the drag queen.

I trace the shifting discourse and labor of the drag queen in contemporary culture, arguing that perhaps the ambivalent figure can be used as a heuristic to understand the stakes and limits of belonging and exceptionalism. Inclusion in our social and national belonging in the US allows for legibility and safety, however, when exceptional or token figures become the path towards achieving belonging, it can leave out those who are unable to conform, which are often the most vulnerable folks, those multiply-marginalized within hegemonic society and white LGBTQ+ society. The drag queen often bears a significant burden of scrutiny and responsibility. Steven Schacht and Lisa Underwood forward a model to distinguish between politically subversive drag and those that are more nonthreatening:

“drag performances that question and make light of the dominant structures of society... and the practices of oppression in society can be framed as subversive in intent. Conversely, drag performances that reify and support those same

structures and practices, even those that are transgressive in appearance and campy in attitude would obviously not be subversive.” (11-12)

Schacht and Underwood insist that their model must also include the actor’s intent and audiences in a “dialectic” (11). José Muñoz brings further focus on these subversive types of drag writing about the political “terrorist drag” of Vaginal Davis, which “is about creating an uneasiness, an uneasiness in desire, which works to confound and subvert the social fabric” (*Disidentifications* 100). The drag queen has long functioned as a visible symbol of queer aesthetic, a politicized hypervisible figure marked by Stonewall associations, while also a symbol of “safe” marginality, desirable for bachelorette party experiences and gimmick jokes. It is important to meet the shifting, complex ambiguity that the drag queen occupies, thus I follow this figure from film, to television, and finally ending with flesh. The project works to center a queer feminist approach to media in all its complexity, which includes a holistic look at the context of the texts and the ways in which people “speak back” to media.

This dissertation project focuses on the drag queen, who has long functioned as a hyper-visible symbol for the queer community. I seek to take this figure seriously and investigate the cultural labor that she has performed in the past, tracing her encounters with mainstream film and media, to the current figure of RuPaul who has become the *de facto* drag queen today, a notable position for a queer Black figure to occupy, indicating RuPaul’s savvy in navigating the cultural and consumer logics in the US. Presently, the US is marked by neoliberal logics, where governance and capitalism are enmeshed, while insisting on false distinctions between social and economic policy. These neoliberal logics attempt to persuade the public that axes of identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, class, etc are distinct. I resist this reading and instead attend to the “messiness” of embodied experience. Using semiotic phenomenology, I seek to extricate

meaning and foreground embodiment with drag performers and performances. I argue that attending to the drag queen's trajectory, and understanding RuPaul as the drag queen "zenith" in contemporary society, we can trace the ways that multiply-marginalized bodies navigate attempts to include, subsume, and erase their existence by the nation-state while simultaneously celebrating and consuming them in the realm of media and consumer culture. Thus, I am poised to ask questions such as: How has RuPaul shaped the labor of the drag queen in contemporary culture? How has his position as an exceptional subject shifted mainstream media discourse around what is considered proper queer and drag performance? Finally, what impact does RuPaul's labor, as well as larger drag discourse have on local drag communities such as Phoenix, Arizona and their understanding of belonging and performance?

Fractures in Political (Mis)recognition and Inclusion

It was the use of LGBT communities by Trump throughout the campaign and in the initial weeks that reminded me of the necessity of careful, critical interrogation. Trump used the Pulse nightclub shooting as an opportunity to position himself as a Republican candidate sympathetic to the LGBT community, before spending the rest of his speech attempting position the Muslim community as "anti-woman, anti-gay, and anti-American" (Golshan, quoting Trump). In a key act of pinkwashing, paying lip service or promoting the gay community despite offering little to no substantive support, Trump is positioning the gay community as so fundamental to American values that even a racist, xenophobic candidate for President would support them. He continued this espoused support of the LGBT community into the Republican convention, claiming, "As your president, I will do everything in my power to protect LGBTQ citizens" (Hod, quoting Trump). While Trump ultimately kept the federal worker protections established by President Obama's executive order, he has proceeded to pull federal protections for

transgender students. These all demonstrate the need to carefully investigate the way the LGBT community is being deployed in public discourses. Paying lip service to supporting the LGBT community has become a way to mark progressivism and inclusivity.

In the recent political climate, the queer community made significant gains, winning key high-profile victories in terms of marriage and ability to openly participate in the military. These victories are often touted as indicative of the US' embrace of gay bodies, but it came along with the immeasurable damage of the loss of key protection in the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and little acknowledgement of the lack of material protections such as fair access to housing or employment protections for LGBTQ folk. These key victories have long been advocated by LGBTQ advocacy groups, and strangely even conservative gay journalists such as Andrew Sullivan. Lisa Duggan simplifies how seemingly progressive LGBT advocacy organizations have found themselves in company with scholars like Sullivan in their push for including gay folk in the institutions of marriage and the military: for Sullivan, it's a means to present a narrow focus and work to "demobilize[e] the gay population to a 'prepolitical condition,'" one that focuses on folding in (white and at least middle-class) gay folk to the state with minimal challenges to the status quo (Duggan 60-63). It is interesting to note that it was in 2009, the first year of Obama's administration (also the administration that presided over those Supreme Court decisions), that *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Logo, 2009) first aired. José Muñoz once wrote in 1999, "Indeed, the erosion of gay civil rights is simultaneous with the advent of higher degrees of queer visibility in the mainstream media" (*Disidentifications* 99). Now 20 years later, I'm afraid he is still correct.

Drag- Performance in a Political Context

This project has the benefit of stepping into robust conversations that are already ongoing. Drag has been given consideration by many scholars, of which, much can still

be appropriately addressed with Judith Butler's observation, "at its best, it seems, drag is a site of certain ambivalence" (*Bodies that Matter* 85). Conversations on drag queens have developed significantly since Esther Newton's seminal ethnographic work *Mother Camp*. Newton's work, while relying on "social deviance theory" of the time, provides early theorizing about drag that pushes understandings away from "deviance," to exploring performing and "transformation." Newton demonstrates careful attention to the language of her participants, returning again in her work to primacy of the male/female binary as categorizing society, and the work that "female impersonators" do as they are aware of and function alongside that division. More recently, Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor's ethnographic work, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* position drag as "a form of strategic collective action" and "social protest" (212-213). Linking their work with larger social movement theory conversations, Rupp and Taylor consider the ties between politics and performance in drag shows. Roger Baker provides attention to drag queens in other arenas, specifically focusing on the history of drag in theatrical and performance traditions, rather than the ethnographic research conducted by Newton and Rupp and Taylor. His revised book includes film, television, and other popular culture mediums. However, his updated work closes by touching on RuPaul at the beginning of his career explosion. From Baker's perspective in 1994, "Drag reached its pop zenith with RuPaul," and ends by lavishing further praise that "RuPaul is a spectacular act of self-reinvention and of drag reclamation. He's created a character – sassy, strong, beautiful and black – but disputes that his act is female impersonation, claiming he doesn't look like a woman, he looks like a drag queen" (R. Baker, 258). Over twenty years later, it is necessary to return to this scrutiny, I argue. In Baker's mind, RuPaul had taken the drag queen as sign beyond its initial object, an example of processual semiosis, iterative acts of meaning-making that happen so quickly in popular culture (Merrell 56). This is the

ongoing theoretical conversation that I have the benefit of stepping into. There has been ample consideration of drag queens in the contexts of queer performance (Barnett, Berkowitz and Belgrave, Hankins, Hopkins, Horowitz, Johnston, Mann, Moreman & McIntosh, Rupp and Taylor). However, I seek to bring focus on the dialogic relationship between media and “real world” experience.

It is difficult at best and largely impossible to bring any analytic focus to the drag queen without drawing on discussions of camp, which is often presented as core to a gay aesthetic/sensibility. Camp has been repositioned by Moe Meyers as an “oppositional critique,” of sex/gender identity and practice, the means through which a queer identity is enacted through “social visibility” (1-5). For Meyers, camp necessarily critiques the dominant order, and claims that camp is “conscious of its future as an appropriated commodity” (17). I would push against fixing camp as always already counter-hegemonic, as that simultaneously renders camp static and centers hegemonic maneuverings. However, this does provide a foundation to build on- particularly this consideration of camp as an always to be appropriated commodity, as this folds in queer practice and aesthetics to the workings of capitalism and the state in new ways.

Homocapitalism- Consuming Sexualities

It remains important to consider the ways that queerness has implicated itself with capitalism and consumer culture. It is perhaps unavoidable, when it has been argued that capitalism allowed for the development of gay identities, as folks were able to “[separate] sexuality from procreation,” via the autonomy that capitalism gave to workers (D’Emilio 140). This history of capitalism and consumption as a means to equality by white lesbian and gay groups has had striking implications for the LGBT community as a whole. At a minimum, it enacts bounding lines of who is able to be properly gay and protected via class and access.

Historically, largely white and middle class LGB groups have advocated for their inclusion by highlighting their desirability as a market segment, building up the “DINK” (dual-income, no kids) caricature of the community (Gluckman and Reed). Companies took note, and it’s all too common to see corporate advertising and sponsorships for Pride floats or queer media. Katherine Sender notes in *Business, Not Politics*, “Those who welcome gay and lesbian themes in advertising applaud appeals to GLBT consumers as validating their existence... For GLBT people unaccustomed to seeing images of themselves, let alone being taken seriously as explicitly gay or lesbian, national corporate appeals can seem profoundly affirming” (17-18). The validating affirmation of images is a romantic thought, and can be seductive. However, upon scrutiny, it appears to be nothing but gilded platitudes. Such visibility tends to be overwhelming limited to an imagined gay consumer that is white, male, and solidly middle-class if not upper middle-class, obscuring and leaving out wide swaths of queer communities that are often comprised of multiply-marginalized bodies (Sender 19-20). This emphasis on advertising and sponsorship support also doesn’t indicate that the company is committed to those values internally, as Baker notes that hiring practices and gay-friendly environments don’t go hand-in-hand with a page-length advertisement in *The Advocate* (14-15). The gay and lesbian community focus on capitalism as a means of achieving recognition is a tricky path, allowing the *appearance* of gay support with minimal substantial demands. Such a path towards recognition benefits the nation and feeds into homonationalism, as Jasbir Puar warns, “the nation benefits from the liberalization of the market, which proffers placebo rights to queer consumers who are hailed by capitalism but not by state legislation” (69).

As Sender argues, “Gay marketing visibility complements an already-existing political visibility, it does not produce it. For as long as homosexuality remains politically

and socially contested, any visibility that marketing affords cannot help but both rest upon and reproduce a view of GLBT people as in part politically constituted... contained visibility can only ever yield conditional acceptance” (250). There has been work drawing this connection of media and government, especially the ways in which reality television “diffuses and amplifies the government of everyday life” via harnessing the “cultural power of television... to assess and guide the ethics, behaviors, aspirations, and routines of ordinary people (Ouellette and Hay 2). Ouellette and Hay outline a framework where television becomes an “instructional template,” for creating the “empowered citizen,” a term they use that implies the self-sufficient and individual education process that constitutes empowerment (17). For example, in Puar’s reading of *South Park* episode, “South Park Is Gay,” she excavates metrosexuality as a form of terrorism, “manifested through penetrating and all-encompassing queer aesthetics, even as it capitulates to the regime of homonationalism through the dilution of queer politics: *queerness is now something spectacular to be had, to covet, rather than to reject and revile*” (69, emphasis mine). While the metrosexual is largely racialized and gendered as a white man, with such an instructional template, what happens when other bodies begin to consume queerness as a politic/aesthetic/sensibility, specifically with that aspect of queerness I am concerned with in this project: drag queens.

The Supermodel of the World Ru-turns to TV

RuPaul’s Drag Race (Drag Race) is a long-running reality show, and from its success RuPaul has built a franchise of spin-offs and companion shows. Online, the show’s production company, World of Wonder, posts many digital series on their YouTube channel, WOWPresents, featuring fan-favorite queens of the show. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* unabashedly borrows from other reality television competitions, such as *America’s Next Top Model*, and *Project Runway*. RuPaul and his panel of judges are

seeking “America’s Next Drag Superstar,” by gauging over the course of the competition the contestants’ Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve, and Talent (a playful phrasing that works out to C.U.N.T.). The show puts drag queens through performance and design challenges, each episode culminating in a runway presentation. The contestants who are judged as the bottom two of the week are charged to “Lipsync for Your Life,” leaving RuPaul to determine who earned the chance to continue in the competition. Winning the competition features a cash prize (\$20,000 in season one, \$25,000 in season two, \$75,000 in season three, and \$100,000 since season four), along with various other benefits depending on the season, but among which is usually a supply of makeup. The show has continually increased in popularity and success with a notable boost during season four. In addition to *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, there is the companion series *Untucked* (a “behind the scenes” with the queens backstage during each episode’s judging), *RuPaul’s Drag Race All Stars*, where returning queens get another shot at winning the crown, and the now-canceled *RuPaul’s Drag U*, which utilized *Drag Race* contestants as “professors” to makeover ciswomen.

With such a rich and multi-dimensional text to pull from, *Drag Race* and its related titles have been the focus of some academic writings. In a specifically dedicated anthology to the show (Daems), there are essays dedicated to examining the show for its treatment of race, use of accent, trans* queens, relationship to ciswomen and RuPaul’s pedagogy. There’s also a developing strand of thought dedicated to the ties between commodification and neoliberalism of the show. Benny LeMaster offers a trenchant examination of *RuPaul’s Drag U*, the spin-off show where cisgender women receive extreme drag makeovers from queens who have been on *Drag Race*, connecting the work of the drag queens as “professors” to the ciswomen contestants and “to LGBT communities more broadly” by guiding to a “homonormative imaginary” (177-178).

Via “gaystreaming,” as Eve Ng terms it, networks are able to better position shows that might previously have been considered too niche into “draw[ing] in a larger general audience, particularly heterosexual women” (259). Gaystreaming simultaneously promotes visibility of LGBT-focused programming while it also “promotes a relatively narrow set of representations. Ng specifically cites *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (aired on Bravo) as successes that helped lead to the development of gaystreaming (259). Both were programs that had managed to attract significant audiences beyond just LGBT demographics. *Drag Race’s* increasing commercial success and mainstream recognition has raised the profile and visibility of the show, queer folk, and drag queens in culture. As Suzanna Walters writes, “Visibility is, of course, necessary for equality. It is part of the trajectory of any movement for inclusion and social change. We come to know ourselves and to be known by others through the images and stories of popular culture” (13). However, this visibility brings with it a “dilemma,” as Walters terms it, between maintaining difference or moving towards inclusion/assimilation (25). This dilemma also brings other concerns. As we see the increasing visibility to the camera’s gaze of gay bodies, gay relationships, and gay lives. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* presents a bit of a turn, augmenting this gay visibility. This is no longer gay bodies/lives on display, but an increase in the visibility of a “gay sensibility.”

Another “way in” to unpacking and examining the labor of drag queens and *Drag Race* is provided by Judith Butler. Returning briefly to Butler and her essay “Gender is Burning,” I want to highlight her question of whether the camera promises a sort of transubstantiation (*Bodies that Matter* 93). She works through this via Livingston’s camera in *Paris is Burning* and how the camera interacts with Octavia’s femininity. Butler unpacks how the desire of the camera works with the recognition of Octavia as a woman, paying particular attention to the labor the camera performs in its deployment

and recognition. This psychoanalytic-informed approach is one that provides useful tools to work towards an understanding of the slippages between drag and trans that occur, both in academic thought and *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Susan Stryker argues in LGBT politics and communities, the “T” is thus homonormatively constructed as a properly distinct group of people with a different orientation than gays, lesbians, and bisexuals (or, for that matter, straights)” (148).

It is this rich media text that I seek to situate my analysis. *Drag Race* had become the flagship show on “the” gay network, LogoTV and has now been moved to air on VH1, a channel included in basic cable packages, unlike the cable position LogoTV has which must be added to most plans. Drag queens have had a long history in the US in the movement for gay rights/equality- often serving as a visual representation of queer art, performance, and sensibility. The drag queen contestants are rewarded for constructing and cultivating themselves into a branded identity, ready for consumption. The show also works to render a particular, queer community, one dominated by cis men and versed in camp culture legible to audiences at large- shows after all must be accessible to larger markets in order to succeed. RuPaul serves as mentor, judge, and educator (the latter applying to audiences at home as well).

There would be no *RuPaul's Drag Race* without RuPaul, and indeed, this project must contend with RuPaul the cultural icon. RuPaul serves as an exceptional figure, a Black gay drag queen who has achieved commercial success through fluency in particular kinds of performances that are legible to hegemonic audiences. RuPaul also rewards particular performances of drag- as of late emphasizing acting over fashion. Frequently in these acting challenges, *Drag Race* encourages racial caricature, pushing queens to hyper-perform their Otherness for Black and Latinx queens to succeed comedically- performances which are often rewarded in the competition. White queens, in contrast,

are often allowed to the myth of unmarked whiteness, unless invoking a particular classed caricature. RuPaul still insists on and claims drag as always already subversive when he's speaking online in social media spaces, media interviews, and his weekly podcast where he espouses this view. According to RuPaul, "[Drag] will never be mainstream. It's the antithesis of mainstream," and allows that this moment is perhaps the most "mainstream" drag will become because "[drag] is completely opposed to fitting in" (Jung). For RuPaul, mainstream outlets such as "*Ellen* or David Letterman or *The Tonight Show*" remain out of bounds for him because he and the conversations that would happen would "make those hosts feel very, very uncomfortable" (Jung). Since that interview in early 2016, RuPaul has been booked dozens of times on talk shows such as *Ellen*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, *The Late Late Show with James Corden*, *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*, *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, and *A Little Late with Lilly Singh* to promote either *RuPaul's Drag Race* or other projects he's involved in.

RuPaul heavily cites and relies on *Paris is Burning*, a 1990 documentary that depicts the Ballroom community of New York. However, he goes no further in his citation of this rich tradition. The Ballroom community, emerging in Harlem and consisting of Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ people, is a tradition with roots dating back to the 1920s that still continues today (Bailey, 5, 89; Wilson 38-39). RuPaul is not known for his participation in this community, rather, RuPaul was more frequently found in club kid circuits, who Davenport describes as "often the children of white middle or upper class families who wanted to escape the grips of their conservative parents" (165).

The culture of *Drag Race* encourages consideration into the dialogic relationship between audiences and media. The material effects of the show are myriad, including elevating particular drag queens to command pay rates that are not common to drag

performers in the pageant or bar scene. It also dislocates queens- keeping them on the move and primarily interacting with fans online, as opposed to drag queens who often establish themselves in a “home” bar and visit other bars nearby occasionally.

Considering questions of consumer culture, queerness, belonging and exceptionalism, with an intersectional lens remains important, particularly when the LGBT community is being used as political cover to distract from the racist and xenophobic politics being enacted.

Homonationalism- exceptionalism and cultural labor of queer bodies

Lisa Duggan explains how queer bodies have increasingly been the focus of a disciplining state, encouraging legibility into a “new homonormativity” by folding in these bodies into the institutions of marriage (62-65). Jasbir Puar further elaborates on this expansion of belonging, highlighting that it specifically is the white queer that has been provisionally accepted by the state (124-125). In this context, I argue, it is important to consider the work that *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, and RuPaul himself does in terms of inclusion into a national belonging, particularly in this era of post-gay marriage where “the state has emerged as a central locus by which certain nonnormative sexualities have sought to make it a terrain of freedom, destigmatization, and normality. Sexuality has thus once again become, quite powerfully, organized around questions of legitimacy and illegitimacy” (Reddy 157).

This becomes particularly timely to consider in today’s political climate, where the LGBTQ community has been leveraged by Donald Trump as a political cover for his racist and xenophobic policies. Queer bodies are being positioned as vital to American society, a symbol of American exceptionalism (Puar 48-49) and used as political cover and as political tokens. For example, the range of responses to the Pulse massacre, often lamenting the loss of queer life by the hands of a “radicalized Muslim,” ignores that this

was a violence against queer people of color and uses the tragedy to further ostracize Muslim bodies as inherently Other to the national body. RuPaul, by constructing a platform that draws on notable performers in the drag community, and increasingly demands and encourages a particular racialized performance, is loosening the bonds on what kinds of queers get included.

On the one hand, this is important and notable work. On the other, it ties acceptance of a racialized queer with a position/performance historically associated with deviance. In this, it is important to keep in mind work such as Siobhan Somerville's which worked to "recognize the instability of multiple categories of difference simultaneously rather than to assume the fixity of one to establish the complexity of the other" (5). Additionally, this entry is predicated on a reality TV competition. This encourages a neoliberal understanding of citizenship where these bodies are bought and sold, often by straight white women. The proximity of consumption and capitalism also charges me to take insight from Roderick Ferguson who opens *Aberrations in Black* by remarking on canonical sociology's "preoccupation" with the "drag-queen prostitute" as the outcome of capitalism on queer Black communities (18-19). The position outlined by Ferguson's example is particularly striking in its disparity to the desexualized, depoliticized proper gay consuming subject that Sender outlines, the respectable, middle-class white gay men who most benefit from gay marketing (which in turn constructs a proper community) (Sender 252, 27-28). In this project, I recognize the vital work that performs, to "shed light on the ruptural components of culture, components that expose the restrictions of universality, the exploitation of capital, and the deceptions of national culture," tools that will be indispensable to my research (Ferguson 24).

Finding ways in and potential ways out

In this context, I find it useful to draw on performance studies to further facilitate my work's attempt to bridge the (somewhat arbitrary) divide between culture and embodied experience. Jill Dolan writes of the transformative possibilities of performance, particularly in the "utopian performatives," which work to "lift everyone slightly above the present" in a moment of suspension or liminal space that encourages an affectively intense intersubjective experience (99, 5). Indeed, José Esteban Muñoz describes the "queer worldmaking potentialities" that a disidentificatory performance brings (*Disidentifications* 197). It is in my attention to the localized communities, in places such as The Rock, and their tactics for responding to and navigating dominant discourses that I find hope. As Peggy Phelan reminds us, "Performance clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital." (148). For drag queens, who are necessarily always engaging in literal transactions of capital, tracing the possibilities enacted via performance becomes key. Further, it leads me to consider, how does this change via reality television and increasing digital media, when these performances are recorded and no longer fleetingly experienced? Queens now cultivate themselves as brands, cell phone videos of performances are posted (some are even professionally recorded), amassing followers on social media to increase their presence and visibility.

It is key to this project to construct an intersectional feminist framework. Intersectional feminist thought provides a strong foundation to consider the drag queen with the full complexity and contradictions of her social location with larger societal power dynamics. Without the framework of intersectional thinking, the task of excavating the cultural labor of drag queens in media and in performing communities becomes nigh impossible. Intersectionality requires an understanding of the specific historical context that drag queens generally, and RuPaul specifically operates in. It

provokes a questioning of how power differently affects the folk performing drag. Queer theory in this project allows for a particular consideration of sexuality, and a sharp consideration of how drag performers enact queer performances. The denaturalizing bend of queer theory allows for a consideration of actions and how they work within/against technologies of normalization. However, queer theory has often been criticized for its focus on gay men and ignoring of race. It is important bring an intersectional perspective to queer theory and draw from the ample scholarship within Queer of Color critique. Queer of Color critique explicitly calls for a more focused attention to the linkages between gender, race, and sexuality in ways that queer theory has not always contended, such as turning these tools to interrogating the nation.

Semiotics, following Peirce's thought, will be the backbone of my methodological orientation, providing a means to critically read the visual texts I outline in my chapter previews. Rather than performing a counting "content analysis," semiotics provides tools and approaches to explicate meaning from visual texts. From here, I can draw from and incorporate critical social semiotics to approach the multimodal phenomenon of drag and drag queens that I propose to examine. Integral to my methodology will be semiotic phenomenology. Semiotic phenomenology works well to enact my feminist orientation by requiring a return to the embodied, lived experience throughout every step of the analysis, centering the material reality of drag performers even as I contend with objects of analysis that may (wrongly) appear as "removed" from lived reality, such as film and television. My fifth chapter necessarily incorporates ethnographic methods to best attend to the lived experience of drag queens and experiencing drag shows, but I do not view these as mutually exclusive approaches. Rather, I incorporate these methods into my larger methodological framework that is necessarily informed by semiotic phenomenology and its focus on examining semiosis, allowing me to "engage the

dynamic interrelation of speech and body that is human embodiment” (Martinez 99). Vivian Sobchack writes, “as our aesthetic forms and representations of ‘reality’ become externally realized and then unsettled first by photography, then cinema, and now electronic media, our values and evaluative criteria of what counts in our lives are also unsettled and transformed” (111). For this, I turn to semiotic phenomenology. How, then, are these public discourses of queer identities in general and proper drag performances in particular affecting local drag communities?

My dissertation project is divided into six chapters. This introduction offers an overview of the project as well as provides the contemporary cultural context of drag queens and the LGBTQ community in the US. In order to unpack the rich tradition of drag queens and layered complexity of RuPaul and *Drag Race*’s cultural labor, I must draw together several bodies of scholarship and theoretical tools. I take heed of Chandan Reddy’s warning that without careful attention, “queer studies is the vehicle for a whiteness that seeks to construe the nation as a homogenous social and economic form, rather than as the name for a space that goes beyond a single national form” (Reddy 180). As a white queer ciswoman scholar, it is important to acknowledge my own positionality and privilege in approaching this work, and strive to center voices that are often under-acknowledged in the academy, rather than using “white queer politics to hide white privilege behind legalistic analogies between race and sexuality” (Reed 50). Queer theory is a necessary tool, having made key insights that will prove immeasurable to shaping my inquiry. However, I augment this by drawing explicitly on the vital queer of color critique and making queer theory contend with its own blinders in my work. Undergirding this is my commitment to conducting feminist scholarship.

The second chapter moves into discourses of drag in media, beginning with John Waters’ and Divine’s collaborative projects in the 1970s and 1980s and moving into the

“boom” of representation of the 1990s, including *Paris is Burning* (1990), *Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995), *The Birdcage* (1996), and *Kinky Boots* (2005). These texts are important to understand how drag queens were beginning to be understood. These films help lay the groundwork for a type of meta-acknowledgement that is deployed by films that draw from the awareness of drag without directly utilizing it in “traditional” ways, such as the cult classic, *But I’m a Cheerleader* (1999). This heightened visibility produces a particular kind of legibility and acknowledgement, which is evidenced by the relatively quick succession of initial campy, independent films and a documentary that depicts drag queens and ball performances to studio films that draw on well-known actors such as Patrick Swayze, Wesley Snipes, John Leguizamo, and Nathan Lane. This analysis will be conducted with a Peircean semiotics to read the figures of the Drag Queen produced in these films and trace the larger trajectory these films construct.

The third chapter focuses on RuPaul and the drag queen as sign. It is vital to contend with RuPaul and his career in order to better understand the impact and importance of his media empire. This chapter seeks to examine the discourses of exceptionalism and the larger cultural labor that RuPaul as a figure performs, and how he upholds and shifts the labor of “drag queen.” Here, my past research excavating RuPaul as a disciplined and disciplining figure of neoliberal homonormativity will prove particularly useful. Using again using Peircean semiotics, I will highlight how RuPaul has worked to make himself and his drag legible and the ways in which this can stand in as an exceptional figure for the state. I continue this tracing to consider the silences and exclusions, to ask which bodies are left out of this labor of exceptionalism and belonging.

The fourth chapter builds on the conversation and theoretical threads developed in the second chapter to consider *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and the creeping neoliberalism of

the show as it shifts from a campy, world-making endeavor to a parody of itself. In the early seasons of the show, queens were often charged to produce elaborate and striking looks on laughably limited budgets—a scenario that is all too familiar to many working drag queens. The show embraced goofy mini-challenges and dispensed small “herstory lessons” to give contexts to unfamiliar audiences. As commercial success has increased, the production values got “slicker,” the show creeping to familiar reality show contrivances. I trace this creep of neoliberal logics of extreme individualization and sacrificing the community/peers while espousing the narrative high-minded ideals of family and community. Here, I further flesh out the bodies that are left out by the show and RuPaul capitalizing on the slippages between drag and trans by tracing the #Tr****gate controversy of season six and the disruptions of racial politics that The Vixen’s presence prompted during the season 10 finale.

The fifth chapter extends these considerations to examine the impact of the shifting media discourses of drag on local drag communities. I utilize ethnographic methods and semiotic phenomenology to conduct an examination of the drag community in Phoenix, Arizona. Here, I center a local drag queen, Barbra Seville, who is a key fixture in the community and her primary performing bar to consider how drag shows and performances have changed over the years, and how a queer performing space is constructed and negotiated. I have spent multiple years attending the Barbra Seville Show and other events at the bar in pursuit of previous research and socially, building up rapport and trust with the performers and community members attending these drag shows. In addition to Barbra Seville, I interview three other drag queens for this project: Dianne Daniels, Charmaine KC Honeywell (often styled as Charmaine Honeywell for show promotional materials), and JoAnn Michaels.

These performers embrace a range of styles and are at different points in their career. Barbra Seville, performing since the 90s, is a polished full-time performer who has won an array of titles with the Miss Gay America system and hosts two shows a week at the Rock, a gay bar in Phoenix, Arizona, in addition to other shows and events throughout Phoenix. Dianne Daniels has been performing since the 1980s, and has done shows in Minnesota, Texas, and Arizona throughout the years. Dianne was the fourth Miss Arizona Central Pride (the precursor to Miss Phoenix Pride), reigning from May 1996-1997. In addition to being a nurse, Dianne has performed in and hosted many shows over the years in Phoenix. Charmaine Honeywell began doing drag in 2013, making her first foray in drag at an Imperial Court of Arizona event, working her way up to paid gigs and pageant titles. JoAnn Michaels, at the time of our interview, had been doing drag for a year. JoAnn's first performance happened at a pop-up drag event called "What the Queer," and has gone on to perform regularly in numerous shows in the community.

Finally, I end with a concluding chapter that summarizes my larger arguments, and the importance of the dialogic relationship between media and material realities.

