

**Got to be Real:**  
**Queering Reality, Identity, and Audience Affect on *RuPaul's Drag Race***

By Erin Elise McHarge

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### Abstract

The meteoric rise of *RuPaul's Drag Race* in popular culture has given the extravagant subculture of drag a mainstream platform through reality television. *Drag Race* constructs queer identities and drag performances to make them palatable for both LGBTQ+ and cisheterosexual audiences alike. To understand how audience members consume and understand queerness and drag, I interviewed self-identified fans of *Drag Race* and recollected my own connections with the show. Coupled with queer and affect theory, these interviews inform my analysis of *Drag Race* and how it depicts queerness and the impact it has on viewers. Audiences are endeared to RuPaul's drag reality through the queering of the reality television genre, the onstage/offstage/backstage depictions of gender and sexuality, and affective relationships they build with the show. *RuPaul's Drag Race* invites fans behind the curtain of drag performances to be entertained by personal narratives of queerness beyond the spectacular drag persona.

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My Granma, Bobbie Miller, passed away when I started working on my thesis. She told me every chance she got that she loved me, believed in me, and was proud of me. Granma, I wrote this for you. I miss you every day. I love you yesterday, today, tomorrow, and always.

Quick story before I go: When I was in Grade Four, my elementary school would host a public speaking showcase where students would write speeches and the classroom winners would present them in front of the school with the hopes of going to the board-wide competition. I wanted so badly to go to the final competition and say my speech in front of judges from different schools, but I was stumped on what topic to write about. Much like today, my mom encouraged me at the time to write what I know. Even at 10 years old, I had a love of small screen stories and settled on writing my speech about the benefits of television watching. Nearly 15 years later, I am still writing about the benefits of television watching and what audiences take away from their favourite programs (although my takes have gotten a lot more queer over time). From my first public speech on television to entering a PhD in Communications, I am so fortunate to continue to pursue television-based research and study what I have always loved.

I am grateful to everyone that got me here and continues to push me forward.

Love, Erin.

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### **Racers, Start Your Engines: Introduction**

“Bitch, we all have a place here and so you might as well have enjoyed the show.”

Said Bob the Drag Queen to me after the “Siblings Rivalry Tour” show on September 14, 2019 at the Algonquin Commons Theatre in Ottawa, Ontario. I was one of the many—and I mean many—young, white, and femme-presenting attendees waiting in line after the performance to get a chance to briefly meet the stars, Bob the Drag Queen and MonetXChange, as they signed merchandise bought before the show. After emerging from the shadows of the theatre and into the fluorescent light of the lobby, I stood my place in line to have my obnoxiously large “Sibling Rivalry” fan signed by the fabulous drag queens who had just put on an incredible show. Bob and Monet spent the better part of two hours lipsyncing, dancing, telling jokes, and excessively sweating in front of a wired and receptive audience. Starstruck by seeing two strong contestants from one of my favourite programs, *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, I spent the entire line-waiting time racking my brain for the perfect quip to tell the queens as they sign my fan. Should it be funny or sincere? Brief or winded? Bold or conventional? I decided I didn’t have nearly enough time to explain to the queens how much drag as an art form means to me, or to even tell them that their work inspires my research and passion in academia. My turn came. I ambled forward, unfurled my fan and handed it over. Monet complimented my signature velvet shirt and drag show makeup. I gushed over how enjoyable the show was, and settled on saying something pithy and to the point, “I’m just another anonymous *fan*, but I had a great time.” Bob, towering over me and still sweating from the final number, looked me in the eyes and told me that even though I was one single person in the audience of their show on a North American tour, I still mattered.

Prior to attending the show, I had just moved to Ottawa to begin my Master’s degree at Carleton University. I moved to a new city to live with two unknown roommates, and study at a

university I had never visited before. After catapulting myself into an unfamiliar world, booking a solo ticket for a drag tour with talented performers from a TV show I adored seemed the best way to find my footing. *RuPaul's Drag Race* has been a consistent throughline for my experiences of adulthood thus far. Initially when I was eighteen, *Drag Race* brought me an escape from the trials of minimum wage work and the stresses of undergraduate classes. In the years since, as I have grown, so has my relationship to watching the show. *Drag Race* became a constant feeling of familiarity and a guaranteed source of joy as I endured difficult things within my own coming of age story. Throughout years of fandom, everyone from my closest friends to the most casual of acquaintances, and all those in between, knows that drag and *RuPaul's Drag Race* has been one of my keen special interests. I filled my free time watching the show, reading about the queens, and watching stray clips on YouTube. As my older sister once explained, some people have certain tantalizing topics that they continue to seek out over and over, and the illustrious world of drag and *RuPaul's Drag Race* just so happened to be mine. Even though I was beginning a new chapter as a young adult living on my own, going to a drag show alone was the best way for me to settle into my new independent but connected life in Ottawa.