CHAPTER 2

NOW PLAYING: DRAG QUEENS ON THE BIG SCREEN

In a world where RuPaul has garnered critical acknowledgment, with eight Emmy nominations for the reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and two wins for his hosting of the program, it can be easy to forget the entry of drag queens into popular culture. Indeed, how likely is it that the current VH1 audiences of *Drag Race* have the memory of the vast cultural difference to place Divine eating dog shit in her *Pink Flamingos* performance, and not *Drag Race's* recreation of that moment in season seven? Perhaps more are familiar with the enduring legacy of Nathan Lane's turn as Albert, performing alternatively as his drag persona Starina and also as "Mother Coleman" in a campy farce navigating a dinner party with neo-conservative future in-laws. These almost polar opposite references, between Divine's performances embracing "filth" and the "wholesome" moment of Robin Williams' and Nathan Lane emulating John Wayne's famous swagger (only to realize the homoeroticism of the Western and John Wayne's performance), there is a large terrain that drag queens have covered in their popular culture representation.

Marjorie Garber writes that we have "look[ed] *through*, rather than *at* the cross-dresser," (9). Here, I must simultaneously draw attention to the slippages of language while acknowledging the idea at work¹. Indeed, the drag queen occupies an interesting place in media and scholarship. Drag has inspired many powerful works of theory and criticism, notably as a key example in *Gender Trouble*, where Judith Butler deploys drag to demonstrate gender performativity, as well as the entry figure for Roderick Ferguson's

¹ By "slippages of language" I'm referring to the messy overlay of language. While today these terms seem (somewhat falsely) clearly defined, historically there has been significant overlap in terms such as "transvestite," "cross-dresser," "drag queen," etc. While this may seem imprecise, it reflects the reality of experience and language over time.

foundational queer of color critique text, *Aberrations in Black*. Butler's discussion of drag in *Gender Trouble* serves to tie drag as a performance to the body, as she notes, "the performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 187). The distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed is an important one. Specifically, it references a history of tying particular bodies to particular genders in order for drag to be considered 'proper' drag. I will unpack this concept further in relation to *Drag Race* in the fourth chapter of this work. Butler goes on to parse this distinction out into what she terms, "three contingent dimensions of corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance," which in her view, performing drag unsettles and denaturalizes (*Gender Trouble* 187). Butler argues that drag in this understanding showcases "a production, which, in effect—that is in its effect—postures as an imitation" (188). Butler's reading of this denaturalizing production settles this performance closer to parody, which she argues "by itself is not subversive" (*Gender Trouble* 189), and is further refined as she returns to her example of drag in *Bodies that Matter*. Writing again in 1993, Butler settles into a larger discussion of drag via the documentary film *Paris is Burning*, stating "at best, it seems, drag is a site of certain ambivalence," torn as it is between a performance that is subversive to hegemonic scripts of gender and one that remains implicated within those scripts (Butler *Bodies* 85).

Drag queens obviously engage overtly with performance with their own shows or sets. However, they also engage in performance art outside the boundaries of the "stage," in the moments they interact with bar patrons before or after the show, their engagements with others if they travel in "face" to or from a venue, these brief interactions can carry a performative art element. My focus is drawn to the ways in

which performance can act as a form of cultivating community and belonging, by establishing codes and sensibilities, particularly when the performance is no longer a moment experienced in the flesh and ultimately fleeting but when it becomes “captured” on film, able to be preserved and experienced in new ways.

Many of the representations of drag queens are bounded and contained under the idea of “camp.” In “The Cinema of Camp,” Jack Babuscio highlights “four features basic to camp: irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humour” (119). For Babuscio, camp is relational between “activities, individuals, situations, and gayness,” arguing that some people can be campy or responsible for camp aren’t gay, but rather the campiness they generate is camp when it is recognized by a “gay sensibility” (119).

Of course, many remember Susan Sontag’s now-famous essay, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” where she describes camp as a sensibility that “is not a natural mode of sensibility, if there be any such. Rather, he places the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration. And Camp is esoteric- something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques” (53). However, Mark Booth seeks to complicate that, arguing that camp requires more deliberate action on one’s part to cultivate. He builds on Sontag’s essay to define camp as a “self-presentation,” where “to be camp is to present oneself as being committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than the marginal merits” (Booth 69). Camp is an admittedly slippery thing, resisting being nailed down or boxed in. While these attempts to describe and define capture pieces, I also augment them with Muñoz’ insights, that,

camp is a form of artificial respiration; it breathes new life into old situations. Camp is, then, more than a worldview; it is a strategic response to the breakdown of representation that occurs when a queer, ethnically marked, or other subject encounters his or her inability to it within a majoritarian representational regime. It is a measured response to the forced evacuation from dominant culture that the minority subject experiences. Camp is a practice of suturing different lives, of reanimating, through repetition with a difference, a lost country, or moment that is relished and loved. Although not innately politically valenced, it is a strategy

that can do positive identity- and community-affirming work. (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 128).

Moe Meyer positions Camp away from Sontag's deployment of it as a sensibility, pushing it instead as critique of the dominant order, aligning more with Muñoz' usage, although lacking the grounding that Muñoz provided. A reminder here, that Meyer tells us that camp is always aware of its future citations and appropriations (17). Thus, this showcases camp in its performative mode, where "reiteration and citation are the most easily identifiable characteristics of this mode of camp performativity" (Muñoz 128).

However, the drag queen doesn't always enjoy the benefit of extended scrutiny and discussion in these texts. Much of the in-depth look at drag comes from researchers engaging in ethnography, with some work that examines drag queens in media, a body that is growing quickly thanks to *RuPaul's Drag Race*, its spin-off shows, and growing drag queen access to television opportunities (C. Collins, Edgar, Goldmark, González, Schottmiller, Strings, Zhang). This dissertation shall contribute to these discussions.

This chapter in particular is concerned with reading the films that feature drag queens between the 1970s and early 2000s. These films helped to establish a familiarity for mainstream American audiences with drag queens and audiences. While some of these films have been previously discussed in academic literature, often they are discussed in isolation. However, these films do not exist in isolation and can contribute to a growing understanding of drag queens in contemporary culture. Thus, I ask the following questions: How are drag queens in these films developed? What associations do they draw on and establish? What role does the drag queen fill? Do drag queens achieve legibility in these films, and if so, how? To that end, I've selected a range of films: *Female Trouble* (dir. John Waters 1974), *Polyester* (dir. John Waters 1981), *Paris is*

*Burning*² (dir. Jennie Livingston 1990), *Adventures of Priscilla* (dir. Stephan Elliott 1994), *Queen of the Desert*, *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (dir. Beeban Kidron 1995), *The Birdcage* (dir. Mike Nichols 1996), and *Kinky Boots* (dir. Julian Jarrold 2005). These films were chosen based on their enduring reputation, as well as for their focus on drag queens as main characters. Here, I must insist on drawing a distinction between films that features characters engaging in cross-dressing as “aberrant” behavior that only arises out of necessity, such as *Tootsie*, or *Mrs. Doubtfire* and those that feature drag queens. While these films have been discussed in some academic literature, these “cross-dressing” films don’t engage the art of drag and the specific subject position of drag queens.

Additionally, the films discussed in this chapter help establish a foundation of drag queens in popular media, and the types of representation they’ve enjoyed. From this, we can better understand the context of the entry point for *RuPaul’s Drag Race* on television. There has been considerable academic scholarship on cross-dressing in general, where drag queens act as one facet of that. Marjorie Garber argues that “*transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture*: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself” (17, emphasis original). For Garber, cross-dressing is a way out, and she repeatedly returns to the “relationship between transvestism and gay identity,” although she does not limit her examination of cross-dressing to drag. However, in her text *Invisible Lives*, Viviane Namaste forwards a trenchant critique of Garber’s “paradigm of ‘looking at’ is limited insofar as it ignores the intertextual relations in

² At first blush, *Paris is Burning* as a documentary may seem like an outlier amongst the films I have selected. However, *Paris is Burning* received significant critical praise and award buzz. However, most importantly, *Paris is Burning* has become a key cultural touchstone for discussions of drag and has been a significant influence on both RuPaul and *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.

which meaning is situated,” and continues to reify “familiar oppositions between academics and ‘our’ objects of inquiry” (15). She goes on to critique how queer theory has treated drag queens in academic texts: “Drag queens are reduced to entertainment, coifed personalities whose only purpose is to titillate the gay male viewer. Framed as pure spectacle, this negates a variety of reasons why people might choose to cross-dress in a club: an exploration of one’s gender identity, a gesture of political intervention, a creative solution to boredom, and/or a way to pay the rent” (Namaste 11). Drag, Namaste argues, in queer theory such as Butler, is always confined to the stage, rendered a performance but never a subject position (11-13). In taking seriously the drag queen as a subject position, I argue we must attend to how this subject position is represented and how the performers understand themselves. This works to establish and form knowledge, regardless of these being media experiences and knowledge. As John Fiske writing about media events notes,

“...in a postmodern world we can no longer rely on a stable relationship or clear distinction between a ‘real’ event and its mediated representation. Consequently, we can no longer work with the idea that the ‘real’ is more important, significant, or even ‘true’ than the representation. A media event, then, is not a mere representation of what happened, but has its own reality, which gathers up into itself the reality of the event that may or may not have preceded it.” (Fiske 2)

Here, we begin with these questions of representation. One major consideration for those examining queer media and queer representation has been the question of in/visibility. Suzanna Walters expounds on this fixation, gays are not always able to be visually marked as queer and thus “issues of visibility and ‘coming out’ are centrally and inextricably linked to the process of acquiring civil rights,” whereas other marginalized groups whose difference could be visually read often had to contend with

“misrepresentation” (28). Larry Gross builds on this, arguing that “our vulnerability to media stereotyping and political attack derives in large part from our isolation and pervasive invisibility” (15). Gross acknowledges the similar position that marginalized folks occupy in the media, prone to “relative invisibility and demeaning stereotypes,” however, Gross draws a distinction between the ways in which people of color are “born into minority communities,” and what he views as the self-identifying and often solitary recognition that LGBTQ folks experience. In his view from 2001, LGB folk (as he does use the phrase “sexual minorities”) in the media brought controversy by their existence, a threat to heteronormative kinship formations that the state and society encourages people to adhere to, and thus Gross argued, “the group whose enemies are generally least inhibited by the consensus of ‘good taste’ that protects other minorities from the more public displays of bigotry (Gross 12-15). Writing in 2001, it is perhaps forgivable that Gross did not anticipate the active bigotry of a major party’s presidential political campaign, when Donald Trump actively directed hateful rhetoric and encouraged violence toward Muslims, Mexicans, and many PoC immigrants in general. However, Gross’ writing here does seem to subtly indicate a viewpoint that breaks identity out into clear axes, specifically an unstated whiteness to these “sexual minorities” that he writes about. Amidst the significant increase of gay representation in the 1990s, Walters shares her concern that while “we may be *seen*, now, but I’m not sure we are *known*” (3-10). Walters here is referring to the fact that while gay characters seem increasingly trendy, there is little engagement with the material realities of gay lives (10). Part of this comes as a result of the representations available to gays and lesbians. When the first gay characters began appearing on television shows, they were often one-off engagements done in “good taste,” designed explicitly to counter stereotypes (Gross 83). When recurring characters crept onto shows, they were sanitized, rendered safely gay by being

desexualized, such as the character Matt Fielding on *Melrose Place*, or they experienced a careful, hypersensitive handling of intimacy as minor as a kiss for sweeps, such as on *Roseanne*'s "lesbian kiss" for spring sweeps in 1994, or the multiple "lesbian kiss" moments in *Ally McBeal* for sweeps in November 1998 and 1999 (Gross 81-93).

Television brings its own challenges and considerations to constructing and understanding representation within queer communities. Film, however, offers a different opportunity for representation. Films featuring gay or queer characters exist in the shadow of Hollywood's tumultuous history with homosexuality, and the precarious position that queer representation was left in after the Hollywood Production Code of 1930, or the Hays Code. In order to gain financial success, films had to develop coded performances that could be read in a myriad of ways (Joyrich 444, Russo 30-33, 40).

When reading across these films, although no direct thread exists linking them all (aside from the drag performances of main characters), I argue that these films help to add layers of familiarity and understanding to American audiences approaching drag queens. As Suzanna Walters notes, within the media, drag queens were "domesticated," since "in films and popular culture generally, drag becomes a safe and circuitous way of dealing with gay subjects" (Walters 149, 144). The beginning, marked here in this chapter by the collaborations of John Waters and Divine, introduced the drag queen as a subcultural, cult, camp figure. Marked by deviance and desire, her subsequent forays into film helped to establish a clear referent for a drag queen-as-actor. Certainly, many would balk at the idea of Divine as "domesticated," however, it becomes important to trace the appearances of the drag queen figure in popular culture and attend to the labor she performs. What work do these representations do, how do they collect, cohere, or contradict each other in their manifestations? This chapter does not pose as the final

word on this conversation, which should be continued, but is merely one entry point into this dialogue.

Divinely Disruptive

I would be remiss if I were not to begin this chapter with the work of Divine and John Waters. Divine participated in countless collaborations with Waters and these films have achieved acclaim and notoriety from cult audiences. While Dreamland Productions has six films with Divine, I culled a representative selection. I focus on *Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble*, and *Polyester*. These films feature some of the most well-known of Divine's performances, and thus serve to establish a baseline reference for drag queens in film to American audiences. Waters' and Divine's collaborations achieved cult status and an enduring legacy in the cultural consciousness. These films helped present the camp sensibility characteristic of many drag performances. Throughout Waters' films, the opportunity for subversive drag, as Judith Butler terms to distinguish from non-subversive drag (*Bodies that Matter*), is present *because* Divine's very presence invokes the drag queen. Butler pushes, "drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality" (*Bodies that Matter* 85). If drag simply serves to imitate and uphold hegemonic norms of being and "regimes of power," that is not subversion (Butler *Bodies that Matter* 85). Rather, it becomes pastiche, an imitation without the denaturalizing and destabilizing laughter that parody brings (Butler *Gender Trouble* 188-198).

Notable in these films is the use of Divine. Divine often stars in these films not as a drag queen within the narrative, but as a woman. Richard Niles, extending Elin Diamond's conversation marrying Brechtian alienation effects to feminist theory ("Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory- Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism"), builds on

Diamond's discussions of cross-dressing to specifically consider the alienation effect in regards to drag (Niles 38). Niles argues that "drag can... be subversive by making the audience aware of the process of marginalization as it watches a historical moment sculpted and emphasized with a broad strokes of camp performance" (50). Divine, performing archetype roles like "the bad girl" (*Female Trouble*) or "the suburban housewife" (*Polyester*), is performing these roles as a drag queen playing a woman. This layered performance, marked notably by Waters' camp and grotesque sensibility, serves as a disruption to audiences, requiring more work of viewers than allowing them to sink into a film devoted to realism. These collaborations often showcase subversive, disruptive camp, forcing viewers to confront uncomfortable and very *visceral* scenes.

Divine does not stay in the land of safe imitation and respectable drag. Rather, as Michael Moon notes,

Divine's fiercely aggressive performances do not conceal or disavow what a dangerous act drag can be, onstage and off... Divine's 'loud and vulgar' (to use her terms for it) drag style flings the open secrets of drag performance into the faces of her audience: that unsanitized drag disgusts and infuriates many people, and that it is not wearing a wig or skirt or heels that is the primary sign of male drag performance but rather a way of inhabiting the body with defiant effeminacy – or, the effeminate body itself. And, finally, that it is just this conjunction of effeminacy and defiance in male behavior that can make a man the object of furious punitive energies, of gaybashing threatened or carried out rather than applause. (Moon and Sedgwick 17-18)

Rather than shying away from the harsh truths of performing drag (the threat of bodily harm for performer, the social distance it can place on one, etc.), Divine showcases these.

While some balk at the messages of the film that link perversion and excess with femininity, as Matthew Tinkcom notes, such criticisms arrive from a position that essentializes Divine's body as masculine and able to be distinctly separated from the performance... cleanly, pardon the pun (176). Ragan Rhyne pushes for a middle ground—rather than fixing Divine as enacting activist drag or misogynistic drag, “rather that Divine's deployment of classed fat femininity offered a space of discontinuity in which white supremacist rhetoric was often challenged both explicitly and implicitly” (191).

Pink Flamingos especially, as well as *Female Trouble*, retain significant subcultural capital as “cult classics,” that indicate a long(er) memory of queerness in popular culture. The collaborative film work between Divine and John Waters exhibit an early and enduring example of queer camp. Indeed, in addition to being among the earliest examples of queer media, or of a drag queen starring in feature films, John Waters' films and Divine's performances in them contain interesting ties to the grotesque and carnival. The accumulation of meanings that these film collaborations have acquired both at the time of their release and over the years, help demonstrate the earliest constructions of the drag queen in film and thus an American imaginary.

My entry into considering the queer grotesque and monstrous of course begins with Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin's discussion of carnival and the grotesque comes most extensively in his work *Rabelais and His World*. In Bakhtin's configuration, carnival or the carnivalesque functioned as a cathartic moment, a “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (Bakhtin 10). While Bakhtin was not alone in writing about carnival in literature, his conceptualization has been carried forward for productive academic discussions. From this understanding of the carnivalesque space, Mary Russo continues this consideration and brings the grotesque

body in Bakhtin's configuration forward. She understands carnival as a "semiotic performance," and from this works to excavate "the relation between the symbolic and cultural constructs of femininity and Womanness and the experience of *women*... together toward a dynamic model of a new social subjectivity" (Russo 320). After all, what is more grotesque, or more removed from the prevailing order, than the final scene of *Pink Flamingos*? Perhaps the most infamous scene from *Pink Flamingos*, and really, perhaps the most enduring of Divine's legacy, is the final scene where Divine eats dog feces as John Waters' voice speaks over the scene, telling the viewers that Divine is "not only the filthiest person in the world, but the filthiest actress" (*Pink Flamingos*). Here, we come crashing into camp full force:

"the old-style dandy hated vulgarity. The new-style dandy, the lover of Camp, appreciates vulgarity. Where the dandy would be continually offended or bored, the connoisseur of Camp is continually amused, delighted. The dandy held a perfumed handkerchief to his nostrils and was liable to swoon; the connoisseur of Camp sniffs the stink and prides himself on his strong nerves (Sontag 63).

John Waters and his work with Divine certainly "sniffs the stink" with glee- at times literally with the use of Odorama alongside *Polyester* in theaters.

Following Dawn Davenport's life, *Female Trouble* deals with Dawn's dissatisfaction with her family and drive for beauty and fame. We meet her as a delinquent high school student who explodes when her family do not give her the shoes she wanted for Christmas, because "nice girls don't wear cha cha heels" (*Female Trouble*). She leaves home in her nightgown, where she is picked up by Earl, played by Divine out of drag, who rapes her. Dawn gives birth to a daughter, Taffy, whom she often beats or neglects. Meanwhile, she supports herself and her daughter as a waitress and stripper, while engaging in burglaries and prostitution with her friends from high school.

When she begins frequenting the Lipstick Beauty Salon, she meets the owners Donald and Donna Dasher, and hairstylist Gator, whom she marries. Gator's Aunt Ida is devastated at the marriage, since she wanted her nephew to be a "homo," and feared him being in the "sick and boring life of heterosexuality" (*Female Trouble*). Eventually Dawn is called to meet with the Dashers at the salon, who ask if she'd be interested in participating in a "beauty experiment," where they are trying to show that "crime enhances beauty" (*Female Trouble*).

Dawn engages happily in the experiment. She uses her new closeness with the Dashers to persuade them to fire Gator after their marriage ends. In a rage at losing her nephew Aunt Ida throws acid on Dawn. This development thrills the Dashers, who declare "operation excitement is off to a flying start," and reassure Dawn of her heightened beauty when her scarred face is revealed in the hospital. Taffy runs away, and the Dashers take Dawn to a furnished apartment replete with a mini stage. There, Donald offers her liquid eyeliner, a "beauty treatment," that Dawn injects in her arm. We see Dawn living for the eyeliner rush and reveling in the stares. The Dashers set up a show where Dawn is advertised as the "most beautiful woman alive," while Taffy, returned from having met, then murdered her father for attempting to rape her, has joined the Hare Krishna movement and insists that her mother looks like a freak. In a pre-show fit, Dawn murders her mother, and briefly performs in front of a crowd, bouncing on a trampoline to raucous cheers before brandishing a gun and shooting into the crowd. The police arrive, also shooting audience members as they control the room. Dawn escapes, but is eventually captured. In court, the Dashers testify against Dawn for immunity, and Aunt Ida testifies, as Dawn is found guilty for a mix of crimes she committed and didn't. She is sentenced to die by electrocution, thanking her fans and declaring "my life is a show," before being killed (*Female Trouble*).

It may seem odd to include *Polyester* in this discussion. *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble* are arguably more iconic, more in line with John Waters' desire to provoke disgust and shock, accomplished by some of the most outrageous Divine performances. However, *Polyester* still toys with shock and corruption, and its approach is an important shift in style for both Waters and Divine. *Polyester* is subtler, and attempts to play with the audience experience of film with the inclusion of Odorama. Rather than explicitly glorifying trash, filth, and crime, *Polyester* inverts that. Divine plays Francine Fishpaw, a long-suffering suburban housewife with a hyper-sensitive nose. The smells that she is subjected to are made available to viewers in theatres via scratch and sniff cards. She is a very proper, 1950s-style housewife, incredibly aware of societal norms and gazes. Her husband runs a pornographic theater, to her dismay, and her children are burgeoning delinquents- her daughter Lu-Lu reminiscent of Dawn Davenport, and her son Dexter who huffs glue and stalks the streets of Baltimore to stomp on women's feet. Her best friend, Cuddles, her former house cleaner who has inherited enormous wealth from a former client, is her only source of kindness. We watch as her life falls apart as her sense of smell leads her to more familial disappointments. She smells out her daughter fooling around with her boyfriend in a car outside the house, smells out her husband Elmer having an affair with his secretary, and realizes her son is the foot stomper when he attacks her. During this period, Francine increasingly drinks and falls into a depression as she divorces her husband. Things come to a head when Dexter is arrested, Lu-Lu is abducted by Catholic nuns and her mother is shot by Lu-Lu's boyfriend and friends who trash the Fishpaw home. Francine's mother manages to kill Lu-Lu's boyfriend, whose body is discovered by Lu-Lu and, in an absurd echo of Romeo and Juliet, she attempts to kill herself. Francine arrives home to see her daughters suicide attempt next to her dog committing suicide. The police arrive, trashing

the house and insisting “the whole family is sick!” as Francine tearfully shouts that they’re “a normal American family” (*Polyester*).

However, we see Dexter arrive home, rehabilitated after prison and Lu-Lu returns, now a serene hippy changed by arts and crafts, particularly macramé. Francine quits drinking and finds new love with Todd Tomorrow, owner of an art cinema drive-in. When he proposes, Francine accepts. She shortly finds out that Todd is conspiring with her mother to take her money, he’s in love with her mother, who he does coke with, a sharp contrast to his high-class, dashing image. Again, Francine and her children are beset with violence as Elmer and his secretary come to the house at night to kill Francine, who they torture with old shoes. Francine’s kids leap to the rescue: Dexter stomps on Sandra’s foot, and Sandra shoots Elmer while Lu-Lu strangles Sandra. Outside, Cuddles and her new husband are driving past the house still dressed from their wedding, before swerving to avoid hitting Francine, but hitting and killing Todd before accidentally running over Francine’s mother as they reverse. Francine hugs her distraught children to her as she is comforted by Cuddles and her husband. Francine produces aerosol air freshener that she sprays as she hugs her children, declaring “everything smells so much better now” (*Polyester*). The camera slowly pans up and out, as Francine moves from her children, steps over Todd’s body and heads back inside, spraying all the while. Francine hits rock bottom as her family is deconstructed, and rises as her family is remade. However, as Matthew Tinkcom notes, “it is quite a stretch to imagine that the Fishpaw household can be restored to equilibrium, for it is defined through its continual reassertion of crisis” (Tinkcom 171).

According to Tinkcom, John Waters insists “that he writes his screenplays with the intent of positioning his viewers to side with the perverse, the criminal and the outlandish” (Tinkcom 177). We are meant to view Dawn and Francine as heroes in their

own journeys, and in doing so, follow the inverted logics of the films. What happens if we take these grotesque figures as heroes? While surely there are limits to excess- the familial murders depicted across both films are certainly acts that we ought not to uncritically embrace. However, loosening the hegemonic logics can allow for a productive alienation, allowing viewers to step back and re-examine that which we are conditioned to disdain and revere.

While perhaps a reclamation of and celebration of the monstrous by queer communities and artists may be galling to some, or seen as “a step backwards,” myself and others see liberatory potential in the monstrous. To quote Bernshoff, “Identification with the monster can mean many different things to many different people, and is not necessarily always a negative thing for the individual spectator in question, even as some depictions of queer monsters undoubtedly conflate and reinforce certain sexist or homophobic fears within the public sphere” (97-98). Rather than allowing a sanitized, homonormative LGBT community (as the Q would not be welcome in such spaces) that is accompanied by HRC-approved sponsors and policies become the sole voice of “sexual minorities,” this strain of art and expression finds itself insisting on queer, and adherence to the anti-normative critique and visibility that is more in line with queer politics, rather than lesbian and gay politics. And on an individual level, there is often something in the tragedy of the classic monster’s plight that can resonate with queer individuals, providing a type of “power-wish fulfillment fantasy for some queer viewers” (Benshoff 98).

Capturing “Realness”

Perhaps out of all the films discussed in this chapter, *Paris is Burning* is the most significant outlier. A documentary rather than fiction, and thus posing different considerations than the other films included in this chapter, *Paris is Burning* depicts the

Ballroom scene of New York City, interviewing many established and up-and-coming ball performers. As a documentary, it has a veneer of authenticity, or as Juhasz and Lebow phrase it, “documentary has relied upon this aura of, and actual engagement with, the world” (Juhasz and Lebow 1). The documentary is directed by Jennie Livingston, and follows the performers of the Ballroom community, who take Livingston and the audience into the world of Ball culture and their Houses. Names flash in bold caps on the screen to introduce new interlocutors, who function as guides for the audience, as well as language used by the performers that may be unfamiliar to mainstream audiences, such as “mopping,” “shade,” or “reading,” the latter two have certainly crossed into mainstream usage in contemporary times. It has become a key textual referent in both popular culture and in academic discussions of media, queer studies, gender studies, etc. to refer to performance, race, gender, sexuality, class, drag, and of course, the particular dynamics of the Ballroom community.

Paris is Burning has been the subject of significant and sustained criticism for the circumstances surrounding its production and distribution. As a documentary, it claims a privileged relationship to truth and authenticity, with the films goal to introduce audiences to and educate them about the New York Ballroom scene developed and sustained by Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ folks. In the film, we can see moments of quotidian deployments of performance in fleeting glimpses. As Marlon M. Bailey argues, “members of the resilient Black LGBT community rely on cultural labor not only to survive but also to enhance the quality of their lives” (16). *Paris is Burning* remains a prominent exemplar to discuss cultural labor practices of Black LGBTQ communities. In the years since its release, it has garnered ample discussion and criticism of the production politics. Judith Butler in a 1993 essay takes into consideration *Paris is Burning*, and the work that the film and the spaces and figures depicted within perform

to resignify, appropriate, and subvert norms. It is here that she sketches out her (now in/famous) consideration of drag (as well as identification) as ambivalent (*Bodies that Matter*, 86). Butler questions whether the camera promises a sort of transubstantiation, offering the recognition and chance for a wider audience and potential legendary status that Butler views as the “phantasmic trajectory of the drag ball culture” (*Bodies that Matter* 93). She works through this via Livingston’s camera and how it interacts with Octavia’s femininity. Butler unpacks how the desire of the camera works with the recognition of Octavia as a woman, paying particular attention to the labor the camera performs in its deployment and recognition.

Important to note, however, this theorizing by Butler departs from the theory of the flesh produced from the persons engaged in interviews for the film. Dorian Corey dryly remarks as she paints her face at the end of *Paris* that folks “aim lower” as they age. She explains this as moving away from grandiose dreams of stardom to consider the existential questions of pleasure while living in a world that is actively hostile to the existence of multiply marginalized subjects, where to “simply make it through” and have a few people know your name makes a mark on the world. Corey’s remarks align with Fiona Buckland’s discussions of queer lifeworlds which are produced socially and through movement, which she viewed in the context of the club and dance floor (4). We see the lifeworlds of *Paris is Burning* through the ballroom community, performing, competing, and simply living with and amongst one another.

Paris is Burning becomes a necessary bridge after the films of John Waters and Divine. It’s a drastic shift - Divine was not “playing” a drag queen character in *Female Trouble* or *Polyester*, but has always had the sign of the drag queen attached to those performances. In *Paris is Burning*, we shift from the association of drag with monstrous excess, to a representation that is wholly human. Of course, *Paris is Burning* cannot

capture the scene or period in totality, despite the almost canonical-like reverence that *Drag Race* and other venues have for *Paris is Burning* as the authority for depicting the scene. Indeed, the film has moved the scene and the participants speaking on camera to almost the mythic domain, as Oishi notes in her discussion of Nichols' work, "by which filmmakers lend political significance or emotional power to bodies by producing them as symbols or icons" (Oishi 255). Paradoxically, *Paris is Burning* was notable in its early years for providing a lived, quotidian context for drag and other queer and trans* performances, but now has been so held up and reified, the performers have become mythic, symbols of an authenticity that is used to demonstrate one's knowledge of "the history." As such, this sustained, continued engagement via quotes, citations, references, etc. all work to demonstrate how "these regimes of representation, while linked to histories of struggle, exploitation, and control, are themselves not fixed and are subject to constant revision and negotiation" (Oishi 266). *Paris is Burning* is a vital, key step for queer semiosis and our iterative understanding of the Drag Queen.

Taking the Show on the Road: Traveling Queens

There is a popular conception among audiences that *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* is the American version of *Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. However, both films were developed independently, although both do share some broad similarities, featuring a set of traveling queens on a road trip. Additionally, these films, while building off of a largely white gay sensibility, begin to incorporate race and (briefly) indigeneity in a liberal gesture towards "multiculturalism." Perhaps rather than a road trip experience, these films can be viewed as the drag queen's "welcome tour," a charm offensive that introduced drag queen characters to American audiences in both mainstream and "indie"-geared circuits. Esther Newton, in her conversations with drag queens and female impersonators in the 1960s, writes about how impersonators

and performers often have an aversion to taking their show on the road. These performers felt that in small-town America “audiences and entire towns can be ‘unsophisticated’ and aggressively hostile” (Newton 120). Via these films, audiences across a range of locations would be able to experience a drag performance, regardless if there is a drag scene in their local community.

In her seminal work, Newton unpacks the centrality of transformation, a visual shift between hegemonic gender roles within a cisnormative framework, to the drag queen and camp. Newton elaborates, “the drag queen is concerned with masculine-feminine transformation, while the camp is concerned with what might be called a philosophy of transformation and incongruity” (104-105). Berkowitz and Belgrave also write of the “allure of transformation” that their interlocutors describe, the power in literally crafting the self to become a character (176). I argue that we must take transformation as a core tenet of drag, but not in the closed way that Newton describes. Rather, I push to consider transformation in a larger sense and view this section of “Travelling Queens” as contending with an intersubjective transformative experience throughout the course of their films. In these films, we see drag queens venturing beyond the confines of their stages and bars in urban environments traveling through rural settings, and creating ripple effects of transformative shifts in both themselves and their surroundings. While both films utilize a type of camp sensibility and demonstrate a commitment to transformation, the distinction between *Priscilla* and *To Wong Foo* lies in its scope. *Priscilla* presents a film that centers the traveling drag queens and trans performer, engaging in human-size, realistic ripples of intersubjective transformation, while *To Wong Foo* engages in outlandish transformations of the characters (that are at times best left un-interrogated to enjoy the film).

Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert sets the tone of the film cleverly in its opening moments. We see Tick, played by Hugo Weaving, performing a lipsync as his drag persona, Mitzi Del Bra, to Charlene's "I've Never Been to Me," a gentle 1970s ballad in front of a lively, at times raucous bar. The song is from the perspective of a woman who has traveled around the world, seeking experiences and following pleasure, speaking to another woman who has spent her life as a wife and mother and expresses a yearning for the latter's experiences. It's a fitting introduction to Tick, the anchor of the film, who "has never been to me," and makes that journey over the course of the film. Tick recruits the help of Adam and Bernadette to do a run of shows at a resort in Alice Springs, in the interior of Australia, from their coastal location in Sydney, a journey of over 1,700 miles. Adam is another drag queen (Felicia Jollygoodfellow), earlier in his career who has turned into a "bloody good little performer," as Tick says (*Priscilla*), and Bernadette, a transwoman who had performed in a Les Girls troupe (a group that actually existed and was famous for female impersonation) in her youth. Tick is vague about why they're offered a four week show run "at Equity minimum" in Alice Springs, and the audience knows only that he has been drawn there from a mysterious phone call in the night. Throughout the film, viewers are treated to cryptic, stylistic flashbacks of Tick in an ornate drag chandelier costume, waiting in a hospital hallway- the juxtaposition between the glittering ensemble and the stark surroundings inviting a laugh. Throughout their days on the road, the performers, and thus the audience, gradually learn more about each other's lives and histories. From Tick, we learn that the mysterious woman on the phone is his wife, calling him to take over custody of their son for a while- an unconventional but amicable arrangement between the pair.

Throughout the film, *Priscilla* foregrounds the trio, working on unpacking and unwrapping the layers of the characters to center their lived experiences, while also

pairing it with a pervasive wry camp humor. The film gives ample time and care to ensure that the trio of Tick, Bernadette and Adam are fully realized, and *human*, not caricatures of a camp sensibility or what audiences “think” a drag queen does when not onstage. *Priscilla* works to showcase the joys of performing and the real dangers that accompany both their act and their own selves, but also the mundane details that creep up while dealing with the logistics of taking a show on the road. Additionally, *Priscilla* is an example of showcasing queer kinship patterns in a film that was widely available, critically lauded, and considered a box office success. During our meeting, JoAnn remarked, “I loved *Priscilla*. It was terrifying to watch... too dangerously close to what was um, to be gay or queer at the time... It was really intense to deal with, and that’s why it was really scary. Queers felt the same thing. It was really hard to watch sometimes because you’re terrified that your life is going to be so hard.”

Part of the success of this rich humanization is the very frank discussions of struggles and goals each performer has. For Tick, we discover the mysterious voice calling is his wife, Marion, who he hasn’t seen in years, calling to reconnect and pass their son, Benji, to him, a type of unconventional shared parenting. Bernadette joins the journey to perform in Alice Springs to take her mind off of her late husband, who had died bleaching his hair with peroxide in an unventilated bathroom. While she doesn’t seem especially sad to have lost her husband, Trumpet, describing him as “just a kid who had a thing about transsexuals,” she is mourning the loss of a source of love in her life, one that she had struggled for, “spend[ing] half [her] life and all [her] savings to find a sympathetic husband” (*Priscilla*). Adam is going to fulfill his lifelong dream of climbing King’s Canyon “as a queen”- which Bernadette wryly terms, (“a cock in a frock on a rock”) (*Priscilla*). While Adam is not driven by a sense of loss, or reunification with a family, Adam’s role in *Priscilla* is integral, and arguably was the riskiest role to cast and

perform. The concern for Adam's role was taken seriously by the writer and director of the film, Stephan Elliot, who worried "about the role lapsing into caricature, to which he felt a 'straight' actor will eventually resort in order to sustain a role of such queenly flamboyance," or deteriorating into "mincing pastiche" (Clark 66, 41)

Adam, who performs as Felicia Jollygoodfellow, enacts key moments of queer world-making during *Priscilla*, that allow audiences to marry an outrageous camp sensibility with important queer labor. In Broken Hill, the first town they stop in after Sydney, Adam wins a bet with Tick and Tick must walk the "main drag in full drag," with Adam willingly joining him, as "he can't let [Mitzi] have all the attention." Their turn on the main streets of Broken Hill is not done in high-feminine, glamorous drag, but rather a more outrageous style that veers more to playful and campy, featuring outlandish corsets, a flip-flop dress, and fluorescent wigs.

The group encountered pushback that night before ordering drinks from a homophobic and transphobic character, Shirley, however Bernadette's effective insults that the crowd also found funny allowed the group to join the community for a night of drinking. However, when the trio awake to "AIDS FUCKERS GO HOME" spray painted across the bus, the response is one of somber acceptance. Indeed, the next scene of them on the road features one of the most iconic images, where Adam is seated in the silver high heel atop the bus, performing the aria "Sempra libera" from *La Traviata* in a silver sequin bodysuit and headpiece, with a long tail of metallic silver fabric trailing behind the bus as it drives through the outback. Later, when their bus breaks down, Adam works on painting over the graffiti message by putting a coat of lavender on the bus. When spending the night in Coober Pedy, Adam in full Felicia glory attempts to join Bob drinking with the locals, but is almost attacked before Bob and Bernadette step in. Despite their past friction, Bernadette offers the shaken Adam advice, "Don't let it drag

you down, let it toughen you up. I can only fight because I've learned too. Being a man one day and a woman the next is not an easy thing to do" (*Priscilla*).

Priscilla as a film does not shy away from showcasing and celebrating drag performances, opening and closing with Mitzi Del Bra's performance in a Sydney bar. The trio launch impromptu performances when the opportunity arises: such as when they're happened upon by an Aboriginal man, Jimmy, who brings the trio to an Aboriginal gathering for the night, where members are playing music together and dancing. The trio, in full drag, perform a number for those present as a form of payment/contribution to the party, which after a beat of silence is warmly received. Indeed, Alan is so enthusiastic, they perform a second number, revealing Alan in a glittering disco suit, enthusiastically taking the spotlight with the drag performers to the delight of the gathering. This is a vast difference from the other impromptu performance of the film, when they are having dinner with the mechanic fixing their bus, Bob, and his Filipino wife, Cynthia. Upon discovering the trio are traveling to Alice Springs for their drag show engagement, Bob is excited and reveals he was a fan of Les Girls. Bob insists they perform at the bar in his small town, and the trio agrees, although Bernadette is wary. Her reservations draw on the narrative distinctions between urban/rural centers and the shades of class and culture that often accompany them ("Broken Hill had a Kmart, they knew what a frock is"). Indeed, their performance is met with stunned silence that does not break into applause, with the exception of Bob's enthusiastic claps and cheers in the back of the bar. Rather, their show is disrupted at Cynthia's entrance and the recentering of heterosexual desire. The trio quietly gets down off the bar and watch in shock, a twinge of horror, and Felicia's cackle as Cynthia's performing talent is revealed: she does a burlesque style number that culminates in her inserting and then shooting ping pong balls out of her vagina to the roars of approval from the bar. And

finally, in Alice Springs, viewers are treated to a full number set to “Finally” by CeCe Peniston with extravagant costume changes that showcase the flora, fauna, and landmarks of Australia. The number closes to polite applause from the crowd, while Bob, Marion and Benji cheer and clap enthusiastically.

The film plays with a kinship structure that at first blush would seem in service of the heteronormative: the film is spurred by Tick being called back to be a father to his son. As Eng tells us, that it is the “position of parent” and “possession of a child, whether biological or adopted,” which is being used as “a measure of value, self-worth... the sign of guarantee both for family and for full and robust citizenship, for being a fully realized political, economic, and social subject in American life” that he tells us is being sought after by both heterosexuals and homosexuals (Eng 101). However, *Priscilla* doesn’t strictly cleave to this, after all, Benji has lived with Marion for years before Tick was called to retrieve his son. Any specific parenting conversation they might have had is only alluded to as their “deal” or “bargain,” and that she needs “some space,” since she’s been a full-time parent for so long (*Priscilla*). Presumably while Tick and Marion speak, we find Adam sitting on the floor with Benji while he plays, asking very pointedly if Benji knows “what his father does for a living,” and “so I suppose you know he doesn’t really like girls then” (*Priscilla*). Adam seems defensive here, almost protective and trying to gauge what Tick is walking into, before being surprised by Benji’s nonchalant answers: yes he knows, and he wants to know if Tick had a boyfriend, because neither does his mom, who also doesn’t have a girlfriend anymore, and does Adam want to play with his legos? The next day, Tick is unaware of Benji’s awareness and still struggling with how to “explain himself,” as the entire group go on a family outing of sorts. When he has his own conversation with Benji, touched that Benji was told that Mitzi was “the best in the business” and his request for an ABBA number, we see Tick finally settled. He rushes off

to complete his promise with Adam and Bernadette, his other family members in the film, as they climb King's Canyon in showgirl attire and sensible boots. We learn that Bernadette will find love with Bob, covering Marion's job while she's on holiday, taking a chance on reciprocated romantic love. Meanwhile, Adam, Tick, and Benji drive off to ABBA's "Mamma Mia!", and the end of the film continues the song, showing Felicia and Mitzi performing the number to a captivated, packed bar as Benji looks on in joy next to the spotlight. The film's ending showcases more of what Marlon Bailey terms "overlapping kin-making practices," where "LGBT member nurture and look after one another according to a logic of kinship that exceeds gender and sexual norms, age hierarchies, and biological ties" (Bailey 25).

Priscilla's legacy is enduring, known for its willingness to engage with the beauty, the ugly, and the quotidian realities of performers. As Dianne tells me in an interview, "I loved it because I thought it was very clinging, um, it gave all sides of the story, not the "I'm a happy gay, I'm a happy gay, I'm a happy gay", it gave the bad points, showed the bad stuff too. You know, the tagging of the bus, um, the awkwardness in the street, club, the weirdness that can happen when you're out as a gay person, with the lady shooting the ping pong balls. I mean, just weird shit you run into, which really isn't that far off of the stuff I've seen in my lifetime. So it's just- I mean, they covered everything, they did it tastefully, the acting was extraordinary."

Where *Priscilla* was unafraid to dive into the struggles and joys of the travelling performers, in *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* we learn surprisingly little about the three drag queens we follow. Starring Patrick Swayze, Wesley Snipes, and John Leguizamo, as Vida Boheme, Noxeema Jackson, and Chi Chi Rodriguez, respectively, *To Wong Foo* follows three drag queens who are traveling cross-

country from New York to Los Angeles to compete in the “Miss Drag Queen of America Pageant.” The film opens with each character getting ready to compete in a regional drag pageant, New York’s “Drag Queen of the Year,” a title that Via and Noxeema both win in a joint victory.

For JoAnn Michaels, the drag queens of *To Wong Foo* are always in their “superhero costumes,” and what she calls their “drag power stance,” so it “felt more of a fantasy,” and that “it was one of the few that ended with a really positive message.” JoAnn mentions that she is really drawn to superheroes, that they feel like drag queens to her, although she struggles with it “they’re written by mostly heterosexual men, leading to over-sexualized women characters.” Despite her reservations about some depictions of superheroes JoAnn is effusive about *To Wong Foo*, saying she loved it because “it was a celebration of... the sissy inside of [her].” Indeed, the beginning of *To Wong Foo* is nothing short of exuberant celebration. The film’s opening sequence depicting Vida, Noxeema and Chi Chi readying themselves for the pageant also leads us directly into the pageant, taking the audience backstage where the screen is filled with chattering, excited drag queens all making final touches for the event. The camera from the dressing room, traveling through the stairwell as Chi Chi finally dons her wig before taking the audience to the stage. Onstage we are treated to each drag contestant getting a close-up and announced introduction before fading to black to open on another contestant. We then see the contestants assembled onstage, among which include well-known drag performers such as Coco Peru, Candis Cayne, and Hedda Lettuce, with a flash to a scene of drag queens, club kids, and well-known gay icons like Susanne Bartsch, Quentin Crisp, Lady Bunny, Joey Arias, Fotilla DeBarge, among others. RuPaul descends at the end of the musical number to crown the winner, dressed in a sleeveless floor-length gown, JoAnn shares, “I respected RuPaul’s drag name [in the movie], Rachel

Tension. As soon as I realized what it was, I was like, ‘and she’s wearing a confederate flag!’ Along with her confederate flag dress, Rachel Tension sports blonde updo tinged with pink.

Following the show, Vida and Noxeema encounter Chi Chi crying at her loss. Here, we see the main dynamic of the trio begin to emerge: Vida and Noxeema acting as mentors or even fairy godmothers to Chi Chi, a newer drag queen. At Vida’s pushing their airline tickets are traded for cash, in an effort to change modes of transportation to allow them to bring Chi Chi with them to compete in the national pageant (ignoring the fact that if she hadn’t placed in a preliminary, Chi Chi wouldn’t likely be allowed to compete). With their money, they purchase an old Cadillac, persuaded by the style of the car, despite the salesman pleading with them to take the Toyota Corolla.

On their drive, they begin to coach Chi Chi, and by extension the audience about what it takes to be a drag queen. Noxeema is tasked with explaining to Chi Chi and the audience “you are, simply put, a boy in a dress. When a straight man puts on a dress and gets his sexual kicks, he is a transvestite. When a man is a woman trapped in a man’s body and has the little operation he is a transsexual. When a gay man has way too much fashion sense for one gender he is a drag queen” (*To Wong Foo*). When Chi Chi, frustrated at the disrespect, attempts to leave, they coax her back, as Vida promises that “Auntie Vida” and “Auntie Noxie” will help her become a full drag queen. Chi Chi pushes for a different label, as Vida relents to call her a drag princess and Noxeema tells her that there are four steps to being a drag queen, the first being “let good thoughts be your sword and shield” (*To Wong Foo*). When Chi Chi insists on getting a room at a hotel, ignoring Noxeema and Vida’s concern (“People are going to be cruel to us, it could get violent, Vida we’ve been there before”), they are greeted as part of a women’s basketball group, given safety by passing under an “alternative femininity” that the hotel staff

assigns them. This gives us step two: “ignore adversity” (*To Wong Foo*). Their next obstacle on the road is less rosy, when they’re pulled over by Sheriff Dollard. The trio frets as they are in full drag, but Vida’s license obviously is assigned to her legal name as a man. Sheriff Dollard is the primary antagonist of the film, casually dropping racist slurs as he questioned why a white woman would be with a Black woman and Latina woman. Later, when Vida is told to get out of the car, Sheriff Dollard pushes up Vida’s gown and she exclaims in a deeper voice than we’ve heard her use yet, “Get your hand off my dick, buddy” shoving the sheriff to the ground (*To Wong Foo*). The trio assumes he’s dead when Chi Chi says she can’t find a pulse and flee, only for their car to break down. When Chi Chi is able to flag down a passing trunk, they’re towed to safety in Snyder’sville, a small town in Nebraska.

Forced to wait the weekend for a car part to come in, the trio gets to work, first transforming the presidential suite comically fast, as the townsfolk stare through the windows and the “Wonder Woman” theme song plays, a preview of the labor they’ll be performing on the townsfolk in the film. Meanwhile, Sheriff Dollard is found in the road by other law enforcement officers, with a clear plastic heel nearby. Later, he is mocked by his coworkers as they laugh and ask, “you got beat up by a girl?” (*To Wong Foo*). This enrages them, as Dollard reminds them that there were three people there, “and one of them was black... they were dressed up like girls but they were boys” (*To Wong Foo*). As the laughter continues, and the officers call him “Mrs. Dollard,” Dollard is resolute, insisting that he was “attacked by perverts,” and that he’ll “bring back three corpses,” before stuttering that they’ll find something they “shouldn’t find” under their dresses (*To Wong Foo*). Within the film, on paper Dollard should be wildly threatening: he’s invoked threat of death, and is a racist law enforcement officer who uses his power to assault women, however, the film frames him as an absurd character. In nearly every scene,

people address him first as “Dullard,” due to a badge misprint. When he is searching for the trio, he has a checklist in comically large print (for viewer legibility) labeled “Places for Homos” which lists flower shops, ballet schools, flight attendant lounges, restaurants for brunch, and antique shops. The villain here is toxic heterosexual masculinity, and we’re meant to find it ridiculous, despite the very real threat it poses.

In the town, the trio begin to make sense of where they wound up, learning more about the community they’re staying in that they will perform their labor, working in service of heteroperpetuity, which La Mar Jurelle Bruce defines as working “to convince us that (white and middle class) heteronorms are desirable, natural, essential, and eternal. All the while, it produces material structures and conditions to sustain those heteronorms” (169). Chi Chi pursues a romantic engagement with Bobby Ray, who saves her from the “roughnecks” and the threat of sexual assault. Noxeema chases after an older woman named Clara who “doesn’t hear or speak” since her husband left her (*To Wong Foo*). Noxeema shares her plans to be discovered while in Los Angeles to star in a film biopic of Dorothy Dandridge. Praising the career Dorothy Dandridge “the noble blacktress who never played domestic help and then whose career was crushed by the white Hollywood machine,” Noxeema lists the films of Dandridge but misses a few titles, which Clara supplies to Noxeema’s shock as Clara asks her “You wanna try Lena Horne?” (*To Wong Foo*). Vida connects with Carol Ann, the wife of the mechanic who runs the bed and breakfast where they’re staying, finding her crying in the kitchen with a new bruise on her face, which Carol Ann claims is from a box in the closet falling on her. Vida, realizing the situation, tries to connect by sharing her own excuse for the verbal abuse her father. The self-declared full drag queens of the film, Vida and Noxeema meet up again at the café, and begin to work their transformative labor for the women of the town. With their assistance, the town Strawberry Social event gains a theme (Red and

Wild), and the women indulge in a “day with the girls,” replete with makeovers for a new hair and new, retro outfits. With a blank slate, they can begin to work on transforming the townsfolk themselves.

Things come to a head when Bobby Ray comes to court Chi Chi. Throughout the day, Vida had been coaching Bobby Lee, Carol Ann’s daughter on pursuing Bobby Ray. Vida insists she cannot, that “there are human rules by which we operate,” (*To Wong Foo*). The drag queens of the film are not inhuman, we’ve spent too much time rooting for our protagonists, rather they are super-human, deified and acting as guardian angels (Hammond). Noxeema is practical, reminding Chi Chi that there is a danger in intimacy since Bobby Ray thinks Chi Chi is a woman. When Chi Chi and Vida fight, invoking the racial tension as Chi Chi is frustrating with Vida’s “vanilla white superior” way of running the trip, it is only interrupted by the sound of Carol Ann being beaten. Again, Noxeema interjects, “there are times when you help people, and then there are times when, if you help people, you end up being killed. So you don’t help people” (*To Wong Foo*). Indeed, Noxeema in this moment is seemingly the only one aware of their precarious safety in this small town. Chi Chi continues her frustration, yelling that Vida is a drag queen because she “couldn’t cut it as a man, so you had to put on a dress,” and when Vida rises to the taunt, her wig is ripped off by one of their decorations, a moment where the fantasy is seemingly disrupted. That disruption is never addressed, as Vida shifts into action, kicking down the door in full glamor, punching Carol Ann’s husband and throwing him out of his house. Here, Brookey and Westerfelhaus that this scene shows “the film’s conception of the true power of the drag queen... although she possesses the feminine qualities necessary to subdue masculine aggression in a civil manner, she also has the strength to physically subdue such aggression as well... she can draw on masculine and feminine strengths” (Brookey & Westerfelhaus 148). Chi Chi

realizes the image Bobby Ray has of her would be shattered by truth and she walks away, earning step three, “abide by the rules of love,” as the Vida and Noxeema comfort her and the trio forgives one another for their fight. Chi Chi’s disciplining is a key move, finally bringing her in line to dehumanize her into a drag angel, moving from “queer provocateur, threatening to thwart heteroperpetuity, into an innocuous matchmaker and style guru who cheers on a young, straight, white couple” (Bruce 172).

In the aftermath of the conflict, we see how the workings of the trio have affected the townspeople: Bobby Lee is transformed into Roberta, empowered to attract and pursue Bobby Ray. As they dance to music outside in the night before the Strawberry Social. The townspeople, drawn by the romantic music, couple up and dance in the street, while Vida, Noxeema, and Chi Chi, look on from an upstairs balcony, sighing “sometimes it just takes a fairy,” as thanks to their efforts, “the threat of masculine aggression is contained, and heterosexual dysfunction is overcome” (*To Wong Foo*, Brookey & Westerfelhaus 149). Of course, our comic threat of Sheriff Dollard grows, as he sits in a bar dejected in his search, delivering a wistful homoerotic soliloquy before meeting Carol Ann’s husband, the two teaming up to take on the trio.

This success only continues the next day, as Carol Ann fixes the car herself, and gently revealing that she has noticed Vida’s adam’s apple, and remarks her gratitude to have a “lady friend who just so happens to have an adam’s apple” (*To Wong Foo*). The guise assigned to the trio: that they were “career girls” is revealed to be a thin illusion. Indeed, when Sheriff Dollard arrives, he calls for the drag queens to reveal themselves, shouting to the town, “Don’t protect these freaks!... these weirdos comin’ in here, these boys in dresses. Corrupting you with their way of life. Changing the way things have always been” brandishing the shoe and a shotgun in a perverse Cinderella move (*To Wong Foo*). When a figure in red steps out to meet him, the audience and townsfolk is to

presume that it's Vida, sacrificing herself for the group, before its revealed to be Carol Ann who is able to confidently dismiss her abusive husband and declares, "I am a drag queen" as the townsfolk gather around her in support (*To Wong Foo*). The community moves to protect the trio as everyone joins in to declare themselves drag queens, frustrating Sheriff Dollard and his ally Virgil into leaving, while the queens shelter in their room, touched and each changed by this reveal: Noxxeema declares she is no longer worried about acceptance, she will "make Hollywood wherever" she is, Vida will no longer crave her parents approval, and Chi Chi will "stand up from now on" (*To Wong Foo*). There is the obligatory celebration at the social before the trio leave, as Carol Ann tells Vida she can't accept Vida's offer to leave with them, but she tells Vida she loves her, and says, "I don't think of you as a man. And I don't think of you as woman. I think of you as an angel," as Vida replies, "I think that's healthy" (*To Wong Foo*). The acceptance and protection of the community for the trio is seemingly positive, however this acceptance and protection is figured within the bounds of the queens acting as guardian angels for the town, providing a "social separation" and "dehumanization," by figuring them as something other-than human (Brookey & Westerfelhaus 152, 150). Indeed, Chi Chi, under the tutelage of Vida and Noxeema has blossomed, revealed at the pageant in Los Angeles to have achieved "step four: larger than life is just the right size," when she is crowned the winner of the Drag Queen of America contest by Julie Newmar herself.

To Wong Foo engages in a similar transformative experience to *Priscilla*, featuring traveling drag queens who meet others and engage in mutual growth for the better. However, where *Priscilla* foregrounded a rich, humanized narrative with a full world for the performers, the central trio in *To Wong Foo* is dehumanized in their portrayal, and presented in a contained and bounded narrative. Casting Patrick Swayze, Wesley Snipes, and John Leguizamo is one indication of this, all well-known stars who

offer “heterosexualizing presence,” with the trailers featuring action sequences from Swayze and Snipes’ earlier films to “assure audiences of [their] masculinity” (Evans 44, Davenport 216). Swayze in press tours that *To Wong Foo* touted the “family values” of the film, and much of the publicity for the film was aimed at mainstream, heterosexual audiences. This is in contrast to the marketing for *Priscilla*, which embraced more of the gay market- Dianne reflected in an interview that she was involved in a “promotional tour” for *Priscilla*, that involved a bus tour in town, where she was in “full tilt drag.”

Both *Priscilla* and *To Wong Foo* feature traveling drag performers, but it is no surprise that *To Wong Foo*, involving some of the biggest names in Hollywood, lands squarely in commercial drag. The queens of *To Wong Foo* are never shown out of drag, with the exception of the opening sequence, and yet no mention is made of this choice, beyond the brief reminders it could be dangerous. As my interlocutor Charmaine notes, “it is very scary the first time ever going out in heels. And like, for me, when I was getting in my car from my apartment, I was running really fast, ‘cause I was in these stilettos and this hair and I was just, like boy in makeup.” While now she jokes that she doesn’t care if she goes to a drive-thru after a show with a face on, there is a very real threat. When Dianne first moved to Phoenix and would perform, she noted her own rules, where she would park down the street, since cops in Phoenix would pull folks over leaving gay bar parking lots, she would always try to walk in pairs, and always carried a switchblade. *Priscilla* engages with this reality more than *To Wong Foo*- Chi Chi is ultimately saved from the threat of violence. Barbra notes how she came to these films after learning a little about drag and was “turned off” by them, how *Priscilla* and *To Wong Foo*, showed the characters “run out of town to town... they chase them out, they’re going to beat them up.” These films hint at the danger and tragedy enough to orient audiences familiar, but don’t overly engage.

Both films also struggle with humor and dialogue that are increasingly out of step with today. Twice in *Priscilla*, Bernadette is deadnamed by Adam, who does it in the spirit of annoyance, ignoring the transphobic violence of the action. Throughout *To Wong Foo*, both Vida and Noxeema refer to Chi Chi with bigoted language, making jokes about her “running across the border,” that she has a “head like a piñata,” or is “Third-world sway-backed,” all configuring Chi Chi not only as Other in terms of an incomplete drag queen, but Other in the national body, her Latinx identity precluding her from full access. Interestingly, this distancing is not performed on Noxeema, who is situated firmly as a full-fledged drag queen implicated in transformative labor.

Drag Queens as Community Guardians

If we can understand *Priscilla* and *To Wong Foo* as bringing drag queens on a journey of self-discovery, understanding, and acceptance, the next films that featured drag queens worked to address incorporating drag queens within communities that film audiences would find more familiar than the dark showrooms of gay clubs and bars. *The Birdcage*, a 1996 remake of the 1978 *La Cage aux Folles*, was a wildly popular French-Italian film, garnering both commercial and critical success. *La Cage aux Folles* was adapted to film in 1978, originally a French play debuting in 1973. While *The Birdcage* is often grouped with *Priscilla* and *To Wong Foo*, where all featured drag queens as main characters, and had been released with a year of each other, *The Birdcage* fits better in conversation with *Kinky Boots*, released nine years later.

Both *Kinky Boots* and *The Birdcage* feature one drag performer in their main cast, and in both films, the drag queen in question is often considered in need of being managed or contained. The “traveling queens” of *Priscilla* and *To Wong Foo* were on a journey under their own direction, offering excitement or support to those they encounter, while the drag queen characters, Albert/Starina and Simon/Lola (of *The*

Birdcage and *Kinky Boots* respectively) are situated amongst a network that often positions them as outrageous creatures of excess that must be handled carefully to maintain peace (or perhaps just for the comfort of others). However, despite being figures that attract attention, scrutiny, and at times discomfort with societal norms, the drag queen character in both *The Birdcage* and *Kinky Boots*, acts as a figure of salvation, helping to foster and support heterosexual relationships, and as an economic savior.

The Birdcage opens by bringing audiences into the drag club that provides the title of the film. We are able to watch a snippet of the evening's show, an ensemble performing "We Are Family," while Robin Williams, playing Armand Goldman, strides confidently through the bustling crowd, offering free coffee to the younger Kennedys in attendance while wishing Ted Kennedy would attend. From this scene of bustling club energy, we move to the domestic space above The Birdcage, where Armand's partner of many years, Albert Goldman (who enjoys top billing at the club as Starina) is preparing for the evening show. Albert is convinced that Armand is cheating on him because there is a bottle of white wine in the fridge and refuses to go on. In a conspiracy to manage the show, Armand muses outloud that another drag queen will simply have to step in for her, prompting Albert's jealousy and sudden return to "professionalism," while the housekeeper Agador dispenses "pirin" tablets, cryptically (the audience learns later these are simply "aspirin" with the "as" filed off). We leave Albert as he takes the stage as Starina, shifting between an opening monologue and song he performs live. Our introduction to Albert frames him as hysterical and unreasonable, flighty and prone to dramatics a place he is often assigned throughout the film.

The Birdcage is a comedy film about parents of a young, newly engaged couple meeting. Val is the son of Armand and Albert Goldman, the couple that anchors the film. Val is getting married to Barbara Keeley, whose parents are extremely conservative

Republican senator, Kevin Keeley and Louise Keeley. Senator Keeley has recently co-founded a new group, the Coalition for Moral Order, but he learns his co-founder (another Senator) has been found dead in bed with an underage Black sex worker. This development thrusts him and his family into political scandal, and Louise offers the suggestion of Barbara's marriage "a big white wedding," to help address these issues. They travel to the Goldman's home in South Beach, Florida to have dinner, while the Goldman's frantically work throughout entire night to hide their "deviances," such as their Jewish last name, and importantly, the signs of homosexuality. The framing structures of *The Birdcage* are the institutions of marriage and American politics, played out at the familial level.

In order to present as "acceptable," Val works to reconfigure his family to one that adheres to hegemonic ideals. To do so, he enlists the help of his father, Armand, who must bear the brunt of telling his life partner Albert that Albert is the aberration that Val needs to correct for the Keeley's approval. Val asks Armand to call his biological mother, Katherine, to pose as wife and mother for the evening, as well as to ask Albert to leave for the dinner. Dianne Daniels in an interview takes a charitable view of the film, remarking "I think that was the point, in the end, to see how far they would go for him. And they went all the way" for their son.

Armand attempts suture the competing needs of his family, while he does call Katherine he refuses to let Val turn out the man who helped raise him. When Val finally makes the request for Albert to leave in person, the film frames Albert's response as excessive, responding, "The monster, the freak, is leaving. You're safe" (*The Birdcage*). However, understanding this as the intimate disavowal this is, Albert's response is reasonable- only that morning he picked up clothes from Val's room to wash, ordered a cake for his return, and bragged about Val returning to the neighborhood. Seeing his

partner in distress, Armand reassures him it's because of Barbara's parents, not Val's feelings. He brings a reframe to their issue, "of course you can pass as an uncle. You're a great performer, I'm a great director" (*The Birdcage*). The next montage is Armand coaching Albert to perform gender in a more masculine fashion, in a series of actions from buttering toast to walking. Armand invokes John Wayne as a pillar of masculinity, telling Albert to imitate his walk, which Albert does to perfection. However, Armand realizes the mistake, the walk is not inherently masculine, and the feminine style is more easily discerned without John Wayne clouding it, as "even John Wayne, the last bastion of maleness, is revealed as having a feminine quality to his walk- casting doubt on the rigidity and exclusivity of gender binaries" and even, the arbitrary nature of them (Kirk 173). The coaching only serves to emphasize that masculinity is what femininity is *not*. Despite Armand coaching Albert, even his masculinity is precarious, as Val implores him to not walk too much, avoid gestures, to not talk so much, a laundry list that underscores that his family's existence is untenable for the Keeleys.

However, the Goldmans and Keeleys are not too far off in *The Birdcage*, in terms of their family structure. Of course, Senator Keeley's political aims are invasive and disciplining, and the Senator's conservatism heavily draws on the idea of an "intimate public sphere," which Berlant describes "renders citizenship as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values" (*The Queen of America*, Berlant 5). Regardless, their familial approaches can be broadly comically similar. Both parents felt it was too young for Val and Barbara to marry. Both are dedicated parents, as Val mentions early in the film, "I'm the only guy in my fraternity who doesn't come from a broken home" (*The Birdcage*). There is a strong current of domesticity to both families, indeed, aside from the Goldman's who happen to be gay and focused on largely gay arts and culture, both families overall uphold a recognizable, almost traditional family

structure. The ways they don't are when Albert reminds us of his precarity, that he is without a palimony agreement should anything happen to Armand. Indeed, this underscores the homonormative liberalism under which the Goldmans operate, where "queer liberalism's current claims to state-sanctioned rights, recognitions, and privileges implicitly reinforce a normative politics, not just of family and kinship, but of U.S. citizenship" (Eng 28). Armand produces the agreement, giving Albert the legal recognition and rights that he needs for stability.

This is further underscored when we see the ease with which the families interact together once Albert enters as Mother Coleman. Senator Keeley is delighted and has a lively conversation with "Mrs. Coleman," and her authenticity has been so cemented in his mind that he is unable to grasp that Albert had been in drag. Albert is reassuring to a fault, telling Senator Keeley, "I don't know if this helps, but I want you to know I meant every word I said to you about a return to family values and a stricter moral code" (*The Birdcage*).

The Goldmans shelter the Keeleys when they're strategizing an escape from the news crews outside. It is Albert who has the missing piece, bringing the Keeley's under his wing to disguise them as drag queens to exit the club quietly (the irony of a quiet drag queen exit goes unremarked), as "We Are Family," plays continually. It is the conservative Keeley's and Barbara in drag for our final moments, as the Goldmans in suits escort the family out in pairs. Senator Keeley frets about his white dress, that he looks fat, that he "doesn't want to be the only girl not dancing" (*The Birdcage*). The film indicates that there exists a tolerance between the two worlds, as we witness the multi-faith wedding, packed with the flamboyant family of Val and the conservative Republicans on Barbara's side.

Kinky Boots opens with a young Simon, years before his career as Lola would occur, dancing in red shoes to his own music on the pier, only to be stopped by a disciplining, disappointed father rapping on a window and summoning him inside. Immediately after, we're dropped into the story of Charlie Price. We see montages of his father, taking pride in his work running the family's shoe factory while he teaches Charlie the trade, and we see his acceptance that Charlie pursues work outside of that. The film follows Charlie Price, a man who must take over his family's struggling shoe factory following his father's untimely death and his collaboration with Simon, a drag queen who goes by the name of Lola when performing. It is Charlie that we spend the most time with as viewers, despite the fact that the film opens and closes with Simon and Lola.

Charlie meets Lola when she is being pursued by a group of men on the street, and despite attempting to help, Charlie is knocked out when he steps into Lola's own strike against the men, done with her high-heeled boot. The film almost mocks the conventions of *To Wong Foo*, as Charlie awakens in Lola's dressing room as angelic music plays, seeing tchotchkes of angel figurines around. Lola thanks him for attempting to help, calling it a "Prince Charming" move, as she gets ready for the show, putting on her bra and pulling on her boots, offering Charlie a shot of vodka "to forget the pain" (*Kinky Boots*). Lola in this moment is clearly the drag queen of the new millennium, scoffing at Charlie's nervousness to her touch ("Don't flatter yourself"), apologizing for her presumptiveness at calling him a mister ("are you a mister?") before leaving him there to start her show. No more angelic references, Lola's show consists of her singing live, "I Want To Be Evil" by Eartha Kitt with backup dancers that bear a striking resemblance to Dr. Frank-N-Furter of *Rocky Horror Picture Show*- a picture that is too much for Charlie, causing him to flee back to safe, contained heteronormative Northampton. When Lauren, a worker Charlie fires, tells Charlie to not accept the

slowing sales but to find his niche market, Charlie recalls Lola's struggle with her shoes, and frustration at a broken heel.

Lola is consulted as guide to both drag queens and the niche market Charlie is trying to pursue. Lola explains to Lauren, "I'm not merely a transvestite, sweetheart. I'm also a drag queen. It's a simple equation: a drag queen puts on a frock, looks like Kylie. Transvestite puts on a frock, looks like Boris Yeltsin in lipstick" (*Kinky Boots*). Considering Lola is a far cry from Boris Yeltsin, it is interesting the use of the word "also," here. Lola here lays claim to both, at least playfully, and indeed does appear in drag in both quotidian and performance settings throughout the film. Despite the valiant performance by Chiwetel Ejiofor, the film repeatedly subsumes Lola as a character to be in service of Charlie and the plot. After their first meeting, we see Lola performing "Together We are Beautiful," by Fern Kinney, as she sings "He walked into my life/And now he's taking over/And it's beautiful," the camera shows flashes of Charlie working alone on the prototype pair of boots he is making for Lola. We cut between Lola struggling to wear heels that are too small and Charlie's construction as she sings "I don't need love affairs anymore." While Lola continues singing over the montage, Charlie presents the boots to Lauren as Lola sings "Together we are beautiful." Charlie is allowed both an economic and burgeoning romantic interest (in addition to his depicted fiancée). When Charlie almost disparages her, upset that the prototype wasn't well received, Lola cuts him off, reminding him "you want to show how your niche market a little more respect, Charlie boy," (*Kinky Boots*). More than a niche market, Lola supplies the design Charlie would need, providing the vision that Charlie cannot, as well as the charisma to sell the boots. When showcasing the product in Milan, Charlie is forced to model the boots himself on the runway, a result of him lashing out at Lola after he found out his fiancée was cheating on him. On the runway, Charlie trips, and in almost a mirror of

their initial meeting, Lola swoops in to *his* rescue, accompanied by the dancers from the club, saving both Charlie and the factory.

Lola's visions and designs aren't all she provides: in addition to her ventures in the shoe business, Lola provides sage advice to the factory workers, as well as providing insight to understanding drag and cross-dressing. Lola here is striking a difficult balance professionally, appearing to work and socially alternatively as Simon and Lola, flirting playfully with folks, and generally bucking easy fitting into binaries of sexuality or gender. Sender notes, "Nonconformity brings with it either marginalization... or a self-chosen but nonetheless painful silence" (Sender 70). As one worker questions if Lola wasn't interested in men why she'd wear dresses, Lola explains, "Thing is Mike, ask any woman what she likes most in a man. Compassion, tenderness, sensitivity- traditionally the female virtues. Perhaps what women secretly desire is a man who is fundamentally a woman" (*Kinky Boots*). This is an echo of the ways that Vida from *To Wong Foo* is discussed to draw on masculine and feminine traits to her advantage, situating Lola within this tradition. Lola continues this blending in her challenge about being a better man with Don, a factory worker who often causes trouble for Charlie and Lola. Each set the other a task, and in completing them, both grow to a better understanding of the other.

The Birdcage and *Kinky Boots* serve as a demonstration of the ways that drag queens have been domesticated, positioned as a wise guide to consult on romance, our lives, and even business, consistently "providing sassy but affectionate insight into the vicissitudes of heterosexual romance" (Walters 140). In occupying this role, the queens are often desexualized, providing insight and knowledge of sexuality, allure, and desire, but never pursuing their own. Indeed, the drag queen increasingly has become

“domesticated,” rendered safe for consumption, an easy way to reference or engage gayness without de-centering heteronormativity (Walters 149).

Building Queer Semiosis

This chapter has spent significant time dedicated to the depiction of drag performers in film. These films, over the years, helped create a complex layering of representation, allowing us to understand how over time audiences who perhaps have not encountered drag performers or shows may collect and gather different understandings and expectations, for better or worse. These films also can function as beacons to those who are drawn to being drag performers themselves, either as an introduction to the art form, or something they watch after starting drag, perhaps akin to a rite of passage, as Charmaine describes with her ex-boyfriend, or to appreciate them in a deeper way, such as JoAnn. Indeed, as Jacqueline Martinez notes, “culture is created through communicative practice,” while also reminding that “experience comes to us already *structured*; this structure (culture) does *not* determine what our experience is or will be, but constrains and enables it” (100, 111). Others, such as Barbra, may consider many of these too mired in the tragedy well known to LGBTQ+ people when we see ourselves onscreen. It is crucial to understand these layers of representation and the development of how audiences are able to view drag queens. However, it is just as crucial to understand the interaction the folks have with culture, both as viewers and as creators. Meaning-making, as semiotics works to do, out of film is not a passive experience for the spectator, as Teresa de Lauretis has argued. Rather, “the spectator, stitched in the film’s spatiotemporal movement, is constructed as the point of intelligibility and origin of those representations, as the subject of, the “figure-for,” those images and meanings. In these ways cinema effectively, powerfully participates in the social production of subjectivity” (de Lauretis 53). I propose these films as early and

necessary blocks in a practice of queer semiosis, necessary to build to new forms of meaning-making, allowing viewers to engage with and return to these pieces productively. From there, in my insistence on examining these spaces between people and culture, we should now turn to the question, what of the subjects who occupy these pieces of popular culture? What does our process of meaning-making uncover when we center these folks? For that, we turn to RuPaul Charles as performer and as icon, a drag performer that looms large on our cultural and media landscape today.

CHAPTER 3

RUPAUL AS THE EXCEPTIONAL FIGURE

RuPaul emerged on the mainstream scene in 1993 with a bang via the single “Supermodel (You Better Work),” with the music video and song becoming a notable success- while it peaked at 45 on Billboard’s Hot 100, it sold nearly 500,00 units, staying at number 1 on the Maxi-Singles Sales chart for two weeks, the video in heavy rotation on MTV, and eventually being nominated for “Best Dance Video” for the MTV Music Video Awards (Flick; RuPaul, *Letting It All Hang Out* 159). However, that was not the origin story of RuPaul as a performer, although it is perhaps the origin of the Glamazon iteration of RuPaul that audiences are familiar with. In his autobiography, released in 1995 in the wake of his rise to national prominence, RuPaul reflects,

I was a child of television. As someone who had grown up watching as much of it as possible, whenever possible, I belonged on television. I was never at a loss for things to say, and from my years of study, I instinctively knew just how to turn the volume up, how to pitch myself, and how to speak in sound bites. In short, I knew how to speak the language of television. Fluently. (RuPaul *Letting It All Hang Out*, 60)

It is likely not surprising at all that a self-described “child of television” would dive into and thrive in the format of reality television. RuPaul’s early attitude towards the entertainment industry allowed him to master key tools for what would translate to reality success: the importance of branding. He shares how the creative process behind the drag persona of RuPaul has been a collaborative endeavor, “That’s why I often think of myself in the third person, not because I think I am royal – although I am a queen – but because I see RuPaul as a product” (RuPaul *Letting It All Hang Out* 201). The most

successful version of RuPaul as product can be seen on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and the satellite shows it has spawned.

RuPaul's Drag Race is a reality television show, first airing on Logo TV in 2009. *Drag Race* is currently in its eighth season and has inspired multiple spin-offs, including *RuPaul's Drag U* and *Drag Race All-Stars*. A companion series to *RuPaul's Drag Race*, entitled *RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked* aired alongside *RuPaul's Drag Race* from 2010-2014, shifted to a YouTube airing from 2015-2017, and resumed airing alongside *RuPaul's Drag Race* since 2018 when the show moved to VH1. In the course of that project, it became clear that attending to the *Drag Race* community both online and within the realm of the reality show requires interrogating the figure of RuPaul. The questions guiding this chapter are: What is the type of cultural work that *Drag Race* and RuPaul, himself, perform? As transwomen are increasingly prominent (and precarious) in our media, how is RuPaul actively linking himself to transwomen to render himself legible as an exceptional figure for the state? What bodies does RuPaul's labor of legibility, exceptionalism, and belonging neglect?"

RuPaul, as a queer Black cisgender man performing drag, is disciplined by the neoliberal sexual politics of homonormativity, rewarded for performing a particular style of drag deemed legible and productive for the state, able to represent America in cultural exports even as he is exploited and disavowed as a queer Black man. However, RuPaul also disciplines, occupying a space of authority through commercial success, drawing from what Eve Ng terms gaystreaming. According to Ng, gaystreaming "foreground[s] individual success and talent in ways that discourage attention to structural conditions of inequality" (273). RuPaul derives his position of authority in no small part from his economic power, serving as a capitalist success story that often overshadows and hides the reality of marginalized, vulnerable, queer and trans bodies. Stuart Hall writes of

black popular culture as a “contradictory space... a sight of strategic contestation,” that can’t be reduced to “binary oppositions” (26). RuPaul also navigates this contradictory space, moving closer to a national body that in conception and enactment necessarily rejects Black folks, carving a place in a hostile environment that is a proven capitalist success. RuPaul’s brand of identity performance has been diluted through the consumer-oriented project of Logo TV and *Drag Race*, but we can still uncover the messages lurking behind the *Drag Race* packaging. Outside of the corporate media structure, we find the sharp edges of RuPaul’s own positioning in his social media presence.

Here, it becomes critical to utilize intersectionality and queer of color critique in order to engage in an analysis of *Drag Race* and the surrounding media sphere. Kimberlé Crenshaw outlined intersectionality as a framework allows for a more thorough consideration of how multiply-marginalized folks are impacted by society, writing specifically about Black women’s access to legal discrimination claims (140). Vivian May asserts that identities are “multiple and enmeshed... they overtly consider categorizations as a complex social process tied to domains of power, a dynamic that entails both hegemonic ascription and in turn, continual resistance” (116). Another way of understanding the “complex social process” as May describes it is through Collins’ conceptualization of the matrix of domination, through which power circulates and “to which individuals stand in varying relationships” (P. Collins 292). Lisa Duggan’s deployment of homonormativity proves invaluable but largely ignores race, instead resting only on an unspoken whiteness of the subjects. Drawing from scholars who deploy a queer of color critique allows me to continue the interrogation of queerness and race within multiply marginalized communities.

In crafting this analysis, I rely on queer of color critique informed by Muñoz’s *Disidentifications*. Muñoz writes that a “disidentificatory subject” is one “who tactically

and simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form.” Such a theoretical framework provides useful means to begin understanding the ways RuPaul occupies complex and often contradictory positions within the homonormative state (12). Other feminists of color and queer theorists’ works are invaluable in shaping this project and my own analysis.

I work to unpack the ways in which RuPaul acts as a disciplined and disciplining figure of neoliberal homonormativity, following Lisa Duggan’s deployment of the concept. However, I seek to contextualize RuPaul’s maneuverings into a larger history of LGB and T politics. As Susan Stryker notes, “homonormative accusations” are often deployed against those who focus on LGB at the exclusion of the T (147). Through the intentional language slippage and the contest rules of *Drag Race*, RuPaul works to subsume and elide the position of transwomen under the cover of drag queens.

Furthermore, I consider the ways that RuPaul’s status as an exceptional figure performs certain kinds of labor to benefit the state’s agenda of homonationalism and pinkwashing (Puar 39). I work to explore how RuPaul has labored to make himself legible and stand in as an exceptional figure for the state, at the expense of transwomen. Stryker also writes, “one operation of homonormativity exposed by transgender activism is that homo is not always the most relevant norm against which trans needs to define itself” (149). With this in mind, I believe it is important to consider the silences and exclusions and ask which bodies are left out of RuPaul’s own labor of legibility, exceptionalism, and belonging. For example, when RuPaul claims the identity “tranny,” he subsumes actual transwomen, re-centers political focus on cis gay men, and takes part in the larger neoliberal homonormative project that simultaneously displaces and obfuscates transwomen. Increasingly drag has been positioned in proximity to trans, relying on a slippage between language, gender, and performance to often exclude transwomen. As

Drag Race continues to be economically successful and reach ever-increasing audiences, important questions begin to arise regarding the type of cultural work *Drag Race* and RuPaul perform. In this current media moment, the position of transwomen has never been more prominent or more precarious. RuPaul actively associates himself with this identity and in doing so, capitalizes on his long career and name recognition and cultivates a community that often by default celebrates RuPaul's expressions of identity, language, and performance. In the process, rather than experiencing a flat camp dismissal of American ideals, *Drag Race* and RuPaul insists that national belonging can and already does include the multiply marginalized drag performers. This project will elucidate not only the work that RuPaul performs, but who and which bodies that labor actively removes from consideration.

In early feminist scholarship, there has been (and in some strains of work today) a tendency to consider aspects of social location, such as gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, separately. Feminists of color worked to trouble this conceptualization, refusing to parse out pieces of their identity to consider independently. These scholars insisted that they experienced their identities not as "separate or additive, but as simultaneous and linked" (Glenn 7). Women of color scholars rejected approaches that only recognize difference in an additive fashion. Elsa Barkley Brown identifies in women's history a tendency to briefly acknowledge difference before continuing to write about a universal (white middle-class) woman subject, or to view the relationship between Black women and white women as one-sided, where the former are impacted by the lives of the latter. This one-way understanding, Brown argues, simply reinforces one particular subject as the norm against which others are measured and found to be deviant (300). Brown pushes that "recognizing and even including difference is, in and of itself, not enough... We need to recognize not only differences but the relational nature of those differences"

(298). Evelyn Nakano Glenn expands productively on a relational understanding of difference and bringing that approach to the research process. Glenn writes that “meaning within Western epistemology is constructed in terms of dichotomous oppositions or contrasts” (13). These oppositional categories necessarily require homogenization- categories must be rendered static and hierarchical in order to solidify characteristics of and differences between each category. Glenn’s relationality provides a more intersectional approach to research. Considering categories as interlinked and simultaneous makes several interventions, working to trouble dominant categories, establishing the interconnected nature of groups, as well as allowing for meaning to change as categories shift over time (Glenn 13-14). As Brown notes, “we still have to recognize that being a woman is, in fact, not extractable from the context in which one is a woman- that is race, class, time, and place” (300).

Brown and Glenn’s call for relationality gesture to a Foucauldian understanding of power as diffuse. In her own essay calling for the destabilization of identity categories and a transformation of queer politics, Cohen pushes for a critical examination of power as it works through structures and society (“Bulldaggers, Punks, and Welfare Queens” 459). She writes, “it is the power invested in certain identity categories and the idea that bounded categories are not to be transgressed that serve as the basis of domination and control” (Cohen, “Bulldaggers, Punks, and Welfare Queens” 461). Cohen resists building coalitions on identity alone, calling for an examination of relations to power and an acknowledgement of the multiplicity within categories.

Valentine argues that “intersectionality creates assumptions,” relying on assumptions of categories rather than interrogating them or building an analysis from the bottom-up (18). Cohen’s acknowledgement of relationality calls for a more nuanced reading of identity and subjectivity, “Proceeding from the starting point of a system-

based left analysis, strategies built upon the possibility of incorporation and assimilation are exposed as simply expanding and making accessible the status quo for more privileged members of marginal groups, while the most vulnerable in our communities continue to be stigmatized and oppressed” (Cohen, “Bulldaggers, Punks, and Welfare Queens” 443). Puar similarly expands her critical gaze, noting the ways the state can be queer, and the need for inclusion of exceptional subjects to fit homonormative narratives (28). From queer of color critique such as Muñoz, Cohen, and Puar, we can build a critique dedicated to unpacking power relations and dynamics within marginalized communities and interrogate who is actually working for whom.

RuPaul’s Cultural Labor and Legibility

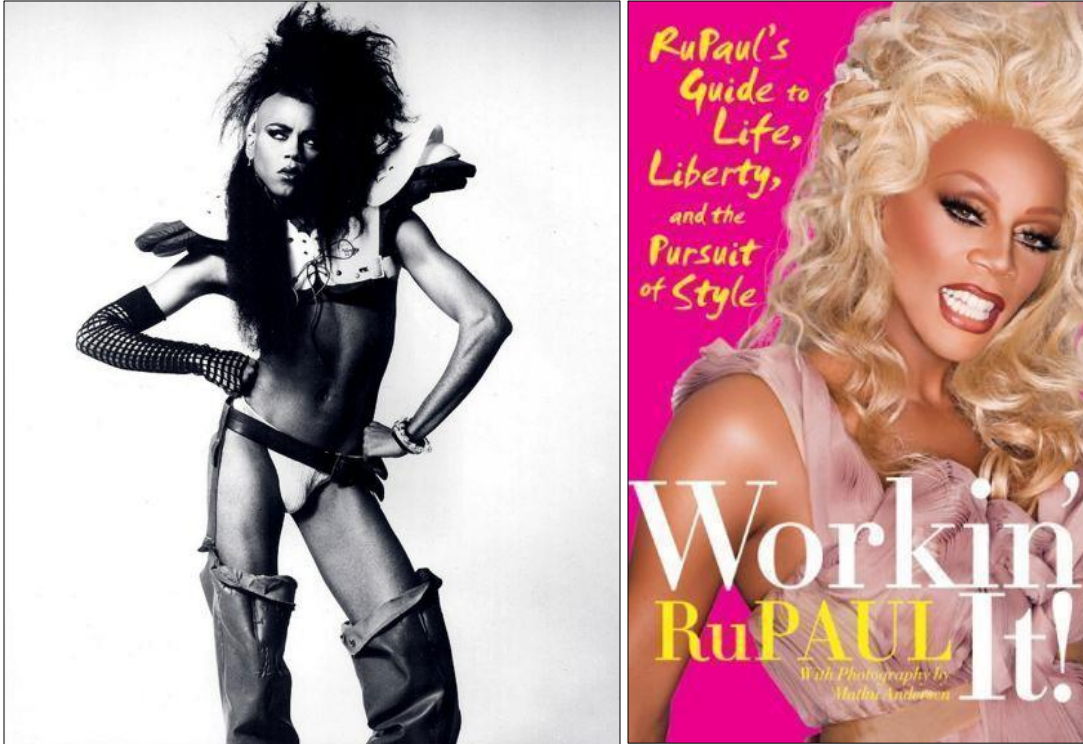
“And when they see me/ they want to be me/ I am the fantasy” RuPaul, “Covergirl”

RuPaul has achieved longevity in his career and the public eye of the US in a way that few other drag queens can claim. In the 1990s, RuPaul crossed over to mainstream popular culture, dropping his successful *Supermodel of the World* album in 1993 and in 1996 serving as a MAC cosmetics spokesman as well as hosting his own talk show on VH1. Most recently, he is known for the multiple reality shows he spearheads on Logo. *Drag Race*, in its eighth season, is one of Logo’s most successful shows, inspiring other reality shows that are also hosted by RuPaul.

RuPaul’s success is not accidental, nor should it be read as a result of US progressivism, as some may claim. Rather, I argue, his success rocketed after making deliberate decisions to invest in homonormative neoliberal politics. As Juana Rodríguez highlights, the fantasy involved in obtaining social legibility and national belonging “demands that queers cross the imaginary border from pleasure seeking perverts to

sanitized sexless adult guardians, committed self-sacrificing partners and parents” (53). Despite our radical hopes, there can be limits to resignification (Rodríguez 180).

In *Workin' It RuPaul's Guide to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Style*, RuPaul presents a life and style guide to readers. A play on the unalienable rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” from the Declaration of Independence, RuPaul has created connections that echo to a very particular strain of gay organizations. Throughout the book, he offers styling tips for women and men such as how to build a wardrobe and find a look. Nearly every page features RuPaul in drag alongside the text, a testament to his glamour and authority to give advice. Threaded between his recommendations on diet and clothing, RuPaul also reflects on his own journey and decisions. RuPaul reflects on his early drag years, “My drag look back then was ‘gender f@&k’- more of a social statement than female impersonation...” (RuPaul *Life Liberty and the Pursuit of Style*, 86). RuPaul connects genderfuck drag with the “anti-Reagan sensibility of the time,” but notes that it was not the look that brought him commercial success (RuPaul *Life Liberty and the Pursuit of Style*, 86). Genderfuck drag continues to be a style employed today by performers, although it’s clear that RuPaul considers that removed from “official” full drag, as he notes in his first memoir, when a friend kept giving him wigs that he would “wear all of them at once in an Elvira- type thing. It wasn’t officially drag yet. It was punk or gender fuck drag. I wasn’t being fashionable, I was being hooty...” (RuPaul *Letting It All Hang Out* 66). Once he shifted into being a “sexy drag queen” and embraced the glamour towards the end of the eighties, he began enjoying a notable increase in economic success.



Being a “sexy drag queen” included substantial edits. In addition to shifting to hyperfeminine style and fashion, RuPaul created another consistency to his look: his hair.

The decision to become a full-time blonde came from my desire to create a cartoon character image that could easily be identified as a brand. From my collection of pop culture influences, 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. You better work! (RuPaul, *Life Liberty and the Pursuit of Style* 87)

RuPaul’s “glamazon drag” required glamorous hyperfeminine styling and a blonde wig. With this statement, RuPaul links blonde hair to consumerism, specifically a US brand of consumerism that not simply utilizes but thrives on white supremacy. This new incarnation made RuPaul more legible to the state and public. RuPaul historically insists that drag itself is a critique of society, suggesting that his donning of glamazon drag,

hyperfeminine, upscale, and blonde is a disidentifactory move. RuPaul's glamazon drag is certainly performing a classed version of drag, gesturing to whiteness. This would echo Lipsitz's reading of Dizzy Gillespie's "Swing Low, Sweet Cadillac," where RuPaul is a "commodity that critiques the commodity system while circulating within it" (163). In this view, the blonde wig and upscale, glamorous looks could be read as "symbolic terrain," and RuPaul, a gay Black man accessing this successfully would be a site of subversion. However, this reading relies too heavily on a homogenous approach to intersectionality that women of color feminist and queer of color scholars critique in their work. RuPaul's identities as Black and gay are not inherently destabilizing enough—one must critically examine the context and content of his message. RuPaul himself tends to suggest this in his first memoir, as he has fielded thorny questions over his blonde branding for years, "When I put on a blond wig, I am not selling out my blackness. Wearing a blond wig is not going to make me white. I'm not going to pass as white, and I am not trying to. The truth about the blond wig is so simple: It really pops. I want to create an outrageous sensation, and blond hair against brown skin is a gorgeous, outrageous combination" (RuPaul *Letting It All Hang Out* 190). Rather, he is drawn to a different, wider perspective, "And while it is important to celebrate our differences in terms of race, sex, and gender, the thing that is important to remember is that we all belong to one race—the human race. The fact is that we all really have more in common with each other than we think" (RuPaul, *Letting It All Hang Out* 190). This impulse towards viewing oneself in the context of "the human race," leads many to be skeptical—it's a line of thinking that can be ambiguous. Is it a gesture towards solidarity, or a token acknowledgement but ultimate disregard of difference? And perhaps it becomes a both/and or RuPaul, "I think the problem is that sometimes we take things too seriously and get stuck on the details. The question is not who you are, but what do you bring to

the party. What can you contribute, create, invent?” (RuPaul, *Letting It All Hang Out* 190). As Audre Lorde reminds us, “Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation” (Lorde 115). Certainly, RuPaul’s tendency to embrace an ambiguous language of transcending labels and boundaries holds vague gestures: “I define myself as RuPaul. RuPaul is an extension of the power that created this universe, and we are all manifestations of its love. Therefore, RuPaul can do everything, RuPaul is a boundless energy that can pour itself into whatever shape it wants” (RuPaul, *Letting It All Hang Out* 191). Perhaps RuPaul is attempting to “develop tools for using human difference as a springboard for creative change within our lives” (Lorde 115-116). With such ambiguous, vague language, our path forward must be to consider his message and the work that it is doing.

The context and content of his message can be seen throughout the seasons of his most successful television show, *Drag Race*. While RuPaul believes that drag intrinsically deconstructs and satirizes social patterns, it is necessary to examine how he chooses to deploy this deconstruction (RuPaul xi). Patriotism and the nation-state have been reoccurring themes that *Drag Race* has incorporated into its challenges. In seasons three, four, and five RuPaul made overt gestures to locate drag and drag queens within the nation-state. Here, RuPaul is building on the concept of US sexual exceptionalism and calling for his contestants to “buy in” to the narrative of homonationalism. With this project, “aspects of homosexuality have come within the purview of normative patriotism, incorporating aspects of queer subjectivity into the body of the normalized nation...” (Puar 46).

In season three, the contestants were charged with making a PSA entitled “Why I love the USA,” and directed that “the message should be entertaining and from the heart, because we’ll be sending your PSAs to the brave men and women who are serving our country overseas” (“Life, Liberty, & the pursuit of Style”). Throughout the episode, as RuPaul coaches the contestants in the workroom and the shooting of the PSAs, it becomes clear that RuPaul is seeking for particular emphasis on the messages being “from the heart.” RuPaul drifts throughout the workroom, asking the contestants to tell him, and the viewers, what they love about America. One contestant, Raja, is prepared with the answer “I love the freedoms that I’m allowed here- I’m allowed to get in drag and parade around the streets and make money doing it,” while Alexis Mateo speaks movingly of an ex-lover who is currently serving- both answers are met with approval by RuPaul, as opposed to Manila Luzon’s choice to focus on America’s diversity... of food (“Life, Liberty, & the pursuit of Style”). During the runway challenge, Alexis Mateo’s transformation of a service uniform into a gown is met with acclaim, as well as Raja’s appropriative Native American headdress, and Manila Luzon’s flapper look constructed out of \$100 bills. It would appear that Manila’s PSA, which provides a campy lampooning US liberal multiculturalism by celebrating America’s love of food and runway look “Because there’s nothing more American than the USD,” would be the obvious choice, providing the subversive, deconstructive viewpoint that RuPaul advocates drag as bringing. However, instead it is Alexis’ heartfelt, earnest PSA drawing on her past relationship with a service member (remember, this is the era of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”), and her elegant service uniform-turned-gown who is celebrated by the judges and deemed the winner. Returning to Raja’s answer, I’m interested in the phrase “freedoms allowed *here*,” (“Life, Liberty & the Pursuit of Style,” emphasis mine). While for Raja, this is connected to performance and capitalism, what is left unspoken is the

spatialization comparison. Raja is subtly communicating the homonormative project of American exceptionalism, pulling on discourses that construct the US as at the forefront of human rights (Puar 4-5).

Seasons four and five continue this project of inclusion; with an election year appropriate presidential debate challenge, and a gay veteran makeover challenge to highlight the end of DADT, respectively. Again, in these challenges, there was an emphasis on the weightiness of the topic – earnest approaches were often rewarded and encouraged over campier takes. Sharon Needles wins the challenge by walking the line between an earnest push to use the challenge as a political platform, but also a tongue-in-cheek reminder that the US is nowhere near ready for a drag queen president, “because, let’s be honest, a drag queen is not gonna be president for 100 years, so I had to think ahead,” Sharon quips, with a teleological narrative of progress underlying the joke- that eventually, we *could* have a drag queen president, once the country progresses (“Frock the Vote”). *Drag Race* does feel the need to celebrate the victories, as RuPaul notes in the season five challenge, “These gentlemen, who just so happen to be gay, served before the repeal of DADT. Thanks to these men we have the freedom to be *fierce*. And now, you get to exercise that freedom, by enlisting these men into your drag house” (“Super Troopers”). The episodes, particularly “Super Troopers,” devote a substantial amount of air time to the workroom conversations, as the contestants ask about what it was like to be gay in the service, providing a learning moment for audiences. One veteran reflects on the incident that got him discharged,

We decided that we wanted to go to our favorite gay bar in full uniform, what we called “high drag” in those days. There was a spy. It got back to the base, and all four of us were put on notice that we were going to be discharged for being gay.

One of those boys ended up being court marshalled because in those days it was illegal to be gay, and he ended up in Levinworth for a year. (“Super Troopers”)

One contestant, Jinx Monsoon, tearfully reflects later in a talking head, “it’s so important to learn about the struggles that people like Dave have been through, to get us the rights that we take for granted” (“Super Troopers”). As Duggan writes in *The Twilight of Equality?* the neoliberal homonormative project “redefine[s] gay equality against the ‘civil rights agenda’ and ‘liberationism,’ as access to the institutions of domestic privacy, the ‘free’ market, and patriotism” (50-51). Here, in *Drag Race*, these challenges present LGBT struggle as a thing of the past. Queer radical politics, which presumably infuse RuPaul’s understanding of a drag that is always critiquing and deconstructing, are rewritten. Through his education of the contestants and the audience, RuPaul works to assure the public that “queer people... can take part in the American Dream regardless of their actual material ability to do so... and assures straight viewers that even drag queens are people who want the same things as them, rather than being a radical threat” (Morrison 134).

RuPaul’s Slippages and Exceptionalism

“Do you wanna be me... that don’t make you gay/ Or do you wanna fuck me... that don’t make you gay... Hey. Work. Give a dog a bone./ Look at you, lookin’ at Ru-Ru” – RuPaul “Tranny Chaser”

RuPaul’s ability to rewrite narratives through *Drag Race* is something that remains important to consider. Through the show, RuPaul has been able to build a considerable following that he has marshalled into support of other ventures, such as DragCon and the live touring show traveling North America, *Drag Race: Battle of the Seasons*. Through an active social media presence across his personal accounts and those

of the contestants, as well as the show's official accounts, RuPaul is able to engage with fans even while the show is not airing, or expand on conversations begun on episodes.

Throughout *Drag Race*, RuPaul engages in a rewriting, a form of reperiodization of his own, especially through the impromptu “herstory” lessons. Herstory is a word with its own particular history, rooted in strands of feminist activism as part of a project to reorient language in efforts to center women. Often dropped in as asides for both the contestants and the viewers, it's in moments like these that RuPaul can take the opportunity to reperiodize. In one episode, RuPaul opts for the narrative of the Stonewall riots that center drag queens, closing the episode with a small speech about Marsha P Johnson, a “brave drag queen,” who fought at Stonewall (“Float Your Boat”). No mention is made here of transwomen, or Marsha as trans herself.

One cannot watch *Drag Race* without being hyper-aware of RuPaul himself. The show opens and closes commercial breaks with his laugh played over an image of him in drag with the show's branding. Pictures of RuPaul in drag abound on the set, puns that incorporate RuPaul's name, such as the drag ballet of season five entitled “No RuPaulogies,” that focus on RuPaul's life and career, “RuPaul demands influence over her girls' inner lives; their charismatic leader watches them, even as they untuck” (176 Fine and Shreve). RuPaul, in addition to relying on US sexual exceptionalism as Puar has discussed, has also fashioned himself into an exceptional figure. “In the state of exception, the exception insidiously becomes the rule, and the exceptional is normalized as a regulatory ideal or frame; the exceptional is the excellence that exceeds the parameters of proper subjecthood and, by doing so, redefines these parameters to then normativize and render invisible (yet transparent) its own excellence or singularity” (Puar 9). RuPaul holds himself as the standard of drag that he expects contestants to be able to rise to meet, and acts as the standard of drag that the public views as default. The

“No RuPaulogies” ballet is simply a bootstrap narrative of the American Dream, repackaged with wigs and makeup to denote the “drag queen edition.” The ballet, by virtue of its time constraints to fit within an episode of *Drag Race*, presents a glossy image of RuPaul’s career. RuPaul is shown to rise from poverty, battle addiction, and go on to conquer the world as a glamazon, before “sharing the love,” through his work on *Drag Race* to find “America’s Next Drag Superstar.”

RuPaul exploits his exceptionalism to create and capitalize on slippages between drag and trans, categories which are consistently positioned against each other. Susan Stryker notes that in LGBT politics and communities the “T” is thus homonormativity constructed as a properly distinct group of people with a different orientation than gays, lesbians, and bisexuals (or, for that matter, straights)” (148). As I noted earlier, Stryker illuminates that charges of homonormativity are leveled against those who focus on LGBT politics. RuPaul on *Drag Race*, has paid lip service to the “T,” but stops short of full engagement, unless he’s moving to claim it in a roundabout manner.

Following the season 6 “she-male or female” mini-challenge controversy, there was a large amount of conversation over *Drag Race* and transphobia. RuPaul exhibited his loyalty to neoliberal homonormativity when presented with criticism of his show’s actions. In an interview he asserted “don’t you dare tell me what I can do or what I can say... It’s just words. Yeah, words do hurt. ‘Words hurt me.’ You know what? Bitch, you need to get stronger. You really do. Because you know what? If you think, if you’re upset by something I said, you have bigger problems than you think. I’m telling you this” (Merevick). In a series of tweets following the interview and the finale of season six, RuPaul asserts on his personal Twitter, “Trust! @LogoTV hasn’t “distanced” itself from me, not while I’m still payin’ the f%kin’ light bill over there / I’ve been a “tranny” for 32 years. The word “tranny” has never just meant transsexual

#TransvestiteHerstoryLesson./ I'm more "offended/hurt" by the misuse of the word "community" (RuPaul). RuPaul also has songs, titled "Ladyboy" and "Tranny Chaser," where the latter refers to individuals pursuing drag queens sexually (Morrison). RuPaul has capitalized on his own blurring of the line between trans and drag.

RuPaul is correct; drag queens in the past did fall under the umbrella of the slur "tranny." However, there is a willful ignorance to the way that language and identity has changed over time, particularly surrounding trans individuals. As David Valentine notes, "the notion of "identity" in contemporary politics does much the same that an imagined national community does: it irons out differences and elides power relations" (103). In the first tweet, RuPaul consciously wields his substantial economic power in relation to Logo, fully aware that his show *Drag Race* is Logo's most successful program. It's particularly striking, considering his assertion ("I'm a man") at the end of season two, following Sonique's onscreen coming out as a transwoman ("Reunion"). Sonique goes on to assert "there's a line between drag and trans," which is met with solemn nods by the contestants ("Reunion"). Indeed, *Drag Race* takes pains to emphasize repeatedly throughout the seasons that they're simply "men in wigs/dresses," or as Tatianna puts it after conversation resumes during the season two finale, "as long as I have a dick between my legs and a wig, I'm a drag queen" ("Reunion"). Moments like Monica's coming out as a transwoman mid-competition in season five provide further opportunities for RuPaul to pay lip service to including the T within *Drag Race*. RuPaul revisits the moment during the season five finale, stating, "Monica, you know, there's a lot of confusion out there, so help everybody out. Okay, now, can a girl be a drag queen and a transwoman at the same time?," positioning himself as in the know, and willing to share authority with Monica on this issue. She responds quickly, "Yes, drag is what I do, trans is who I am," to approving applause by the past contestants in the audience

“Reunited!”). RuPaul is quick to add “And you know, for the record, everybody out there, uh, the only requirement for being *here* is the desire to be America’s Next Drag Superstar” (“Reunited!”). This is an easy claim to make in the age of the internet, as all mentions of transgender contestants being barred from competing that were previously found on the *Drag Race* documents have all been scrubbed clean (Kohlsdorf 76-77).

RuPaul, a gay cisgender Black man, is able to capitalize on the slippages he makes between drag and trans, erecting lines hastily only to brush them away when convenient.

This ability to work within and against may echo as a form of disidentification to some, however, I would argue that this is more along the lines of the distancing and disavowal discussed in E. Patrick Johnson’s consideration of the *In Living Color* “Men On...” sketches. The characters played by Damon Wayans and David Allen Grier “conjure the specter of the queer Other that suggests not only his disavowal but also, at the very least, his psychic mourning of the same” (Johnson 74). Just as the “Men On...” sketch conjures the Other to produce belonging, RuPaul invokes the specter of trans to bring the drag queen closer to the national body.

Neglected Bodies and Silences: Who isn’t included?

“She’s so wild so animal/ She gonna work that sexy body so sexual/ She’s like a female phenomenon/ She’s a GLAMAZON” – RuPaul “Glamazon”

RuPaul’s slippages enact a form of exclusion, creating lines of who is and isn’t able to belong. By virtue of making himself, and drag queens, legible to the nation-state, RuPaul necessarily excludes trans bodies from his constructed narrative, an example of the “othering within inclusion” that homonormative projects entails (Puar 120). Patricia Hill Collins writes of the “controlling images” of Black women in US society. She argues “these controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (P.

Collins 76-77). Collins traces several controlling images of Black women, noting the images are “dynamic and changing,” shifting to adapt to hegemony’s needs (79). In the essay, Collins writes how Black women are figured as the “Others” of society who... by not belonging, emphasize the significance of belonging” (77). The specter of transwomen in *Drag Race* is positioned against the queens, as contestants repeatedly insist on their maleness as they put on makeup in the workroom. Julia Serano writes of another set of controlling images in *Whipping Girl* in regards to the “fascination with feminization.” She illuminates the drive of producers to show “trans women *in the act* of putting on lipstick, dresses, and high heels, thereby giving the audience the impression that the trans woman’s femaleness is an artificial mask or costume” (Serano 41). Femininity is shown as contrived and constructed, and there is no distinction between drag queens getting ready and transwomen getting ready, a visual slippage between drag and trans (Kirk 173).

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins writes how controlling images can seep into hegemony and seemingly entrap folks in a disciplining discourse (98). The silences and exclusions of those who are not included in RuPaul’s labor of legibility and belonging speak on their own. “RuPaul’s decisions have real career consequences for the queens,” and we have seen a tangible impact (Fine and Shreve 179). In the aftermath of the season six mini-challenge and the usage of transphobic slurs, Carmen Carrera was often attacked by *Drag Race* fans. These fans positioned Carmen as indebted to RuPaul for her career, which she has actively resisted. I would argue the trans contestants of *Drag Race* are performing a kind of disidentification, working within and against the drag subculture to insist on lines and delineations that have been blurred by cis bodies and researchers, as we saw through Monica’s insistence that she could still perform drag without the “transformation,” that some view as necessary for successful drag (Norris).

Collins does provide hope for a way out of hegemonic controlling images, “Emergent women have found that one way of surviving the everyday disrespect and outright assaults that accompany the controlling images is to “turn it out.” This is the moment **when silence becomes speech, when stillness becomes action**” (P. Collins 106, emphasis mine). Carmen’s willingness to pushback against detractors on social media, and Monica’s insistence on her own self-definition are moments of speech and action. As LH Stallings writes, “the means by which Black...transgender subjects define themselves can be as important as the definition or identity itself. The problem is not identity alone as queer theory has expressed, but the world within which any identity has been created” (234)

Consumable Queerness by Proxy

“People talkin’ / Since the beginning of time/ unless they’re payin’ your bills, pay them bitches no mind.” – RuPaul “Sissy That Walk”

RuPaul has remade his image following the spirit of Duggan’s new homonormativity: setting aside political commentary in favor of a compelling visual aesthetic, an image that provides no sharp critique and mimics the language of our founding governing documents. RuPaul has literally re-tooled himself into an object that can be wielded by the state and market. He has intentionally become a brand, packaged for mass consumption. As RuPaul himself reflected in 1995, “Even as a little bitty drag queen I knew it was all about merchandising. I sold the postcards, my books, T-shirts. It’s all for sale, baby, we’re all born to be sold. That’s what pop culture is— one big marketplace. If you’re gonna be out there signing autographs, why not make it something that you can sell” (RuPaul, *Letting It All Hang Out* 137-138). By serving up particular sections of LGBT “culture/history” via his platform of *Drag Race*, RuPaul allows audiences to consume his sanctioned politics, a consumable queerness by proxy.

Viewing RuPaul and the *Drag Race* contestants through the lens of disidentification allows us to “register subjects of constructed and contradictory” (Muñoz 115). Muñoz writes of the “need for a war of positions,” which perhaps has already begun. Stuart Hall argues that popular culture

commodified and stereotyped as it often is, is not at all, as we sometimes think of it, the arena where we find who we really are, the truth of our experience. It is an arena that is *profoundly* mythic. It is a theatre of popular desires, a theatre of popular fantasies. It is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time. (32)

Hall understands popular culture as dialogic, relying on oppositions and binaries, and through it all, not understanding that each require the other. Hall underscores how there is something to be said for the ways that RuPaul raises questions of power and nuance between drag and trans. While RuPaul has been turned into a productive body for the state, standing in for transwomen, *Drag Race* has also served as the catalyst for interrogations of power. Cohen argues for this examination, pushing that “identities and communities, while important... must be complicated and destabilized through a recognition of the multiple social positions and relations to dominant power found *within* any one category or identity” (“Bulldaggers, Punks, and Welfare Queens,” 459, emphasis original). RuPaul, knowingly or not, has laid the groundwork for this examination, prompting the queer community to question their own power and position.

CHAPTER 4

CONSTRUCTING AND TRANSMITTING A PROPER DRAG CITIZEN AND PERFORMANCE... AND THE RESISTANCE TO THIS IMAGE

RuPaul's slippages allow him to slide between different roles, providing him the opportunity to strategically inhabit certain positions, but it is often in service of a homonormative and homonationalist project. For his own success, he has intentionally rendered himself into a brand, one that is easily recognized and easy to consume. Rather than living in the sharp edges of his earlier performances, he has maintained the style that has brought him economic success and resonates with his worldview that pushes for transcendence of identity and encourages us to pursue love above all else. This can be a noble goal, but there are costs involved when we attempt to transcend identity in a society that insists on preserving the mythical norm, as Audre Lorde describes it. The mythical norm is "usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure... it is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society" (Lorde 116). This chapter builds on the questions of the previous chapter: who is left behind by these homonormative and homonationalist projects? What does the proper drag subject look like on *Drag Race*?

On March 17th, 2014, *Drag Race* was in the middle of its sixth season. *Drag Race*, pulling its contestants from across the United States and Puerto Rico, reads as a campy spoofing of other reality competitions such as *America's Next Top Model* and *Project Runway*. Featuring challenges focused on performance, comedy, fashion and makeup, the show is known for the over-the-top personalities and performances that the drag queens bring as they compete to become "America's Next Drag Superstar," with a hefty cash prize of \$100,000 and a considerable career boost. The show has worked aggressively to promote itself, and has cultivated a considerable online presence. Fans

live-tweet the show, and hold conversations across various social media platforms, including but not limited to, Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr and Reddit to discuss the show, the queens competing, past contestants and their careers, and speculate which queens will be contestants in the future. The queens, both current and past competitors are often tagged in these discussions and participate with fans. Simultaneously, the queens are working to cultivate online presences and followings of their own, working to establish themselves and their brand amongst the *Drag Race* franchise, interacting with other queens online, engaging in cross-promotion, or simply discussing the show amongst each other, like the fans.

RuPaul's Drag Race on its own is a contained narrative, bounded by the domain of television. However, it has steadily been increasing its transmedia presence, beginning with suggested hashtags to shape online discussion, to the invitation of fan input via the institution of the fan vote components for the winner and the Miss Congeniality title. Additionally, the ever-growing roster of queens provides fans with a community they're able to watch interact amongst each other online, and by virtue of these interactions happening via social media, fans are able to reach out and become a part of the conversation. As discussed in the previous chapter, there is a significant strain of homonationalism involved in the construction of a *Drag Race*-approved drag performance, an aspect that is only growing as *Drag Race* reacts to America's current political climate and a Trump presidency. However, as David Eng warns us,

“we need to reflect on the political and economic costs that underwrite the current inscription of queer U.S. citizen-subjects into a national order, the instability of a rights-based discourse that enables political legitimacy while exacerbating evolving relations of capitalist exploitation, racial domination, and gender subordination in a domestic as well as global context.” (Eng 29)

That is, what he terms, “queer liberalism’s narratives of freedom and progress,” must necessarily be interrogated, and particular attention must be paid to the things that are sacrificed in the name of progress (Eng 29). In the previous chapter, I discussed who was excluded from RuPaul’s slippages and exceptional subjecthood. Here, we take a closer look at the ways that *Drag Race* shapes and disciplines drag performers into proper drag citizens.

This chapter works to unpack how identity is communicated and navigated within *Drag Race* and its transmedia world, the evolving nature of identity alongside the performance of drag, and to understand how certain bodies are rendered legitimate by *Drag Race*. Here, I work to demonstrate how in the course of rewarding and thus legitimizing particular gender identities and performances of race, *Drag Race* has constructed a particular knowledge of drag queens as performers (and particularly drag queens of color), and the types of performances that should be sanctioned. I center here in this chapter questions of trans* identity and race, specifically Blackness, as they intersect with drag discourse and performance challenges, focusing on key stand-out moments as entry points. The first is the mini-challenge fallout from the episode “Shade: The Rusical,” and the second is the explicit discussion of race in the season 10 reunion between The Vixen and RuPaul, which I provide further background to via a brief discussion of two performances of race in *Drag Race*, the first, “ShakesQueer,” and “Ru-Co’s Empire.”

For this chapter, I utilize semiotics while drawing from feminist and queer theory. Using content analysis and a constant comparative method, I collected statements and posts from the queens of *Drag Race* regarding the “She-Male or Female,” incident combing through profiles during the two-month window between March and May 2014. I pair this with a close reading of the incidents of “Queens Reunited,”

“ShakesQueer,” and “RuCo’s Empire,” with incorporation of popular online discussion of The Vixen. I constructed a chronological timeline of events and postings, and proceeded to sort and organize the media by the emerging themes and patterns I saw. Following the collection and sorting of data, the following concepts proved to be particularly useful in moving forward. First, is Lisa Duggan’s concept of homonormativity, discussed briefly in the previous chapter, and again defined here as “A politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (179). *Drag Race* is heavily influenced by the neoliberal politics of homonormativity, which I discuss further in the section on claiming authority. Also useful was Caryl Flinn’s concept of “loving assassination,” which discusses how camp focused on marginalized, vulnerable bodies, such as transwomen in this context, often inflicts epistemic and discursive violence. Josh Morrison deployed the “loving assassination” concept in his essay uncovering the disciplining of bodies that takes place on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and its spinoff shows. This chapter extends this discussion from the show to the online environment of social media, while also demonstrating the boundaries of acceptable drag performances extend beyond particular styles of femininity, but rather also include questions of gender and race, specifically Blackness, that are at play in drag performances.

Defining “Proper” Gender

With this in mind, let’s return to the date of March 17th, 2014. The fourth episode of the sixth season, titled “Shade: The Rusical,” was airing as fans, current and past contestants reacted and discussed the episode online. The mini-challenge opening the episode, normally a small gag that is generally dismissed, changed the conversation surrounding the episode drastically. The mini-challenges are often frivolous, with little

substantial meaning other than to give the (often arbitrarily decided) winner a small advantage in the main challenge. Past mini-challenges have included a contest to eat and identify fried meat, an attempt to communicate “psychically,” and of course, the annual reading mini-challenge.

This episode, the mini-challenge was called “She-male or female?” showing the contestants extreme close-ups of body parts and requiring them to identify whether the individual was a “biological woman or a *psychological* woman” (“Shade: The Rusical”). As I participated in live Twitter conversations under the #DragRace hashtag while the episode aired, I watched as many viewers online responded immediately with outrage to the casual invoking of the term “she-male” by RuPaul and the contestants, and were upset at the policing and disciplining of bodies and identities as photos and subjects depicted were mocked by RuPaul and the contestants when the answer was wrong. The segment served to remind some the transphobia, such as the opening clip that starts each show, “Ooooo girl, you’ve got a she-mail,” that is casually invoked time and again by *Drag Race* and RuPaul. The controversy spawned numerous reaction pieces and extended conversations online as fans and viewers involved Logo, the network that airs *Drag Race*, and RuPaul. The episode was pulled offline April 14th, 2014, with only the main challenge (a performance of Shade: The Rusical) left online for viewing. Logo, via the *Drag Race* Facebook page, issued an apology, thanking “the community for sharing their concerns around a recent segment and the use of the term ‘she-mail’ on Drag Race” (see fig. 1). The statement outlined the actions the network was taking to address the concern, which included pulling the episode from all online platforms and a promise to never repeat the mini-challenge, as well as removing the “You’ve Got She-Mail” intro from future episodes. The company finishes, “We did not intend to cause any offense, but in retrospect we realize that it was insensitive. We at the network sincerely apologize”

(Fig. 1). The episode was later re-uploaded without the mini-challenge on June 25th, 2014, long after the conclusion of the season. The announcement from Logo prompted a flurry of discussion online from queens and fans alike. This chapter, focusing on the *Drag Race*-affiliated queens, will not discuss the fan response.

Within the day, several past contestants across various seasons posted the same graphic (See fig. 2, 3, and 4). It was a screenshot of the image that accompanied “You’ve Got She-Mail,” a play on Tyra mail from *America’s Next Top Model* and the AOL audio “You’ve got mail!” with text overlaid that stated “R.I.P.” across the top, with the years “2009-2014” across the bottom. Queens added their own captions, and often the tone was one of outrage. Beneath this mourning image, queens lamented the community that “forgot” the groundbreaking work of RuPaul and *Drag Race* the “first EVER show to feature an entire cast of drag queens,” to make “us question gender rules dictated to us by our society,” even going so far as to credit *Drag Race* with “creating such a place for the LGBT community in this world. It has made it ok for us to be who we are and has shown the world we are not freaks and we deserve love just like anyone else in this world” (Fig. 3, Fig. 4).

There was a notable break in the responses from Carmen Carrera’s Facebook page, which didn’t include the uniform “RIP She-mail” graphic used by the other contestants. Carmen was a past contestant on *Drag Race*, who competed during season three and since her time on the show has come out as a transgender woman. Her statement is much longer than the captions posted by the other former contestants, and makes several interesting moves. Within her statement, Carmen takes the time to reflect on her own silence regarding the “Female or She-male” game, noting how she “hadn’t initially commented... [she] sat and thought about it for a whole week” (See fig. 8). She acknowledges the visibility the show has brought for drag queens and the LGBT

community before going on to state “that drag race should be more conscious of the words they use and shouldn’t further objectify transwomen with a game that obviously hurt a lot of fans in the first place,” providing a thoughtful (and relatively mild) critique of the show that is cognizant of the responsibility that comes with wielding such cultural power. However, the rest of Carmen’s statements are devoted to addressing the personal attacks she has received on social media for expressing her opinion, in particular the transphobic nature of these attacks. Carmen is highlighting her precarious position as a transwoman in the *Drag Race* franchise, embattled personally and professionally by the fans and the show she had been a part of.

In addition to these statements of outrage, and affective element of Carmen’s reality of being under siege on social media, there was another type of response to Logo’s announcement and apology- a barbed humor mocking the need for the move and the people calling for it. The common focus was on the idea of “offense,” and often offense at words. Manila Luzon, the runner-up of season three quipped, “Because I am offended by it, RuPaul’s Drag Race will ALSO edit out the last episode of season 3 where Raja Gemini kicks my ass and wins the crown! And because EVERYONE was offended, the entire season of RuPaul’s All-Stars Drag Race will be edited off the face of the earth” (See fig. 5). While another queen, after sharing the “RIP She-mail” graphic on Facebook, took to Twitter to wonder if a “Women’s Coalition” would mobilize to ban the term “fishy” from the show, finishing “Yes it means what you think it does” (See Fig 7).

Following this initial burst, the platforms of the queens remained largely quiet until May 24th, the weekend following the airing of the finale that crowned the winner of the season. In an interview with Marc Maron, RuPaul stood by his use of the slur “tranny,” stating on the podcast, “Don’t you dare tell me what I can do or what I can say... It’s just words. Yeah, words do hurt. ‘Words hurt me.’ You know what? Bitch, you

need to get stronger. You really do. Because you know what? If you think, if you're upset by something I said, you have bigger problems than you think. I'm telling you this" (Merevick). When a BuzzFeed writer reached out to Logo for a response to RuPaul's comments, Logo made clear that those comments did not reflect the company, actions that were described as "distancing" in the article (Merevick). RuPaul took to Twitter and fired off in a series of Tweets, "Trust! @LogoTV hasn't "distanced" itself from me, not while I'm still payin' the f%kin' light bill over there/ I've been a "tranny" for 32 years. The word "tranny" has never just meant transsexual #TransvestiteHerstoryLesson/ I'm more "offended/hurt" by the misuse of the word "community"" (See fig. 9).

In the communication burst that followed, the queens' social media posts began to show a self-constructed, defined conflict with appointed leaders. The queens' posts indicated that they viewed the conflict as one between Carmen Carrera and RuPaul specifically, not as a criticism of the show's transphobic mini-challenge. Some even hashtagged posts as "#TeamRuPaul," or argued that Carmen owes her career to the boost from the show and therefore, to RuPaul (See fig. 10, RuPaul's Drag Race Family). Other queens attempted to continue the focus on community and move the conversation from accusations to coming together, "... I don't agree with polarizing this argument wither way, but I do think we need to overcome the ego, coming from both sides, and have some compassion and consultation so we can move forward. Let's change the way we are looking at this argument, cause when you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change..." (see fig. 15).

Disciplining Race and Performing Blackness

Where the online discussion in the social media sphere was clear and explicit around the lightning rod incident of the "She-Male or Female" mini-challenge, discussions of racism in relation to *Drag Race* is much more slippery. Perhaps as

contestants become savvier to the exhaustive documentation of fandom, contestants have sought out other ways to express their own perspectives on race and racism within the context of *Drag Race*. Public discourse on race in the United States remains fraught, with as much being communicated in the silences as is spoken.

To give some background to the conversation, I would like to highlight two challenges from previous seasons. The first, “ShakesQueer,” aired on March 16th, 2015. On March 21, 2016, *Drag Race* aired the third episode of the eighth season. The episode opened by reminding viewers of the tension between the contestants in the last team challenge. Kennedy Davenport and Jasmine Masters reflected on their team’s good feedback and recognition, but noting they had faith in their own team, since they realized the other team would be “weaker,” or “a lot of buffoonery,” since “they all look alike, they all the same height, they all weigh two pounds” (“ShakesQueer”). Indeed, in the previous episode Jasmine and Kennedy’s team leader, Ginger Minj, explicitly stated that “she wanted a team that was not only very talented but also very diverse. You know, if you look at the other team, they look like Aryan Airlines” (“Glamazonian Airways”). In season seven, one of the featured storylines and tensions that emerged for the viewers was a division between generations of drag queens, “old” vs “young” queens or “experienced” vs “newer” queens. We see this at play amongst Jasmine and Kennedy’s assessment of diversity, but yet the acknowledgement of race and specifically the slim, young, and light skin of the other team erupted enough for this discussion between Kennedy and Jasmine to open the “ShakesQueer” episode for the viewers.

“ShakesQueer” again sorted the queens into teams for a performance challenge, with RuPaul taking the opportunity to educate the queens on theatre’s (he specifies Shakespeare) historical use of the word “drag,” used as an acronym to mean “Dressed as a Girl.” This is a common, popular explanation of drag, although not actually true. As

Roger Baker notes, during Shakespeare's time in Elizabethan theatre, "to boy' actually meant to play a female role on the stage irrespective of the actor's real age" (Baker 36). Baker later goes on to elaborate, "it was during the middle years of the nineteenth century that the word 'drag' was coined to describe the petticoats worn by men playing female parts," with some dictionaries dating it to 1887, although Baker does allow that slang words are often in use for many years before being recorded in any official capacity (Baker 146). RuPaul's erroneous lesson aside, the episode "ShakesQueer" becomes an opportunity to bring *Drag Race*'s blend of camp and parody to two sketches rooted in Shakespeare plays, "Romy and Juliet" and "MacBitch" (twists on Romeo and Juliet, and MacBeth respectively).

Kennedy's team, assigned to MacBitch, must work through their script and assign roles. Kennedy begins reading the character descriptions, "Lady MacBitch, the pretty one, the ambitious, ruthless, wannabe mean girl... that sounds like Violet," and here, *Drag Race* editors have played the metallic noise that has been used over the years to signal a contestant being shady towards another as Violet rolls her eyes ("ShakesQueer"). Kennedy continues, "Laquisha Kanina MacBitch, the tough, ghetto woman," and Jasmine interrupts, stating "I don't wanna be the ghetto girl. 'Cause that's like, so common. I could really turn myself into Lady MacBitch" ("ShakesQueer"). Kennedy considers and agrees that she doesn't want to cast people in their "comfort zones," and announces, "So Violet, I would like for you to be ghetto" ("ShakesQueer"). In a talking head, Violet frames her disgruntlement over casting as irritation over Kennedy giving her friend Jasmine a part that Violet had wanted. Max's team, on the other hand, plays into the broad stereotypes for their strategy, assigning the mother "Lady Cappuccino" role to one of the older queens, a ditzy party girl to another contestant considered young

and vapid, and Mercutio, described as “more ratchet, kind of a hoochie,” is assigned to Jaidynn Diore Fierce, the only Black contestant on the team.

Further tensions erupt on team MacBitch, as Violet explains in talking heads spliced into the rehearsal how she tries to coach Jasmine into being “more Regina George” (a character from *Mean Girls*) a queen bee type, “sassy, bitchy cunt” and is frustrated that “[Jasmine] isn’t really serving that,” while she reflects, “I get the ghetto girl, and I’m really serving it well, I think” (“ShakesQueer”). Immediately following this, we watch as Violet reads through her lines as Laquisha Kanina MacBitch, with minor stumbling and an exaggerated affect that is associated with “ghetto” mannerisms, complete with outsize neck rolls, lip pursing, finger waving, and a blaccent, to cultivate a stronger imitation of Black American English speakers. In a talking head, Kennedy states “The struggle is real,” before we cut back to the group, where Kennedy interrupts after Violet delivers the first of her lines, “Um... I want to make a judgement call here, ‘cause I just don’t feel comfortable. I need Violet and Jasmine to switch characters. Jasmine, just be the ghetto girl and make it work” (“ShakesQueer”). Violet companies that “Bitch, I already gone done filled my ghetto fantasy,” in her Laquisha voice, before reverting back to normal to say, “Let’s switch scripts,” as we cut to a Violet talking head that has her complaining, “Anything else because Jasmine’s fucking up we should change real quick?” (“ShakesQueer”). As the show emphasizes, Kennedy made this choice last minute, adding a significant obstacle to performing the material successfully. Violet read the switch as happening because of Jasmine “fucking up,” and there is some merit as we see Jasmine struggling with delivery. However, the fact that the switch came after Violet’s line reading, and the shared looks between Jasmine and Kennedy, as well as Kennedy’s talking heads interspliced between these developments could be read differently. Perhaps Violet’s feelings of being slighted in favor of Kennedy’s friend Jasmine are true-

Violet does not have strong ties to either of these contestants at this point in the competition. However, foregrounding Jasmine's concern with being cast too easily as "the ghetto girl," indicates different anxieties at play. Of course, we cannot know for sure why precisely Kennedy had her teammates switch roles, it remains unspoken. Even in *Untucked* for this episode the conflict centers around Kennedy's decision to not have a read-through, rather than the casting switch. Rather than viewing Kennedy's switch as one that was meant to give her friend Jasmine an advantage (as it clearly did not), there remains some productivity to thinking of this switch as an attempt to disrupt the "circulating controlling images," in the way that she was able. Kennedy could not wholly resist and compete in the show (P. Collins 93). *Drag Race*, while not an "African-American institution," as Collins unpacks, does provide a "complex site where dominant ideologies are simultaneously resisted and reproduced." (P. Collins 95).

The second challenge I want to highlight is "RuCo's Empire," the third episode of the eighth season, which aired on March 21st, 2016. The mini challenge for this episode focused on the landmark Supreme Court decision that legalized same-sex marriage (*Obergefell v Hodges* on June 26th, 2015), which would have happened just before the filming of the season. RuPaul opined to the contestants, declaring the Court "moved this country boldly forward" as the camera pans over the contestants nodding emphatically at the importance of the decision (RuCo's Empire). Then as RuPaul asks the contestants to drag up the "basic black robes" of the Justices, encouraging them towards "Judge Judy couture," the mood shifts to excitement and appraisal of the materials available ("RuCo's Empire"). This silly, educational moment of gay rights celebration ended, as RuPaul shifts into reading the cards the contestants wrote to introduce their Supreme Court Justice looks and accomplishments.

RuPaul declares Naomi Smalls the winner before going on to announce that the contestant eliminated in the first episode of season eight, Naysha Lopez, would be rejoining the competition following the double elimination in the second episode. RuPaul then announces for the main challenge for the episode: the contestants “will be overacting in my new TV series, RuCo’s Empire,” a sketch that will be based on the hit Fox drama, *Empire* (“RuCo’s Empire”). The contestants are split into two teams, one headed by Naomi Smalls, a Black queen and Naysha Lopez, a Latinx queen. It makes sense that *Drag Race* would continue its propensity for campy parody, focusing on one of the shows that dominated pop culture conversations. However, once the logistics were considered, the choice does seem odd for the show. *Empire* features a predominantly Black cast, Season eight featured 12 contestants, of which five were white, four were Black, two were Latinx, and one were Korean –American, differences RuPaul is ostensibly aware of as he read the card for Kim Chi’s Supreme Court Justice look and introduction- “All rise for Supreme Court Justice Kim Chi. She got her start at the law firm of Ching, Chang, and Chong” at which point RuPaul continues while looking around at the camera and contestants, “I did not write these... do not send me letters” (“RuCo’s Empire”). At this point in the season, 10 contestants remained, and there were only three Black contestants left. While I do not wish to resurrect the debate between August Wilson and Robert Burstein on colorblind vs color-conscious casting, there is something to be said here that a sketch set in the world of *Empire* would need to contend with the very conscious representations of Blackness that the show presents. As Lisa Anderson notes, “race always already has meaning in a U.S. cultural context; this is undeniable” (90). Indeed, Chi Chi DeVanye, a Black queen from Louisiana in a talking head reflects, “I think the other team should be worried... because, they have a lot of girls that are just like, not Black,” because notably, Team Naysha has no Black queens (“RuCo’s Empire”).

It may well be that Chi Chi is voicing her concern out of an essentialist understanding of performing Blackness, which E. Patrick Johnson would balk at. However, unlike the situation he describes in *Appropriating Blackness* where a white student is criticizing for her performance of a story by Alice Walker, where Sally approximated a black southern dialect and moved her body to imitate a larger, older woman. In Johnson's description, several black students criticized her performance for being "more stereotypes rather than a real portrayal," (Johnson *Appropriating Blackness* 237). Johnson was able to underscore how the criticisms of Sally's performance were fueled in part by their own personal issues with her, and their own essentialist understandings of blackness from their lives. However, RuCo's Empire is not portraying three-dimensional, fleshed out characters- it is a caricature of the characters from *Empire*, intentionally written to draw on stereotypes and intended to be overacted.

In a slight echo of the events in *ShakesQueer*, Kim Chi, assigned the role of "Chocolate Chip Cookie," is excited to dive into the role, adding a high-pitched light blaccent, however she stumbles and stutters over the lines. The choppy delivery prompts Naysha to have Thorgy Thor, a white New York queen, reassigned to play Chocolate Chip Cookie, to Thorgy's delight, "I would love to. This is gonna be so good, I really want to do this," she shares before diving into reading lines. Thorgy adopts a blaccent, rolls her neck and purses her lips to better perform as Chocolate Chip Cookie. Meanwhile, on the other team, Bob the Drag Queen, a Black queen also from New York, is rehearsing as Chocolate Chip Cookie. Thorgy's competitiveness, particularly with Bob has already been highlighted in the series, and Thorgy shares in a talking head her irritation at having to be compared with Bob now that they'll be performing the same role. *RuPaul's Drag Race* pushes the conflict in this episode as Thorgy vs Bob. However, throughout the rehearsal of the sketch, the tensions of appropriating and performing Blackness are ever present.

RuPaul introduces Faith Evans to the queens as the “Grammy Award-winning First Lady of Hip Hop,” who will help direct the scene with him, and upon introduction, Derrick Berry, a queen best known for her Vegas shows impersonating Britney Spears, but in this sketch playing a Black militant lesbian responds with a “Wassup” pointing sharply at Faith while throwing up two fingers and grunting after, wearing large hoop earrings and a large Black afro wig. Even Faith and RuPaul seem taken aback or confused, and the moment hangs awkwardly before the queens are called to rehearse. After a few lines are delivered, RuPaul interrupts, telling Kim Chi he wants to see more neck rolling and finger waving as he demonstrates for her. Faith Evans adds “we smack a lot when we ratchet,” while overtly smacking her mouth and showing her tongue while RuPaul nods (“RuCo’s Empire”). They attempt to coach her into a tongue pop and praise her when she adds the gestures and affect to her lines. Conversely when Team Naomi enters, Chi Chi tells viewers in a talking head that Evans was the wife of Notorious B.I.G., followed by a Naomi talking head where she shares that part of her drag name is inspired by Biggie Smalls, indicating to viewers that they needed no introduction of Faith Evans’ placement. Rather, Team Naomi’s hurdle arises when Cynthia Lee Fontaine, a Latinx drag queen from Puerto Rico who now performs in Texas. RuPaul repeatedly corrects Cynthia’s lines and delivery as the show cuts to a talking head by Bob laughing, “Cynthia’s Ginger Snap is hilarious for *all* the wrong reasons. I don’t even know she knows what she’s saying,” and viewers cut back to Cynthia whistling and looking around, seemingly confused (“RuCo’s Empire”). Even in judging, Carson tells Cynthia that “I didn’t know what you were saying and I didn’t care!” praising the zany comedic energy she brought, although she still is up for elimination (“RuCo’s Empire”).

Watching RuCo’s Empire with Team Naysha is uniquely stressful. The heightened voice and performance of the queens feel like a dragged-out minstrel show: Kim Chi

followed the direction given; Derrick Berry, dressed in a black turtleneck, hoops and large Black afro is aesthetically channeling a woman Black Panther which is particularly jarring on a face painted like Britney Spears. Interestingly, it is the two non-Black members of Team Naomi that are up for elimination, despite the bodily cringe that Team Naysha's performance induces. Is the tension between performing Blackness as a non-Black person made especially stark when there are Black people in the scene? Or is the discrepancy between the racial caricature that was performed- after all, Robbie Turner in Team Naomi didn't engage in the over-the-top neck rolls, finger waving, lip-pursing accent that Kim Chi was coached to do. And although Cynthia may have tried at times, she never was able to shift from her Latinx-inflected mannerisms to adopt the performance desired. Like the *Untucked* discussion for the "Shakespeare" episode, the *Untucked* episode for "RuCo's Empire," also doesn't engage with the coaching of racial performance for the skits- the contestants talk about sex: the type of men they enjoy, whether they've had or would have sex in drag, and the other contestants they'd have sex with on the show. Again, we have a silence around unpacking the skit and direction they were given. Ostensibly, the show operates under the logics of colorblind casting, encouraging a silence around discussions of race that only peek out in Chi Chi's talking head, or RuPaul and Faith Evans' coaching. However, these examples are better understood as "careless casting" which "has the potential merely to reinscribe the racist controlling images" (Anderson 101).

These two examples are lengthy, but help underscore the expectations and performances that *RuPaul's Drag Race* often encourages and rewards surrounding race, and in particular, Blackness. And now I must turn to a key moment of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and the (often unsaid) expectations it places on Black queens- the season 10 reunion episode and The Vixen, both her conversation *and* the conversation her absence

inspired. At 10:45 they tease turning to The Vixen and “her most confrontational moments.” RuPaul frames the segment stating, “*Drag Race* is a microcosm of what’s going on in the world today, and when people don’t see eye to eye, it can get real” (“Queens Reunited”). The show proceeds to roll footage of the various conflicts The Vixen has been a part of throughout the season. Piled up as they are, the show presents these as The Vixen vs Aquaria and The Vixen vs Eureka.

RuPaul paints the fight with Aquaria as The Vixen instigating a conflict that had nothing to do with her, after all, it involved Aquaria complaining at the fact that Miz Cracker had debuted several looks that looked remarkably like Aquaria’s (the show helpfully provides side by sides to demonstrate the point), and that Aquaria was frustrated. When the queens bring up the conflict later for discussion among all of the contestants, Aquaria backs off, presenting a diplomatic answer devoid of the sharp criticism she previously shared, to which The Vixen interrupted her insisting it was “too vague,” causing Aquaria to shift her frustration from Miz Cracker to The Vixen, creating a small feud between Aquaria and The Vixen that carries over the next couple episodes, before coming to a head in the third *Untucked* episode (“Untucked: PharmaRusical”). Here, another contestant Monique Heart attempts to mediate this conflict for them, and the other contestants. The Vixen emphasized at the start of the mediation, that it has been a series of Aquaria poking at The Vixen, “When you come for me, and I come for you back, and you say, ‘oh you’re so negative,’ I was chilling. You brought it over here. I bring it back. And all of a sudden, I’m a bitch” (“Untucked: Tap that App”). When the conflict was parsed, the other contestants confirm to Aquaria that she has indeed started conflicts with The Vixen, and has a pattern of being dismissive and rude to other queens about their looks. Even other New York queens share that they’ve had similar experiences with her prior to the season, and that she has a bit of a reputation for doing

so in the New York drag community. Aquaria attempts to hold firm that The Vixen was making too many negative comments- “there’s a difference between shade and a snide comment,” to which another contestant asks, “well what’s the difference between The Vixen making a snide comment and you making one?” (“Untucked: Tap that App”). At which point Aquaria tries to respond but begins crying, to the irritation and surprise of the contestants. Aside from The Vixen explaining herself in the beginning, she’s been silent the majority of this conversation but jumps in,

I’ve gotta say this. So this right here is exactly what it is. You say something, I say something, you start crying. You have created a narrative of ‘I am an angry Black woman, who has scared off the little white girl.’ Even- doesn’t matter how you do it. And so when you get super defensive and tell me that I’m negative when I’m just responding to what you brought to me, that will always read to these [points at all the cameras] as a race issue. (“Untucked: Tap that App”)

Monét X Change, in a talking head, affirms this for the viewers that The Vixen’s point is important, because people will judge The Vixen for causing Aquaria to cry, ignoring the fact that Aquaria had started the conflict (“Untucked: Tap that App”). Aquaria tries to continue, saying she does understand these optics and the racial dynamics at play which made her hesitant to even address it, so The Vixen boils it down to, “leave me alone,” causing Aquaria to cry more, as The Vixen sighs, “I can’t with the fucking tears. This is just so gross. I don’t like it. I don’t” (“Untucked: Tap that App”). The conversation then shifts to tell The Vixen that she picks and chooses when to be vulnerable, and that her concern or feeling that she looks like the villain when Aquaria cries, according to Monique, is “her own shit,” and Miz Cracker suggest that instead of “coming in at 10, maybe come in at 5... don’t fucking escalate, because this is hard as it is” (“Untucked: Tap that App”). The Vixen points out this is a form of tone policing, where she is

supposed to manage herself to be more palatable. In the fight with Eureka, she gets provoked to a higher level of anger, as viewers learn later that Eureka deliberately intended to test her, a fact The Vixen didn't learn until the season aired the episode in question, leaving The Vixen to think she too angry and impossible to work with ("Queens Reunited").

The Vixen did mark her entrance into *Drag Race* and the werkroom by announcing, "I'm just here to fight," but noted later in *Untucked* that she said it was because she was irritated watching season nine, that it was too many platitudes and "niceties," and that the contestants weren't "getting to the real shit," in favor of managing their personas for reality TV ("Untucked: 10s Across the Board"). In the reunion The Vixen points out that even though she entered the show with that line, she never started a fight, only brought up statements made by fellow contestants when the truth was being smoothed over or managed for the sake of cameras. RuPaul however, jumps on this, insisting that The Vixen had a "choice to not say anything" if her statement of past facts would "create tension" ("Queens Reunited"). At which point, The Vixen takes a breath and states, "Okay, so I came here to thank my fans for the love and support that they gave me, for all the wonderful people who relate to me, understand me, and appreciate me. And now that I've done that, y'all can have a good night" before getting up and leaving the reunion to the shock of her fellow contestants and RuPaul ("Queens Reunited"). This exit happens at 21:45, and The Vixen continues to be a topic of conversation for the next segment, as RuPaul begins again asking the contestants if they would like to comment on what has happened. I include the full transcript of the segment here for clarity of discussion.

Asia O'Hara: I don't think it was the best thing to do but I do think that her getting up and leaving was her way of separating herself from a

situation where either A) she was gonna either have to fight or leave the room.

Mayhem Miller: I disagree. I really do. There's still a way to have a conversation without having to do that, though.

Asia O'Hara: Agreed! Agreed. But that's the-

Mayhem Miller: If she would just sit there and just say, you know what? Let me take a moment, breathe, think about what I'm about to say-

Monet Exchange: Yeah

Mayhem Miller: - so that I could get my message across, everyone at home can understand her more.

Asia O'Hara: She walked out of the room because she [clapping] does not know what else to do [end clapping], and it's our job as people to try and help her through a situation that it's clear that she's struggling through.

RuPaul: Listen, as a community, we do have responsibility to each other, but each of us, we are all adults. At one point you gotta say, um, there is nothing else I can do. Each of us have had people in our lives who you realize 'I can't do anything for this person unless they want to meet me halfway.'

Monique Heart: Valid. But I also feel like earned authority is real.

Blair St. Clair: Accepting love is something that's really important just as much as giving love.

Asia O'Hara: But what I don't understand is why do we just automatically expect everybody to understand that? I don't agree with everything that The Vixen says or does, but I understand where it

comes from, and I think... um, [tearing up] The Vixen seems to me like a person that's crying out for help. And it's like everybody else is like, 'Girl, that's on you. You gotta figure it out' and I just... um, that's just unfortunate to me. Like, I feel like our sole purpose here is to, you know, enrich the lives of other people, and even if I'm met with controversy or whatnot, I can do that every day because 20 years down the road we've got something, then it's because, you know, I was persistent in trying to make your life better.

RuPaul:

Listen, I love the girl. In fact, I invited her on in the first place because I felt her voice needed to be heard. But at one point, and you've seen this with your friends back home, at one point sometimes you gotta let people go. Whether it's anger, or whatever the issue is, because it's not a two-way street. It's- it's- it's one-side. And that's where we are [cut to shot of The Vixen's empty chair, slight zoom it]. It's a one-sided conversation. She decided she's gonna get the last word and walk out, so there, it's done.

Asia O'Hara:

It's just ridiculous. It's just ridiculous. Like, it's- it's ridiculous that-that our thought process about people is so self-centered [getting emotional] that if it's hard to help somebody, well just let them struggle. We're not just drag queens we're people, and now we've got one of our people outside. Here we are filming during Pride season, [crying] and we let one of our sisters walk out the fucking room 'cause nobody wants to fucking help her. And we're the first people- we are the first people to say that people aren't treating us right.

RuPaul: Do you think there's anything we could have said to The Vixen to make her stay?

Asia O'Hara: It's not about what we say, it's about what we do.

RuPaul: What could we have done?

Asia O'Hara: If I had of got up and walked to that door and said, "The Vixen, we need you to stay." But the fact that we, including myself, let her walk out, she- that door closed behind her, and she said, 'Yeah, I guess I'm making the right choice.'

RuPaul: When Vixen decided to say, "Thank you, but I'm leaving," do you believe that she had already made up her mind? Clearly you don't believe she had already made up her mind that this is it. Because I believe that when she said that, she was done, and there was nothing anyone could do to stop her. I mean, you've had discussion with her. In fact, we saw you have a lovely discussion with her, where we actually got to see the sweetness in him, [rolls mute footage of Asia and The Vixen talk and hugging] and I saw the fear, and I saw all of that, and I understood why that wall was put up, because I have that wall, you have it, you have it, we all have it. And its coming from a hurt place. It is. But I can't teach her that.

[Asia tilts her head and leans forward]

I can teach her through my own example.

Asia O'Hara: Of course you can.

RuPaul: What, am I gonna go back and follow her and go say, "Come here, let me tell you something."

Asia O'Hara: I mean, not-not at this moment. No-

RuPaul: Can you explain to someone who cannot be spoken to?

Asia O'Hara: No. I don't expect you to do that, but-

RuPaul: But look at me, look at me, goddamn it! I come from the same goddamn place she comes from-

Asia O'Hara: Which is-

RuPaul: And here I am, and you see me walking out? No, I'm not walking out. I fucking learn how to act around people and how to deal with shit. I'm not fucking walking out and saying, "fuck all y'all," you know? That's disrespectful to each of you. And I know you feel for her because you see yourself in her, 'cause we all have that same frustration. Let me tell you something. I have been discriminated against by white people for being black, by black people for being gay, by gay people for being too femme. Did I let that stop me from getting to this chair? No. I had to separate what I feel or what my impression of the situation is to put my focus on the goal. You can't just make, um excuses for bad behavior, or for inconsiderate behavior. I invited each of you back here to my house, into my home, and if I'm invited to someone's home, I'm not gonna disrespect their home. I'm not gonna just disrespect the invitation. You know, the world is hard. It's hard to live on this planet. But we all have to learn how to deal with it, but you gotta ask for help first. Listen, at the end of the day, we are all a drag family, and as you can see here tonight, it doesn't always come easy. I want you to take a look at this. [end at 27:57]

The footage then cuts to Dusty Ray Bottoms talking about her fraught experience with her family and conversion therapy, abruptly leaving the conversation about The Vixen on RuPaul's terms. The Vixen operates a specific place, bringing to light the issue of racism on the show: her conversations sparked numerous think-pieces online, between fans on social media and in-person.

With these rich and varied responses, we can see themes and patterns beginning to emerge in the ways that *Drag Race* seeks to discipline and shape contestants' expressions and performance of race and gender. The first is the fractures and hierarchies that emerge amongst the *Drag Race* community. The second is a tendency of some to highlight affective bonds, peppering their responses with calls to a community. The third theme revolves around authority, and who gets to claim it.

Fractures and Hierarchies

In her examination of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Laurie Norris uncovers hierarchies in the treatment of the queens on the show. She argues "... the show privileges certain types of drag queens over others," going on to draw a distinction between "Glamour Fish," a hyperfeminine style that often uses high fashion and a dramatized runway performance, and "Real Fish," a feminine performance that is often coded as a more "everyday/street" fashion and could "pass as cis" (Norris 33). Working from other literature on drag queens, within *Drag Race*, Norris finds that "the further away from real gender expression a performance is, the more cultural cache that performance merits within the community" (35). Assuming that usage of the word "real," refers to commonplace performances of hegemonic masculinity/femininity that one would find among the general populations, this uncovers another dimension to the online fallout over the slur usage. If queens acquire cultural capital within these communities based on the perceived transformation, this has striking implications for transgender past contestants

such as Carmen Carrera, and their position within the *Drag Race* community, as we see online.

The immediate discussion burst online regarding the “Female or She-male” segment reveals that critique or dissent is being interpreted as an attack. Many of the posts in the April 14th discussion burst seemed to be responding to Carmen’s post that pushed *Drag Race* to “be a little smarter about the terms they use...” and “use their platform to educate their viewers truthfully on all facets of drag performance art” (see fig. 16). One past contestant, Pandora, displays this mentality; “somehow this show is the enemy we should be fighting for to gain equality,” and proceeds to claim that perhaps people are simply *allowing* themselves to be offended and giving those words power over them (see fig. 3). Another past contestant takes it further: “In my opinion this is so ridiculous! What upsets me even more is the fact that some of the contestants that are complaining about it didn’t have a problem with being on the show or getting their fame or success knowing this was part of the show” (see fig. 4). This veiled response en masse to Carmen’s post from previous weeks is a subtle positioning of Carmen as the face of the show’s criticism, fracturing the *Drag Race* community.

Useful to understanding the actions online and onscreen is Caryl Flinn’s recovering of the concept “loving assassination.” Borrowing the term from Leo Bersani, Flinn defines a loving assassination as when camp veers from laughter at difference, power, and excess and instead joins with dominant culture to “do damage” to bodies, particularly feminine bodies (453). Flinn unpacks camp’s tendency to smirk, noting “smirks are always made at the expense of another, [emerging] from contexts in which subject and object are at least partially differentiated in terms of power” (438). *Drag Race’s* and the *Drag Race* community’s deployment of camp, with these understandings

of hierarchies, becomes more insidious. The other defining aspect of the first discussion burst was the overt turn to campy humor, which often functions as mocking to silence.

Rather than harmless camp, understanding these actions as “loving assassinations” demonstrates the transphobia lurking under the cover of camp. As Harris notes, in some camp, “wittiness was the primary element of revenge” and this has been demonstrated online (173). The idea of accommodating to remove offensive language was consistently mocked. Many built on some feminist charges that drag was offensive to women and thus, all “misogynist” drag queens should be edited out of “all and past episodes” of *Drag Race* (see fig. 2). This was further exaggerated by another queen, who shared a post regarding the “American League of Squirrels,” as if to equate that absurdity with the concerns of transphobia and transmisogyny. As Morrison puts ably, “the *Drag Race* empire’s loving assassination demonstrates that gay men are ready to take their place in mass society through gender policing, an act of patriarchal oppression which reduces the cultural threat of gay subjectivity” (132). By reducing the epistemic violence being committed within the mini-challenge to hurt feelings or irritation, as Manila does (see fig. 5) or to a hyper-sensitive community as The Princess (see fig. 6) many of the *Drag Race* community seem to be falling in line behind RuPaul. Some even attempt to position the show as a victim, wondering if a “Women’s Coalition” will ban other terms from the show, like “fishy” (see fig. 7).

While these responses are often couched in humor often typical for their personas, when considered together and in a larger societal context, a larger pattern of using camp and mocking to silence criticism or concerns emerges. *Drag Race*’s community is visually fracturing online. The queens are often subtly drawing on hierarchies within the LGBTQ+ community, rallying together to the exclusion of the past transgender contestants. This divide is not new, as Weiss notes in a 2004 article, “there

are social and political forces that have created a split between gay/lesbian communities and bisexual/transgender communities, and these forces have consequences for civil rights and community inclusion” (34). Within *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, pains are consistently taken to “distance “drag” from any and all things “transgender” (Kohlsdorf 69). This divide is increasingly pervasive, as drag queens of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* enjoy increasing commercial and mainstream success. However, rather than using this newfound position to advocate for the larger LGBTQ+ community, they’re using their newfound platform to police the most marginalized of the groups, putting vulnerable bodies in an increasingly precarious position.

Of course, in regards to the issues of racism on the show that The Vixen helps to bring to light, there was a significantly different response. There is no mention of the show’s frequent reliance on racial (and ethnic, and class) stereotypes for performance challenges, although this conversation playing against this backdrop does inspire reflection on these challenges. Rather, what becomes conjured is that of the “angry black woman,” explicitly named by The Vixen. The Vixen’s responses to Aquaria and Eureka are regulated in the moment and at the reunion by RuPaul and the other contestants. Her anger is viewed as off-putting and unproductive, something that needs to be managed. These strategies adhere to a version of respectability politics, which as Cathy Cohen explains, through which “it is hoped and expected that such conformity will confer full citizenship status, bringing with it greater access, opportunities and mobility” (“Deviance as resistance” 31). Of course, queer Black drag performers, such as RuPaul, cannot adhere to the more conservative ideas of respectability politics, but perhaps can enact a homonormative version of such politics. As Monique and Asia, along with the other contestants insist, The Vixen would be more successful if she smoothed her voice and was more palatable in message. RuPaul condones this, when he calls The Vixen and

her strategies “disrespectful” to both the other contestants, and himself. However, as Lorde reminds us, “anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies” (127). The Vixen did marshal her anger into action, using her newfound platform for philanthropic efforts. She raised \$3000 for Chicago’s Youth Pride Center and helped raise money for another past contestant, Gia Gunn, to pay for surgeries related to her transition (Daw). Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the *Untucked* episode where The Vixen explicitly called out how Aquaria’s actions would maneuver her into an “angry Black woman” narrative, there was an outpouring of support from some contestants. The winner of season 8, Bob the Drag Queen tweeted “What’s wrong with being a hostile trouble maker? #EmmaGoldman #HarrietTubman #AngelaDavis #MalcolmX #JaneElliott” (Crowley). Other contestants such as Aja, Monét X Change, Kennedy Davenport, Jasmine Masters, and Courtney Act also agreed (Crowley, lil_watermelon). The divide is fairly stark: aside from Courtney Act, much of the initial support from past *Drag Race* contestants were Black queens—Kennedy and Jasmine in particular having borne the brunt of fandom racism in the past. *Drag Race* may view The Vixen as a source of conflict and drama, but in the fan spaces online and in-person, and in media outlets, The Vixen has been allowed to have more control over her intentions and actions.

Affective Bonds and Calls to Community

As some queens hid under the cover of camp to discipline criticism and divided the conflict into a “Carmen vs RuPaul” battle, others took a different approach, invoking the nebulous idea of community. Many of the posts by the *Drag Race* queens construct *RuPaul’s Drag Race* as a community and a place. Jules Wight, in her work on the It Gets

Better Project, notes how “home is a *place*, constructed through experience and practice, where we also construct and practice identity” (131). These places can be digital, created through “regularity of actions/interactions, familiarity with the interface, and familiarity with others” (Wight 132). The *Drag Race* queens are naming *RuPaul’s Drag Race* as a kind of home, enacted through engagement in these digital spaces long after their time on the show has ended.

Phi Phi names it explicitly, saying, “[*RuPaul’s Drag Race*] has created such a place for the LGBT community in this world. It has made it ok for us to be who we are...” (see fig. 4). Rather than responding to the criticism directly, these queens are attempting to emphasize the importance of the show. The conversation becomes an earnest defense about the groundbreaking nature of the show, “The first EVER show to feature an entire cast of drag queens. It has made us question gender rules dictated to us by society” (fig. 3). By reminding audiences and the world online, Phi Phi and Pandora are working to romanticize this idea of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* as a digital home. However, when reading beyond these emotion-laden calls to the higher purpose of the show, we see the community fractures between the “transgender community” and the drag queens commenting. It is Carmen who offers a more thoughtful analysis, acknowledging the cultural power of the show as Phi Phi and Pandora later echo, but also calling for it to do better for the community- including the “trans artists in the drag scene” (see fig. 16).

We see this acknowledgement of the importance of education continued in the first non-trans queen to break ranks from the *Drag Race* message. Courtney Act continues Carmen’s nuanced perspective of the show and further contextualizes the show’s actions across other communities. Her post online is littered with facts about the vulnerability of trans bodies in America, calls for “compassion and consultation,” asking everyone to shift the conversation (see fig. 15). Courtney is referring to the emergence of

a constructed “Carmen vs RuPaul” dynamic, and pushing the *Drag Race* community to move beyond this and “change the way we are looking at this argument,” by highlighting the very real danger that the transgender faces daily (fig, 15).

This digital place, this home, of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* can be a compelling concept, and online, the labor of maintaining the affective bonds between *Drag Race* community members is made transparent. Despite the “campy” transphobic attacks of Carmen by Bianca, we are able to see Bianca apologize a couple days later (*RuPaul’s Drag Race* Family, see fig. 14). The apology, sent via Twitter and tagging Carmen in the tweet, is warmly received and Carmen literally moves on from the incident by acknowledging the apology and asking Bianca about the brand of her trademark white eyeliner (fig. 14). Both Carmen and Bianca express love for each other, demonstrating the affective bonds of *Drag Race* home. These public disagreements, couched in terms of home and place, make clear the active negotiation of identity and belonging. By happening online, the *Drag Race* audience can see this community dialogue in real-time, and because this dialogue is happening on social media platforms, the *Drag Race* audience can participate, becoming part of the conversation and community.

Perhaps the most wrenching part of the season 10 reunion is watching Asia O’Hara’s radical call to compassion. Asia insists that the show and viewers need to view The Vixen with compassion, and importantly, act on such compassion. For Asia, none of them following The Vixen when she left demonstrated to The Vixen that she wasn’t valued. Asia is the only one who thinks The Vixen made the choice to leave out of responsibility. Although Asia does not frame it as such, the viewers and The Vixen are well aware of her framing on the show as an “angry Black woman,” because of The Vixen’s labor in highlighting the racial dynamics at work in *Untucked*. The Vixen chose to leave when RuPaul himself was drawing on the broad strokes of that narrative. Julia

Himberg writes that “television audiences have more chances than ever to see themselves on the screen,” and she argues, “there is more pressure, not less, to increase visibility of sexual minorities, especially “realistic” LGBT characters” (Himberg 74). In addition to attempting to act responsibly and in her own self-preservation, knowing the turn to activism that The Vixen has made after filming the show and prior to the reunion, I wonder if The Vixen felt responsible to disrupt a controlling image yet again, this time by removing her image entirely. RuPaul, on the other hand, viewed The Vixen’s leaving not as an act of self-protection, but disrespect. He likens The Vixen’s behavior to disrespecting him in his home, presumably that of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and not the empty theatre in which this reunion is filmed. For RuPaul, there is a hyper-neoliberal attitude to community responsibilities for an individual- if they no longer give, they should no longer receive.

Claiming Authority

It is impossible to talk about the *Drag Race* community without contending with RuPaul. His name and presence is constantly nearby, bound in the show’s title and the link between the queens. RuPaul serves as icon and educator, “often set up as an authority on not only drag, but gender non-conformance more broadly” (Kohlsdorf 69). RuPaul’s commercial clout and successful career is what *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is built on. RuPaul additionally serves as an executive producer and head judge- consistently reminding everyone that decisions of elimination and victory are hers to make.

RuPaul actively resisted disciplining following the transphobic mini-challenge fallout. When he did comment on it, it was to voice a complete rejection of the complaints: “Don’t you dare tell me what I can do or what I can say,” moving into a victim-blaming rhetoric, that the people bringing the complaints “need to get stronger,” and not let RuPaul’s words cause them pain (Meverick). Kohlsdorf notes, “RuPaul

neglects that widespread oppression exists, and blames those who suffer from oppression for their problems” (74-75). This tendency understood when considering RuPaul’s power as an authority figure and educator, able to discipline and shape the community that has spawned from her influence.

RuPaul has consistently shown she is “aware of her status as a charismatic leader,” as are other queens (Fine and Shreve 184, see fig. 12). When reports of Logo’s distancing itself from the controversial interview comments, RuPaul immediately took to Twitter. In a series of tweets, RuPaul manages to claim economic power, assert her claim to the slur “tranny,” and mock the tactics of her detractors by calling into question their use of the word “community” (see fig. 9). It’s a clever series of moves for various reasons. First, RuPaul really does wield a substantial amount of economic power, as Eve Ng notes in her article in 2013, “The main Logo-oriented site is LogoTV.com... its byline was “Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender TV Shows & Specials,” but it is now “RuPaul’s Drag Race, Eden’s World Full Episodes, Reality TV Shows,” and the site is no longer explicitly defined as LGBT on its home page” (268). Even today, RuPaul, her show and its related media are still quite present and visible on Logo’s homepage, a clear nod to the power she is able to wield as her show gains success, despite the *Drag Race*’s move to VH1 (other reality shows enjoy the homepage focus for VH1). Her cultural power is substantial as well, with her “decisions [having] real career consequences for the queens” (Fine and Shreve 179). Second, as discussed in the previous chapter, RuPaul is correct that in the past, drag queens also fell under the umbrella of the slur “tranny.” However, this assertion neglects that language and identity is not fixed- and is deliberately blind to the increasing normalization of drag queens to society.

At the same time, RuPaul is also a disciplined subject, caught in the neoliberal politics of homonormativity. In her work on gaystreaming, Ng notes the shift from

advocacy to consumption in Logo's goals, "It is no surprise that networks like Logo are engaged in LGBT programming not primarily to advance the cause of "gay rights," but because it can prove profitable, in various configurations aimed at predominantly straight, LGBT, or mixed audiences" (276). This echoes the concerns and precarious hopes of Herman Gray, who finds that there is "greater possibilities for black and minority representation to circulate more in market niches," so long as they remain profitable (Gray *Cultural Moves* 86-87). This drive to be profitable means being palatable to broad audiences, which can "result [in] an ambiguous product that ultimately does more harm than good by shaving off the sharp edges of any real social commentary" (Kirk 178). RuPaul herself had to shave off her sharp edges to achieve her current success, "...in RuPaul's early career she often performed gender fuck drag, but she is careful to note that it is not what made her famous... Reinforcing gender binaries paid the bills" (Kohlsdorf 71). RuPaul saves her sharpest retorts for social media, where she is able to control the narrative and speak back to corporate statements that attempt to dilute her intention.

RuPaul has had cracks in his cool demeanor. In season 7 after the disastrous "ShakesQueer" challenges, when giving feedback to Team Kennedy he was met repeatedly with claims of it being "a tough day," or that it was a "domino effect" of not landing lines and having off energy. At one point, RuPaul interrupts the contestants, snapping, "FYI, for all you girls up there: I don't want to hear any goddamn excuses. Be prepared!" and Jasmine tries to jump in, stating that they didn't have time to rehearse, potentially about to share the late casting shuffle they had, but RuPaul cuts her off, "Make it work! Make it work! Fucking make it happen! I don't want to hear any goddamn excuses anymore" ("ShakesQueer"). It is perhaps the harshest that viewers have seen RuPaul, aside from the season 10 reunion and the conversation with Asia

about The Vixen, where he almost positions The Vixen's actions as a personal attack. He interjects, "Look at me! Look at me, goddamn it! I come from the same goddamn place she comes from!" that he too has been discriminated against for being Black, for being gay, for being femme and RuPaul has learned to ignore these things to achieve his own goals ("Queens Reunited"). RuPaul forecloses The Vixen and her struggles as unique, because RuPaul views their experiences as similar, if not the same, and views his current success as vindication of his attitude and strategies.

RuPaul is simultaneously disciplined and disciplining. Her show is lauded as a commercial success, creating a home for the LGBT community, a depoliticized force more concerned with fashion and performance than politics- perfect for the homonormative politics of Logo and now VH1. However, in order to achieve this success, she had to buy into the homonormative ideology, at least to the extent to perform it for television. RuPaul serves as an example of exceptionalism, and like Logo, "foregrounds individual success and talent in ways that discourage attention to structural conditions of inequality" (Ng 273).

The Work of Disciplining and Resistance

This online negotiation in the wake of the transphobic mini-challenge is the result of the neoliberal homonormative policing of RuPaul and its effect on the types of queens deemed successful within the show. However, while the show acted as a policing force on bodies that fell outside of the approved narrative, through their removal from the competition, their online presence isn't so easily silenced.

Instead, queens are able to marshal their personas and the community constructed around *RuPaul's Drag Race* to voice non-sanctioned perspectives. While this may not always be well received, it becomes a subversive disruption of the homonormativity of the show by making the affective bonds between contestants clear,

such as Bianca and Carmen's exchange (fig. 14) and makes transparent the efforts at community building that, while presented through the platform of social media, is crafted by the queens themselves, allowing them control in their own message (for better or worse). Writing in the 1990s, Herman Gray notes, "contemporary films in the age of multiculturalism begin with the figure of blackness and difference. The struggle is not to make blackness representable so much as it is to contain it and make contemporary media representation of it part of the normative order" (*Watching Race* 169). He notes this extending into television, "daily we witness on television the transformations of racialized relations of power into entertainment and spectacle based on difference" (Gray, *Watching Race* 173). While *RuPaul's Drag Race* framed The Vixen as having abdicated her right to any say in the show, with the repeated showing of her empty chair at the reunion, The Vixen refused to be contained. Writing about methexic queer media, Jose Muñoz insists, "Queer media must call for participation, vivification, and an expanded sense of queer commons that is not quite present but altogether attainable" ("Towards" 564). Perhaps, functioning between the bounded world of the show and the unruly world of social media, a methexic queer media has emerged here. The *Drag Race* audience sees the negotiation of identity and belonging in all of its messy forms, outside of a falsely constructed linear model of "progress," and are encouraged (for better or worse) to engage in conversation through replies and comments, and thus have the potential to be challenged/confronted to think differently.

CHAPTER 5

PERFORMING LIVE AND IN THE FLESH

We begin by walking down 7th Ave., in the heart of the Melrose District. While Phoenix doesn't have "official," gay neighborhoods, if one asks people "where are the gay neighborhoods" the answer is usually, "Oh, well, there's a lot of gay bars in the Melrose area." The gay neighborhood remains marked by the presence of gay bars. Walking south down 7th Ave., the street is quiet, pulsing around points of gathering. Stacy's @ Melrose is one hub, a faded rainbow pennant fluttering in the night breeze. Moving south, a new bar beckons, its fresh sign brightly shining- notable not only as a new, large, white sign, but also because it's an overt designation of a lesbian space. I keep moving down 7th Ave., but crane my neck, trying to gauge the bodies and vibe inside. Instead, I continue walking, eventually the parking lot of the Rock, the building low, ambiguously attached to the other stores on the lot. There are rainbow lights on the awning facing 7th Ave., and rainbow flags, recently replaced and still vibrant. I can hear chatter from the brick enclosed patio to my left as I approach the door.

Inside, I step down into the space. The bar stretches out in front of me, and people are milling around. Over the speakers, there's a wailing voice singing karaoke- lyrics scroll on the flat screens to my right, while on the large TV behind the bar is tuned to Logo and muted, captions scrolling across the bottom to the syndicated sitcom. The bartenders, Chris and Morgan, smile and greet me, like they often do for customers. Both are white men, and seem fairly tall with the expanse of countertop between us. Chris meets me across the bar and compliments that I look pretty tonight- it's just a ponytail and a black polka dot t-shirt, but I don't think I've worn my hair up here in a couple weeks and he's always kind. He turns to one of the cocktail waiters and drops a *Mean Girls* reference, "Doesn't she look pretty with her hair pushed back? Tell her she looks

pretty with her hair pushed back.” To which Matty dutifully repeats the quote- he often works the showroom for the shows and regularly checks on me. Chris slides me a beer and we joke about the karaoke song choices and singing. There is no asking for my order at this point. It’s a relatively quiet moment, before bodies begin moving into the showroom for the drag show tonight. The folks who tend to attend the shows are often the same who tend to frequent the Rock. The crowd is mostly, although not exclusively, white, cisgender gay men. There are also women, and people of color, both queer and straight who number among the “regular” crowd. On show nights, the types of folks in the space are expanded, but still, largely white, with a mix of genders and sexualities in the room. The show’s opening music cues us to take our seats now, (transcribed here imperfectly):

“Everybody (body) go!

The show is about to start (echo)

Places!

The show is about to start (echo)

You have to show them

Faces

Beautiful

No one ugly allowed

(Laughter)

Ready? Here we go!”

Our weekly host is “Barbra Fucking Seville,” as she is often announced. She is a white queen in her 40s who favors blonde wigs (by my best guess, although she likes to change the numbers at times), with a pageant history. Her array of titles is impressive: Miss Phoenix Pride in 2014, Miss Gay Arizona in 2000, Miss Gay Western States in

2015, Miss Gay California in 2016, and Miss Gay Tennessee in 2017. In addition to winning the crown, she has been 1st alternate for Miss Gay Arizona in 1997, for Miss Gay Southern Elegance 2002-2003, and for Miss Gay Illinois America 2019. At the Miss Gay America pageant, she was a top 10 finalist in 2016, 2018, and 2020. Barbra is well-known in the community, often winning praise as a drag queen and for her show by *Echo Magazine* and the *Phoenix New Times*.

This project raised the following questions for me to consider while I conducted my observations³: In a bar that serves as a local hub of community for so many, how exactly does queerness and performance operate in the space? How is this enacted? How does performative production of queer space emerge? What does that even look like? How do we understand this through the lens of what can be considered quintessential to the gay bar, a drag show? Following Frank Browning, my turn to geography necessarily incorporates a “personal geography... a double sense of place, that double geography” that considers not only finding a physical location but how we “locate the place of queerness within ourselves” (2). The moment of “The Barbra Seville” show is a queer space and performance that is quite specifically bounded, rendered distinct from not only the surrounding bars, but even within the Rock itself, contained within the show room and only at 10pm on Saturdays. Inside the space, the boundaries remain murky as a queer performance emerges, playing with the roles of audience and performer, and dancing around and above the raised dollars for tips and recognition.

Drawing from Fiona Buckland, *The Rock’s showroom and The Barbra Seville Show* function as an act of world-making, the production of a queer lifeworld, produced

³ For this project, I conducted observation of weekly drag shows at The Rock and The Barbra Seville Show from June 2017 to March 2019. Additionally, I interviewed four queens and two regular attendees in conversational-styled interviews ranging from 60-180 minutes. Following observation sessions, I compiled my jottings and headnotes into fieldnotes.

socially through bodies and movement. Buckland extends the concept of lifeworlds from Berlant and Warner, distinct from “community and group” because it includes “more than those who can be identified, feelings that can be learned rather than experienced” (qtd. by Buckland 4). Buckland’s queer lifeworlds depends on an understanding that is necessarily characterized by its multiplicities (5). The show becomes a space where a disidentificatory performance can emerge, able to “transport both audience and performer... to another *space*... effect[ing] a change through the performative act” (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 196-197).

Barbra often opens the show by greeting the room, but soon focuses in on one or two people in particular, especially if they’re celebrating for the evening. “Are you the birthday boy?” Barbra asks, as she pauses greeting the room individually to “see who’s here” since she “[wasn’t] wearing contacts.” “Oh my god, you’re precious...” she mutters into the microphone, overtly examining his body and running her hands down his torso. “What’s your name?... How old are you, Alex?... Oh shit, come here, Alex. Gloria! This is how they’re making them now! Twenty-one, huh? It’s a little young for me, but I’m willing to... Who are you with tonight? Yeah, I was just being polite... Where are you coming from?... Her apartment? What is this right here on you, Alex, hold on. That’s another bitch’s hair, go sit the fuck down, Alex.” As Alex leaves, she pulls him back, unwilling to give up the bit quite yet. “No, come here, Alex. We can work through this, I’m not willing to give us up just like that. We’ve been through too much.” For Barbra, this is a key move to set the tone of the show. It’s important to her that folks “feel like they’re comfortable... and welcome. My biggest goal there is to put people at ease... I always talk a lot of shit, but I always try to insult myself just as much.”

Two women, Gloria and Hope, are fixtures of the show, and significant to understanding the Rock as a lifeworld. When I interview them, they are quick to

acknowledge they aren't queer, while exhibiting a deep appreciation and respect for the performances and are members of the community here. Folks tend to gravitate to their table, and if you attend the shows with any regularity, it's impossible not to get to know them. The sisters are warm and charming, remembering names, bringing holiday treats, and even cookies to the queens and the folk who flock to them. They have a standing reservation for the same table, week after week. Although I didn't press them for their exact ages, Gloria offered that she was "22 years old with 50 years of experience," while her sister Hope merely shook her head laughing, leaving me to do the simple math of their age difference. They're seasoned regulars, Gloria attending for fifteen years and Hope since she moved three years ago. Gloria has followed Barbra Seville as she used various venues over the years. The Rock is their favorite because "It's a showroom. You know, sometimes it's just a bar, but here, it really is the drama and the show." For them, when the music starts, the room comes alive, and the feeling of the show descends.

Jill Dolan argues that "audiences form temporary communities," that they can be understood as "participatory publics" (10-11). Dolan's larger focus is on "utopian performatives," which she argues

describe small but profound moments in which the performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking and intersubjectively intense." (Dolan 5)

It is important to note that Dolan views utopia not as fixed or static, but a means of a process that requires work on the audience's part (7-8).

There are ways that bodies reveal themselves as in or out of "suspension." Choy & Zee define this as "a becoming-atmospheric, a capacity elicited in its effective

atmospheric relation. Among mixtures, suspensions... are *unstable once formed*; particles in suspension will eventually settle out of their medium” (Choy & Zee 213, emphasis mine). Suspension is akin to a liminal space: a moment of becoming that cannot be maintained or lived in with any permanence. Some bodies are able to achieve suspension within the Rock more easily though, accustomed to the flows and ebbs of the space.

As such established regulars, both Gloria and Hope can “definitely tell” when people are first-time attendees. From their vantage point, a high-top table in the front row, house left, they are in a prime position to watch not only the show, but the entire showroom.

“They’re usually in a big group,” the women tell me, gesturing to the rainbow boas on the group table in the middle of the room. The women agreed graciously to an interview for my project. Particularly easy to tell are the straight men, “you can tell it’s their first time, because they’re just so... tense,” Hope searches for the right word while Gloria laughs in agreement. Hope continues, “And Barbra just zeros in on it and she loves it!”

There are expandable/flexible boundaries at work in the showroom during The Barbra Seville Show that can include certain bodies that are “legible” in the space, and this can be incorporated into the performance. However, those that are not “read,” or do not “belong,” get used in a manner akin to props. Tense bodies, uncomfortable laughter, and darting eyes have definitely been “tells” of first-timers who perhaps are less prepared than they thought for the intimate show space of The Barbra Seville Show. As Barbra reflects, it can be easy to pick out who’s new as they “take pictures of everything... it’s hard to get their attention at first. It’s hard to get them to understand their role in tonight’s show.”

While there is something to be said for the transformative possibilities of performance (Dolan 99), I believe that the queer performance at the Rock pulls bodies in differently. There is a limit to the extent the show is able to “expand” to include audience members in a benign or supportive fashion. It requires deferment to the queens- when the show is being interrupted or members draw too much attention from the queens onstage, there is a disciplining function. One queen, Savannah Stephens is not one to tolerate audience members disrespecting the performance or the performers. As one drunk attendee wearing a neon, plastic-y wig crosses across the showroom in front of her twice, she began her monologue with an indignant question, “Who was that bitch that kept walking across that goddamn stage.... [I was] feeling my fantasy. [She] Just... “ Savannah mimes the stumbling audience member for effect, before continuing, “No ‘I’m sorry,’ no ‘excuse me.’ Do it again and I’ll rip the wig right off.” She went on to mock the women who disregarded the performance by leaving in the middle of the monologue. Savannah incorporated it into her flow, teasing the designated driver for looking drunker than the woman leaving, highlighting the disruption to the show and making it work for her instead of detracting attention.

Direct hecklers in this space are extremely uncommon, generally when there are offenders, it’s a dismissive disregard for the room. It’s the group that is probably a bit too drunk and getting too loud, the audience member who insists on crossing the stage to get between the bar and their table, or the audience member who is impeding the enjoyment of the show for others by physically blocking views or aisles. One member at a group table gets too loud/too drunk, and Afeelya Bunz, a performer for the evening stopped, “I don’t want to be rude right now, but I’m in the middle of a show, and I’m *paid* to be here. Do you have \$50? Good, you just bought yourself a basket,” reaching over to collect the “fine,” and handing over the basket of the aborted auction. It’s these moments of

disruption that are not oriented towards the performers, but rather a focus on the self.

Phelan elaborates on the power dynamics,

...this account of desire between speaker/performer and listener/spectator reveals how dependent these positions are upon visibility and a coherent point of view. A visible and easily located point of view provides the spectator with a stable point upon which to turn on the machinery of projection, identification, and (inevitable) objectification. Performers and their critics must begin to redesign this stable set of assumptions about the positions of the theatrical exchange. (Phelan 163)

Perhaps, then, in this space of the showroom and the moment of “The Barbra Seville Show,” these “stable set of assumptions” are being redesigned (Phelan 163).

The mirrors covering the walls (on house right and house left) are utilized by the queens to surveil the audience from any point within the room, “But,” explains Gloria, “you know, they’re queens, they love the mirrors.” Hope agrees, “Sometimes they’ll just look through you, at themselves in the mirror while you’re tipping them.” In this room where the stage bleeds into the seating area, and the mirrors provide a sort of panopticon, there is no “easily located point of view.” Within the show space, we are encouraged as audience members towards disorientation, which “requires an act of facing, but it is a facing that also allows objects to slip away, or to become oblique” (Ahmed 171). Those that draw on those stable set of assumptions of what makes a performance in a traditional sense are often disciplined, ridiculed and humiliated by the drag queens- Barbra in particular is quick to direct the audience in a shaming ritual. This feels in line with the methexic as discussed by Muñoz which I drew on in the previous chapter. He deploys it in the aesthetic sense of Greek tragedy, pushing for media that

draws in a “queer commons that is not quite present but altogether attainable” (Muñoz, “Towards” 564).

Barbra ends her opening number and launches into her monologue, declaring “I’m not happy! It looks like a fucking Chuck E. Cheese. The tables are all caddy wampus. Who’s getting married? Are you getting married... (in an aside to the other side of the room) because nobody’s ever done that before!”

Her onstage persona is playful, and offstage, Barbra pairs this with a deep dedication to her craft and professionalism, reflecting,

“That’s what you have to do if you want to be successful at drag, is you have to be respectful of it. You know, you can’t come in late and you can’t have a lousy attitude. And you can’t walk through it. And you really have to commit to what’s going on. It’s not curing science, I realize that. Otherwise I wouldn’t do it. I wouldn’t spend my money on it. [it’s about] treating the audience with respect, and being respectful to the people who are paying you.”

This consideration extends to how she approaches the space as well. At the time of our interview, I had made a joke about being surprised that the curtains haven’t been fixed- they were mismatched sheaths of fabric, and would sometimes show large gaps for the audience to peek backstage. Barbra was immediately bothered and told me to mention it to someone at the bar.

The performers I interviewed all took their craft quite seriously. Dianne described having her looks washed, ready, and packed neatly in a show suitcase at least a week prior. Charmaine described a thorough system of tracking her shows to rotate songs out to avoid doing the same songs too close together but also to not have to learn entirely new songs every time. Barbra is the only performer I spoke with that had her own weekly

show to book and host, and in doing so she intentionally books performers to balance her shows, saying “I want to surprise you a little bit, I want to defy your expectations a little bit.” She works to balance the types of acts, to have racial diversity of the performers, and to have a range of music there. After having the performers booked, she pulls from her own archive to cover any gaps in the show. She does turn solemn, noting “to this day, I’m not going to put anybody on the stage when you pay a cover that I don’t think can do something.”

When a skinny blonde girl darts across the showroom, Barbra stops to stare at her, turning her head to track her movement. The girl appears to feel the sudden silence, shrinking a bit as she slides into her seat with the bachelorette party, holding up her hand filled with money as an explanation or apology. Barbra nods, “Oh she was getting ones, that’s a noble mission”

Rosemary Hennessey writes of the “aestheticization of daily life,” her phrasing for how capitalism has expanded and integrated life and art. Consumers are encouraged to seek out experiences and sensations for their own sake which often leads to invisibilizing of the labor of producing such experiences (Hennessey 132). While I may disagree with the larger trajectory of her argument, and its dismissal of “postmodern” thinking as frivolous and superficial, Hennessey’s point nevertheless seems useful to consider in relation to the experience of the drag show. Writing in 1972, Esther Newton writes of the expenses of drag performances, and in today’s economy with the expectations of today’s audiences, that expense is surely still significant (116). Dianne, thinking back over her career over the years estimated spending about \$25,000, and chuckles, “which I know I’ve never made up probably a quarter of that.” Charmaine emphasized how expensive it

is to build a drag closet, and JoAnn, a younger queen at the start of her career, is deliberately learning how to sew to craft her own looks to mitigate these concerns.

Gloria and Hope also shared another means of determining new or unfamiliar bodies in the space: “They don’t tip.” They elaborated that the people might not know or might not have the means. Gloria added that sometimes Barbra will give a how-to on tipping, “Dirty Suzie, put it in my bra, put it in my panty,” miming the gestures. Now that she points it out, I do remember Barbra using this exact phrasing several times before, often a physical demonstration with an audience member, a means to educate but also enhance her performance. The regulars in the space tend to be big tipppers, they note. Interestingly, in a rare moment of critique, Gloria offers that when performers don’t acknowledge the tip, it bothers her. Hope demurs, adding it’s very few, and Gloria agrees. However, they both remember when a queen doesn’t acknowledge it and mention, “She might not get a tip the next time! You watch, you’ll notice.”

The relationship and dynamic between performers and audience members is a complicated process of recognition and the act of tipping, is an intersubjective moment that is ultimately fleeting but nevertheless marks both bodies involved. There is a form to the tip, the dollar often creased length-wise, held out between fingers, palm-down, literally extending the reach of the body. The tip is not a direct purchase of attention—there is no 1:1 ratio or formal exchange rate. However, queens are often careful to focus on the tipper for a few bars or a phrase of the song, incorporating them into the performance. The audience members at times playfully engage, sometimes smile adoringly to excitedly share and reflect on the moment with their group, and sometimes take a photo/video of the interaction.

For Sarah Hankins, “during the performer-audience interactions, bills are part of the very fabric of erotic intimacy,” as well as a “communalism” that the “tips call up and

sustain” (464). In Hankins’ analysis, the tip is layered with meaning and nuance, able to be loaded with messages of recognition, affective intimacy, soliciting for sex, et. (445).

That the tip is layered with meaning is irrefutable, turning the audience member into a small spectacle. Watching queens in the audience, the exchange tends to be respectful, a mutual acknowledge of performance prowess, perhaps. At times, the queens even tip with comic theatricality: a queen stuck her hand out between the curtains during Barbra’s performance, waving exaggeratedly and impatiently when Barbra’s attention lingered on the audience rather than catching the movement. Charmaine herself is always sure to tip while in drag, to show appreciation of the performance, and Dianne echoed that in our conversation. Barbra felt the same, that folks wanted to show appreciation and also wanted to be a part of the experience. For Barbra, she’ll try to approach people individually, and draw from a few tactics to make the tipper feel seen, such as a whisper in their ear, a kiss on the cheek, or simply squeezing their hand. JoAnn is both younger and earlier in her career than the others I spoke to, juggling a few jobs in addition to drag. For her, tipping is “awkward,” as she understands that folks do it to show appreciation but she also doesn’t want the tip to be an obligation. She also notes that the tip can be used to draw folks over, either because the tipper needs energy or interaction, and how some men use it as a way of “ownership.”

The collection of tips is a moment of feedback, a way to visually and publically gauge appreciation for a performance. Afeelya Bunz ended a particularly high energy set by dramatically throwing the ones in the air and *holding* for a moment, a visual tableau to complete the narrative of her set. As the music faded, we heard Barbra’s voice offstage over the speakers, “It feels really baller and gangsta to throw your money on the ground... But you know what isn’t baller and gangsta? Having to pick it up.” The audience laughs, and some folks near the front approach the stage to speed up the

collection, and Barbra adds, “No no, don’t help her.” The exchange is playful, but there is an interesting tension here: the pursuit of a particular performative feel versus the management of perhaps unwieldy clump of currency.

Some queens will discreetly deposit a ball of ones on an empty table or the table of well-known friends to collect after the number ends. Others try to keep them in a manageable stack. However, some queens are particularly focused on the performance and neglect to collect outstretched dollar bills of appreciation. One performer was either unable to see past the lighting of the showroom, was too focused on her props (a large fan) and choreography or her dramatic, committed performance. Either way, as she walked past the bills extended to her, slowly the arms lowered, and her collection was more diminished than what she had potentially been able to earn during her number. This is a reason that JoAnn likes tip buckets, to also sidestep the complicated tip interactions, but also to preserve the performance that has been crafted.

The show closes with the familiar buckets- performers of the evening return to do a final group number, collecting tips for the LGBT youth scholarships that Barbra raises money for throughout the year. Folks reach down and pass up their dollars for tips, and the moment of the show is over. The lights go up, and groups within the showroom splinter back into their original formations. The memory of the performance lingers, and there remains an easiness to touch, a willingness to engage with each other. As Lauren Berlant writes, “Intimacy builds worlds; it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relations. Its potential failure to stabilize closeness always haunts its persistent activity, making the very attachments deemed to buttress “a life” seem in a state of constant if latent vulnerability” (“Intimacy” 282). As the bodies begin to settle, falling out of suspension, the intimacy lingers, leaving its traces on those who remain. Muñoz, drawing on Schechner, reminds us, “the transported (the actor, performer,

cultural worker) imprints change onto the transformed (who might be a spectator or a performer in a ritual)” indeed, this imprint that implicates all bodies involved is “laden with queer worldmaking potentialities” (*Disidentifications* 197).

With a wave, I pay my tab and head home on foot through the Melrose District. The Rock feels familiar to my body, similar to the drag shows and gay bars I’ve experienced in Ohio, in Louisville. Within the bar and the space of the show room, there is an easiness to initiate conversations and connections, a willingness to (literally) reach out and touch to engage. However, there are limits to these spaces. As I wait to cross 7th Ave., a masculine voice calls out of a dark car, “You want a ride?” Such an exchange pierces the evening, reminding myself of the reality of my body on the street. There are limits to the showroom, to the “gayborhood.” I opt for placating and demurring, smiling and calling out, “No, I’m alright, thanks!” Jogging across the street, I continue heading north on 7th Ave., but that exchange lingers and I scan for dark cars that might be occupied in the parking lot. It isn’t until I head into my neighborhood off of 7th Ave, the thumping music of Stacy’s at my back that I relax. My street is quiet and empty, and the haunting memory of the evening is able to creep back in and fill the air.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Conclusions are tricky. I was uncertain how to best tie up these threads for a reader, or how to properly frame this ending. However, as these things go, the obvious choice presented itself. During the course of preparing for, and conducting this research, I have spent years within the Melrose LGBTQ+ communities. I have found friendships, support, family, and joy within these groups. We have celebrated triumphs and supported each other in setbacks. On Saturday May 11th, 2019, we came together to attend Miss Gay Arizona, a victory that Espresso Grande secured, after winning Miss Gay Melrose. Like many others, I found myself back at the Rock, to support a friend's debut performance in the Barbra Seville Show that evening. Walking into the space, as it has grown to be for me, felt familiar and comforting.

The bar and showroom was particularly crowded that evening. Barbra, having just participated in the Miss Gay Arizona in Tempe, handing out award during the crowning (thus missing the beginning of her famously punctual show), was already performing a number as I entered. The night was full of congratulations: for the performers in the show turning out lively numbers, for the Barbra's Big Break winner performing, for the Forever Miss Gay Arizona from previous years who stopped in to perform after the pageant, and for Gloria and Hope, who won Lifetime Achievement Awards in recognition of their years of support of the drag performers and LGBTQ+ communities in Phoenix. As the show wrapped up and I made my way through the crowded bar to head home, a man crouched over rushed past me and I heard yelling-physical fights at the Rock aren't common, and my first thought was that this was a man who was in danger of vomiting on folks. However, the shouting repeated and cut through

the raucous bar of chattering folks and karaoke singers: “Get down! There have been shots fired across the street, get down!”

After Pulse, like many in queer communities who frequent gay bars, I had thought about my own response if presented with a similar situation. I turned and went back into the showroom, with two entrances and an emergency exit. There, the news was just hitting, and the drag queens who performed that evening were still taking cast photos with audience members. Together in that room we crouched, fell silent, and waited. A man next to me on the floor had wide eyes and had frozen with a folding chair on top of him, so I reached over to yank it off of him. Someone near the stage shouted for us to remain calm, that 911 had been contacted. For several beats the bar was uncharacteristically quiet, and then over the mic, Barbra instructed the showroom to move backstage in sections, further back from the windows. As we shuffled backstage, the news filtered back to the showroom again- the person shooting had been apprehended, all was clear. Folks in the showroom helped each other up and checked on each other. Rob, a bartender I’ve become friends with, comes over to me and asks if I’m okay. In the moment, I had felt scared but focused. After the incident, the focus was gone and I felt entirely too shaken. Rob hugs me, and I begin to cry, for the stress, for the moment of fear. He pulls me up a chair to sit with Gloria and Hope, and I immerse myself in the conversations of the elders in the community. In true camp fashion, a past Emperor of the Imperial Court quips, “isn’t it time they close that bar across the street now?” and the table laughs. I compose myself, and peek around the room. Others in the room are also still shaken, some crying, most are likely my age or perhaps younger. But at Gloria and Hope’s table, they resolutely and firmly turn back to other topics, to the pageant of today, of the fundraiser the past Emperor is planning next Saturday. Jarrod, another bartender who is helping with cleaning and closing the showroom pops out from

backstage, joking about misleading allegations of gun violence. It's funny, because what can one do other than make a joke out of the trauma. It's camp.

The newly crowned Miss Gay Arizona swoops in, freshly changed, arriving in the confusion of us all putting ourselves back together to perform an impromptu number in the bar- not the mostly empty showroom. There are cheers, screams, and applause for both her and another contestant in the pageant who has joined the crowd at the Rock. Their presence and performance has changed the energy of the bar, allowing us to forget the fear and focus on what we have to celebrate.

I step onto the patio, where the new Miss Gay Arizona Espresso Grande is surrounded by friends, supporters, and well-wishers. It's a wonderful sight, and I sit with a friend I see outside, chatting, trying to soak up this moment before heading home. Tonight, I opt not to walk, and catch a ride with my friend leaving the bar.

In the days after the event, more questions were raised than were answered. Gunshots were heard nearby, not fired at The Rock, Jarrod posted on Facebook the next day. In the comments, the co-owner, Michael Jacobs congratulates the staff for handling the situation, and in another comment on Jarrod's post he notes that when he called the police for more information about the incident that there was none to give because nothing was reported. In the replies to Michael Jacobs comment about the police having received no report people living nearby share how strange the comment is, they too heard shots and know others called it in as well.

Indeed, arriving at the end of this work I find that Esther Newton's initial study remains holding key, significant insights. In the beginning of *Mother Camp*, she writes of her intent to re-envision drag queens in a way that does not draw on the lens of social deviance theory. She stresses the knowledge of her interlocutors, and the insights that

they have that she didn't fully first hear. Writing in 1978 as a preface to her work for the "Phoenix Edition" of *Mother Camp*, Newton reflects,

the structural underpinnings of heterosexual domination are still very much intact. What few legal gains have been made in the areas of decriminalization and discrimination are being vigorously attacked by the organized sexual reactionaries. Yet gay books and films appear at a rate undreamt of in the sixties; the business world, having discovered that gay people spend money, is taking advantage of the new openness to direct products toward the "gay market." Not only that, but recent moves point to a cooptation of drag symbols and camp sensibility by the mass media... The gay sensibility, like that of other minorities before it, is finding, in watered down form, a larger audience. (Newton xii)

From this vantage point in 2020, one may be alternatively impressed and disheartened. Forty-two years have passed and yet Newton's words still are largely accurate- yes, we have gained access to the institution of marriage in the LGBTQ+ community, and society in the US has made significant strides in awareness, acceptance, and support of LGBTQ+ peoples. We live in a booming period of representation and queer cultural content being made, where we are not just depicted in fleeting superficial roles but fully fleshed, played by LGBTQ+ actors. Also, as I have discussed in this work, onscreen and in-person drag queens are more popular than ever. What intervention then, does this work have to offer?

Rather, as I discuss from chapter three on, the regulation and disciplining has become more insidious and nuanced. As episodes close out for season 12, RuPaul's song "American," blasts, as RuPaul sings, "I am American, American, American/I am American, American/The red, white and blue/Am-Am-Am-Am-Am American, American, American/I am American, American, just like you too" while contestants hold signs

implores viewers to register to vote. Drag queens are being brought closer to the national body and as they make those inroads, are subjected to increasing disciplining along lines of race and gender.

I began this dissertation with perhaps an unfair question, are drag queens a National Symbol OR Brand. This is unfair, and a question that inevitably will flatten knowledge production. Rather, we should approach this with a both/and approach, which as Vivian May unpacks,

though a less tidy, more difficult place to begin (and end), offers ways to evaluate a situation from multiple standpoints, creates room to identify shared logics while accounting for differences, and can be used to approach tensions or contradictions as having logics and implications of their own, rather than treating them primarily as problems to smooth over. (May 65)

Today, the drag queen as a hypervisible symbol of the LGBTQ+ community can be co-opted by the state, corporate brands, organizations, and other artists as a way to virtue-signal progressivism and acceptance. Within this landscape, it behooves those who have the chance to occupy a larger media platform, individual queens market themselves as brands. And yet, regardless of whether occupying a larger media platform or enmeshed in a local performing context, it is often drag performers of color who are most precariously positioned and most vulnerable. After all, the victims of Pulse were overwhelmingly Latinx LGBTQ+ folk, and consistently on *Drag Race* it is the Black drag queens who receive death threats and racist abuse online (Rodriguez M.)

RuPaul's Drag Race merges media and currently performing queens. However, *Drag Race* misses some aspects of performing live in queer spaces- the ephemerality, the community norms. It replaces them with digital discussion, social media, viewing parties and YouTube videos that circulate. *Drag Race* via reality television provides a meeting

ground for people to consider a variety of drag queen performing styles and circuits, but it is one that is treacherous, with sinkholes, dead ends, and twisting paths. The dynamics of competition reality television encourages some fans to construct false rivalries: Pageantry vs “bar queens,” *Drag Race* queens vs local performance. But still, RuPaul functions as an archive and *Drag Race* as a niche queer cultural export, keeps a mainstream cultural touchstone, so others can freely wander and explore other paths and artistry that calls to them.

RuPaul’s Drag Race creates a homogenized vision of drag and, at its best is perhaps *homo*-genizing mainstream culture. This marketing of a gay sensibility has achieved some remarkable and respectable cultural and market penetration. This however only remains true as long as *Drag Race* remains impervious to change and critique. The “Get Out” sketch is an example of *Drag Race* hearing the criticisms but the “Black Panther” sketch showed that while heard, perhaps the criticism wasn’t felt. While it remains frustrating to some members of LGBTQ communities, and audience members/fans who seek out and appreciate drag in many forms, it has created a starting point. A dialogue that has been *sustained* in a digital era of fleeting mainstream focus and too much news.

As my last chapter shows, in the local community of Phoenix, drag queens can operate as community leaders, feeling the weight of scrutiny and enjoying the increase awareness that media attention brings, but not forgetting their own pull towards this performance mode and labor it entails. The performers I spoke to routinely emphasized several themes in our conversations that drove their art: 1) the desire to entertain and perform, 2) to occupy a leadership role via fundraising and community events and 3) because there is a genuine joy and pleasure in performing. Indeed, many are incredibly touched that they are able to earn money and/or a living doing such work. As Dianne

reflects, “you know you’re doing it right if at the end of the night you’re like, ‘oh my god, I had so much fun. Everybody had a great time. The looks on people’s faces were fantastic.’ Because then I feel like... I did something. I made somebody happy for a minute. Or laugh for a minute. Or just... made them stop thinking about their own life... it’s not about me, it’s about them.” JoAnn poignantly spoke of how we’re increasingly isolated as people and often reject interaction, remarking, “I want to be a positive influence, because I’m on that divide... I want to be the one that helps bridge the gap. Bring everyone together. You’re like, realize that life is meaningless, but we bring the meaning and that’s what the beautiful thing is.” To distill the labor that drag queens inspire into one thing is transformation. Not just of themselves and their bodies, but of the spaces they occupy, physically and digitally, of us as viewers and audience members.

Viewers of *Drag Race* see an active form of “citizenship training,” as the show forwards a template of what forms of drag performance skills are most prized and viable (Ouellette and Hay 224). Furthermore, we are taught to cultivate a specific sensibility, one that is focused on the project of expanding definitions of American citizenship and belonging to marginalized peoples such as LGBTQ+ Black and brown folks who are often deliberately left out of such projects. Such a tight focus does not exist in the live performance spaces I witnessed, allowing *Drag Race* viewers who are brought into the bar a chance to explore different avenues of citizenship or community labor, in a dynamic and ever-shifting sense.

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RuPaul. "Sissy That Walk" *Born Naked*, RuCo Inc., 24 Feb 2014.

RuPaul. "American" *American*, RuCo Inc., 24 Mar 2017.

APPENDIX A
FIGURES FOR CHAPTER 3



Figure 1. RuPaul's Drag Race. "Logo wanted to thank the community for sharing their concerns...." Facebook. 14 Apr 2014. [1 Oct 2015.

<<https://www.facebook.com/rupaulsdragrace/posts/10152064385417828>>]



Figure 2. Needles, Sharon. “i think men who wear huge wigs, exaggerated make up, skimpy outfits, giant lashes, and impossible shoes to impersonate (slander) a woman is a complete misogynist!!! they should all be edited out of all and past episodes of Rupaul’s Drag Race..” Facebook. 14 Apr 2014. [1 Oct 2014
<<https://www.facebook.com/SHARONNEEDLESisDEAD/photos/a.241340819246615.52365.210739222306775/637719992942027/>>]



Pandora Boxx
 RuPaul's Drag Race is the first EVER show to feature an entire cast of drag queens. It has made us question gender rules dictated to us by our society. To me that is part of what drag is all about, breaking down those gender rules. When transgender contestants have opened up about who they are they were greeted with open arms. Yet, somehow this show is the enemy we should be fighting for to gain equality.

I do want to say, I love and respect all of my transgender friends and community. I always have and always will.

I was never offended nor were any of the contestants (who were fighting for screen time to get their face on TV) by the phrase "You've Got She-mail." We all just saw it as a take off of America's Next Top Model and then we all pretend to be "shes" for a living. This phrase has also been on the show for 5.5 seasons.

I certainly never want to see someone belittled and legitimately hurt by anything. In my opinion this was not hate speech. To me this just isn't the battle that needed to be fought. This has the potential to open flood gates we may not want open. Trust me the list of offensive words is growing exponentially. I just don't see this as a victory for transgender rights. We all already believed you should have them.

I certainly understand that words can indeed cause pain. I've dealt with that all my life. But then I realized that I am giving these words power over me. I refuse to be defined by words and I refuse to let words bring me down.

Like · Comment · Share · April 14, 2014 · Edited

8,570 people like this. Most Relevant ▾

1,192 shares

Album: Timeline Photos
 Shared with: Public

Open Photo Viewer
 Download
 Embed Post
 Report Photo

Figure 3. Boxx, Pandora. "RuPaul's Drag Race is the first EVER show to feature an entire cast of drag queens..." Facebook. 14 Apr 2014. [1 Oct 2015

<https://www.facebook.com/thepandoraboxx/photos/a.321547692984.187524.42870394287/10152493649292985/?_rdr=p&type=1>]



Phi Phi O'Hara

In my opinion this is so ridiculous! What upsets me even more is the fact that some of the contestants that are complaining about it didn't have a problem being on the show or getting their fame and success knowing this was part of show. Never was this intended to offend anyone or upset anyone. I love the transgender community soooooo much but I have to say "SheMail" had nothing to do with you until some of the transgender community made it about themselves. I understand how as a community some feel this brings the community and the view of gender identity harder to accept but in all reality you are what you answer to. If you feel the word does not represent who you are then it shouldn't bother you to begin with.

The show has created such a place for the LGBT community in this world. It has made it ok for us to be who we are and has shown the world we are not freaks and we deserve love just like anyone else in this world. The show has not only had transgender guests but many prior contestants that are transgender and have done nothing but given them love, support, respect and catapulted their career plus given them a voice that may otherwise have been silent or not as loud had it not been for a show that gave them support. This subject saddens me because it is our community that has decided this word describes who we are and considers it a negative.

I support the transgender community and have so many close friends that I love dearly. I want a world that accepts everyone for who they are and who they are meant to be. I

Like · Comment · Share · April 14, 2014 · Edited

507 people like this.

60 shares

Album: Timeline Photos

Shared with: Public

Open Photo Viewer

Download

Embed Post

Report Photo

Figure 4. O'Hara, Phi Phi. "In my opinion this is so ridiculous!..." Facebook. 14 Apr 2014.

[1 Oct 2015

<<https://www.facebook.com/PhiPhiOhara/photos/a.147552791980755.30701.146675821466758/593230470746316/>>]



Figure 5. Luzon, Manila. “Because I am offended by it...” Facebook. 14 Apr 2014. [1 Oct

2015

<https://www.facebook.com/manilaluzonfanpage/posts/690648810974508?stream_re
f=1>]



Figure 6. Princess, The. "Thank you Divine Grace." 14 Apr 2014. [1 Oct 2015 <<https://www.facebook.com/TheDragPrincess/photos/pb.176591585721762.-2207520000.1449799033./645051342209115/?type=3&theater>>]



Figure 7. Boxx, Pandora (@ThePandoraBoxx). "Is there a Women's Coalition that will get the term "fishy" banned from RPDR now? Yes it means what you think it does." 14 Apr 2014, 1 Oct 2015. Tweet.

Carmen Carrera ✓
April 14, 2014 · 🌐

Like Page

So once again people are mad at something that doesn't concern them. I'm making a post about this to get a couple of things straight. First of all I'm not the one to accept slurs from anyone. I've always been that way. In high school I watched gay kids get beat up and bullied and you know what, I remained quiet. Why? Because I was afraid to be treated the same way. Some words do hurt other people.

I hadn't initially commented on the "Female or Shemale" game on Drag Race when many people initially came forward and complained about it. I sat and thought about it for a whole week. I decided to make a comment on how I believed drag race was a platform for drag artists to showcase their creativity and how the show brought a lot of acceptance to drag queens mainstream. I also said that drag race should be more conscious of the words they use and shouldn't further objectify transwomen with a game that obviously hurt a lot of the shows fans in the first place. Drag race has now, weeks after they already made a comment about it and after I said my peace, that they are removing that word from the show. Great. Right?

Well now I'm dealing with a bunch of people who think it's ok to personally attack me on social media for standing up for those who were offended and hurt by the words on the show. That ain't even cool boo.

I can only do so much and honestly I rather be a real person than a fake bitch who will sit and allow others to use ignorance and hatred towards me or other trans people as if it's ok.

This isn't high school. We need to grow up a little. It's real life. I think people should educate themselves on respect and maybe, just maybe will the world begin to change for the better.

I also think that using Ru-Mail or Fe-Mail may be a better substitute... Either way, you still get your favorite show and Rupaul still gets paid #amenforthat #peacebewithyou

Like Comment Share

4,124 people like this. Most Relevant -

124 shares

Figure 8. Carrera, Carmen. "So once again people are mad at something that doesn't concern them..." Facebook. 14 Apr 2014. [1 Oct 2015
<<https://www.facebook.com/carmencarrerafans/posts/686059764773833>>]



Figure 9. RuPaul (@RuPaul). “Trust! @LogoTV hasn’t “distanced” itself from me, not when I’m still payin’ the f%kin’ light bill over there.” 24 May 2014, 1 Oct 2015. Tweet.

RuPaul (@RuPaul). “I’ve been a “tranny” for 32 years. The word “tranny” has never just meant transsexual. #TransvestiteHerstoryLesson.” 24 May 2014, 1 Oct 2015. Tweet.

RuPaul (@RuPaul). “I’m more “offended/hurt” but the misuse of the word “community.”” 24 May 2014, 1 Oct 2015. Tweet.

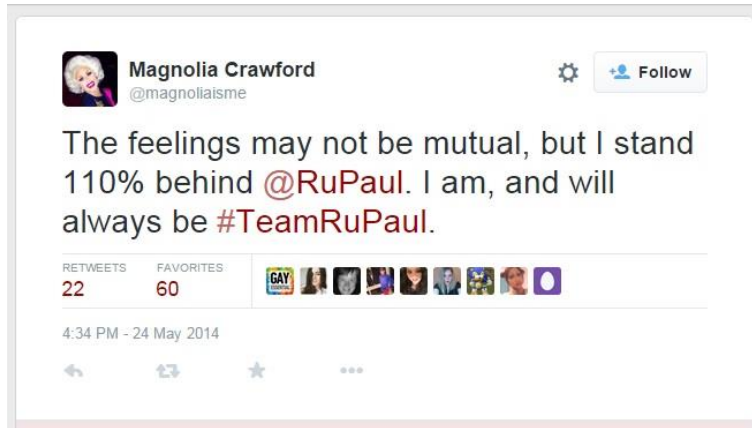


Figure 10. Crawford, Magnolia (@magnoliaisme). “The feelings may not be mutual, but I stand 110% behind @RuPaul. I am, and will always be #TeamRuPaul.” 24 May 2014, 1 Oct 2015. Tweet.



Figure 11. Carrera, Carmen (@carmen_carrera). “Things that are NOT ok: Calling @TheEllenShow a dike, Calling @AndersonCooper a fag, Calling @RuPaul a nigger, Calling @Carmen_Carrera a tranny.” 24 May 2014, 1 Oct 2015. Tweet.



Figure 12 (since deleted by user, archived by *Slate*). Carrera, Carmen (@carmen_carrera). "Follow the leader..." 26 May 2014, 1 Oct 2015. Tweet>



Figure 13. Carrera, Carmen. "Oh and for the record..." Facebook. 24 May 2014. [1 Oct 2015 < <https://www.facebook.com/carmencarrerafans/posts/704993416213801>>]



Figure 14. Del Rio, Bianca (@TheBiancaDelRio). “Hey @carmen_carrera, I’m sorry for my lame joke, I have now fired my comedy writer (me). Love ya.” 28 May 2014, 1 Oct 2015. Tweet.

Carrera, Carmen (@carmen_carrera). “@TheBiancaDelRio Moving forward, I need white eyeliner! Know a good one? #Love #DragRaceAlumni.” 28 May 2014, 1 Oct 2015. Tweet.

 **Courtney Act** May 25, 2014 · 🌐

I'm a little surprised by @rupauls recent reaction to trans issues. I understand and apply in my own life the logic about not giving other people power over how I feel, but I am not 1 in 12 trans people in America who will be murdered. As Ghandi said "The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members", so why doesn't everybody say "Love"?

If you're gay, how do you feel about straight people in the media using the word faggot? If you're black, how do you feel about white people using the word N#@#\$^? At some point we agreed that those words are not acceptable, I can't even type the "N-word", so much as say it out loud. Why are we so flippant about tranny? I don't agree with polarizing the argument either way, but I do think we need to overcome the ego, coming from both sides, and have some compassion and consultation so we can move forward. Let's change the way we are looking at this argument, cause when you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.

from both sides, and have some compassion and consultation so we can move forward. Let's change the way we are looking at this argument, cause when you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.

What would be energy better spent right now is focusing on helping trans people improve their quality of life. Here are some facts I'm sure we all can agree are not acceptable and that we need to come together and bring about positive change:

Transgender facts

1 in 12 transgender people in America is murdered. (This one fact alone is more than enough)

Although social acceptance for transgender people is growing, parents continue to abandon youth with gender-identity issues when their children need them most, advocates say.

49 per cent of transgender people attempt suicide.

Transgender youth account for 18 per cent of homeless people in cities such as Chicago, but researchers estimate fewer than 1 in 1,000 people is transgender.

Transgender youth whose parents pressure them to conform to their anatomical gender report higher levels of depression, illegal drug use, suicide attempts and unsafe sex than peers who receive little or no pressure from parents.

Sources: Guidelines for Transgender Care (2006), Gender Spectrum Education and Training, Families in TRANSition (2008)

👍 Like 💬 Comment ➦ Share

 and 2,840 others like this. Most Relevant ▾

351 shares

Figure 15. Act, Courtney. "I'm a little surprised by @rupauls recent reaction to trans issues..." Facebook. 25 May 2014. [1 Oct 2015 <
<https://www.facebook.com/CourtneyAct/posts/10152239577482909>>].

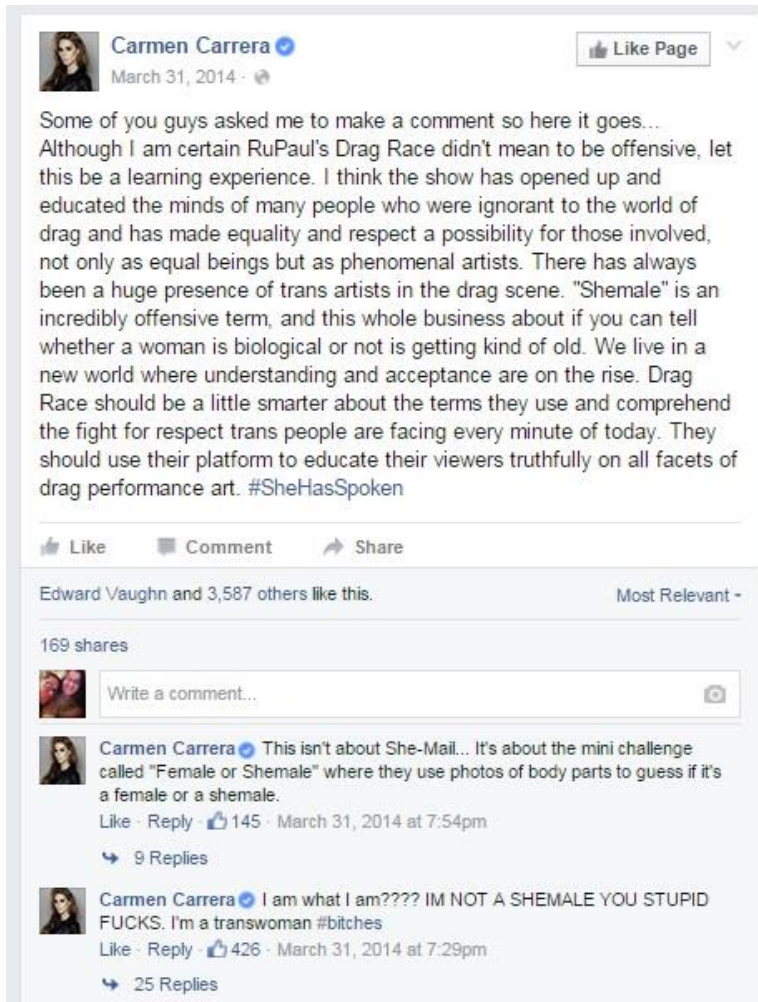


Figure 16. Carrera, Carmen. "Some of you guys asked me to make a comment so here it goes..." Facebook. 31 Mar 2014. [1 Oct 2015 <
<https://www.facebook.com/carmencarrerafans/posts/679959392050537>>]

Monica Beverly Hillz came out as transgender during the fifth season of "RuPaul's Drag Race." The Huffington Post reached out to the former contestant to provide the opportunity to publically contextualize her feelings about the allegations of transphobia on the show. She provided this response:

After my experience of being on the show, I would say that, to me, the use of the words "she-male," "ladyboy" and "tranny" are not cute at all.

I have fought, and still am fighting, for respect from society -- to be accepted as a woman and not referred to as a "tranny" or "she-male."

People don't understand the daily struggle it is to be a transgender woman. Some days are great and some days I can't be around anyone because I have so much anxiety, so much on my mind and just feel alone in this world.

After being on TV and coming out, it is very difficult to live a normal life. So when you see a show that you look up to and have been a part of, it kind of sucks hearing them use those words.

I will say that RuPaul and the entire cast and production team were amazing. To this day they still check up on me, so for that I am forever grateful.

However, maybe some things need to be changed about the show, because it's not just a drag show anymore. We have beautiful transgender cast mates paving the way for all transgender showgirls.

The Huffington Post also reached out to Season Two cast member Sonique for comment but did not immediately hear back.

Figure 17. Nichols, James Michael. "Carmen Carrera And Monica Beverly Hillz Address 'Drag Race' Transphobia Allegations." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 1 Apr. 2014. Web. 1 Oct. 2015.

APPENDIX B

NOTE ON PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED WORKS

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