Thinking through my relationship with drag and the LGBTQ+ community is both complicated and relatively simple. In the more complicated sense, I currently reject the idea that I have a “true self” or label because gender and sexuality are a matrix of social construction and desire. All I truly know is what I have been through, and I look forward to whatever personal growth awaits me ahead. In the more simple sense, I am unabashedly queer. Each chapter of this thesis begins with a moment of my own story. At first, it might seem like a series of anecdotes about my fandom of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, but each story symbolizes a touchstone moment in the journey of figuring out who I am. Traditional queer narratives are characterized by traits like

forbidden romantic trysts, unrequited love and oftentimes a tragic conclusion.<sup>1</sup> My own coming out is not demarcated by dramatic queer romance tropes, but explored through my relationship with *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Years of religious upbringing and emotional repression resulted in me feeling like I was constantly wearing a theatre mask to perform a cis het identity for an eager audience while underneath I was crumbling. Watching *Drag Race* during these formative moments allowed me to momentarily drop the mask and try to piece myself together. My coming out story happened in tandem with my love of *Drag Race*: I sought out the show to find people who seemed to understand me and spend time with a community I severely lacked. Throughout my Master's degree, I have translated my love of drag into my academic work. When I approached researching *Drag Race* in the following chapters, it was not done simply for the sake of critique, but out of adoration and appreciation. This thesis is a labour of love.

The more I watched *Drag Race*, the more I wanted to understand its significance and study why drag has successfully transferred to reality television, understand the impact it has for representations of queer identities, and its affective resonance for audience members like myself. *RuPaul's Drag Race* is a reality competition show that has drag queens from across America compete in weekly challenges in the pursuit of being declared “America's Next Drag Superstar.” The show first premiered on LogoTV<sup>2</sup> network in 2009, and has since been acquired by VH1, Netflix, Paramount+, and CraveTV<sup>3</sup> to be broadcasted to millions of viewers worldwide. With over 150 contestants, thirteen regular seasons, and millions of worldwide viewers, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is the most successful and prolific example of drag in reality television programming.

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<sup>1</sup> Please see any of the following for evidence of these tropes: *Tipping the Velvet* by Sarah Waters, *Brokeback Mountain* by Annie Proulx, *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel, *They Both Die at the End* by Adam Silvera, *Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller, and *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith.

<sup>2</sup> An American LGBTQ+ lifestyle television network

<sup>3</sup> A Canadian streaming service owned and operated by Canadian media conglomerate Bell

As a medium of television, reality shows are formed on the premise that audience members are being shown real relationships and challenges that people are enduring. For *RuPaul's Drag Race* specifically, the audience is privy to seeing how drag queens negotiate their identities through the onstage persona of the drag queen, the backstage process of getting into drag, and the offstage confessionals that narrativize interpersonal relationships during the show. Reality television in this format invites the audience behind the curtain to be entertained by personal narratives of the individual beyond the spectacular drag persona. An analysis of the medium asks the following: how are the concepts of reality and identity constructed? How is the popularity of these drag cultural productions reflective of shifting societal norms surrounding gender identity, gender expression, and sexuality? How do lived experiences of race impact these neat facets of identity? Why have mainstream audiences been able to develop meaningful emotional connections with drag queens and stories unlike their own?

With fans watching both cable and online streaming platforms, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is a catalyst for incorporating drag into popular culture, but the success of the show indicates there is a challenge to how culture understands and represents queerness. This ubiquity has given a popular culture platform to the previously subcultural art of drag. The mainstreaming process has opened up the world of drag to more audience members to invite conversations about gender, sexuality, race and class. By investigating the reality of queerness on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, my research demonstrates how the genre of reality TV is queered; how gender, sexuality, and race is negotiated through space on the show; and how viewers, regardless of their identity, have been able to develop emotional connections with *Drag Race*. This thesis ventures to address why this particular medium of reality television is significant to the current drag cultural renaissance.

## **Background: Existing Research on Drag Culture**

As an art form that inherently mirrors and contorts society while hyperbolizing social roles, drag's social relevance persists in the shifting tides of popular culture. The focus of existing research on drag has also continued to change over time. Most of the prominent sources of research on drag fit within one of two forms of discourse: first, social sciences and humanities empirical and ethnographic research on drag subcultures and cultural productions, and second, philosophical theories that use drag as an example of gender ambiguity or dissonance.

In the mid-twentieth century, Esther Newton's groundbreaking text *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* studied drag as a subculture, illustrated the hierarchy of drag performances, and identified the importance of space during a performance. This thesis is an homage to Newton's work by trying to also communicate the world of drag to academic audiences to emphasize the importance of study queer culture. Adapting Newton's work in today's milieu requires a fundamental shift in understanding how drag is culturally constructed and regarded by audiences. While Newton asserts that all drag performers are a part of the "homosexual subculture or gay world" (Newton 6) and that "the work is defined as 'queer' in and of itself" (7), drag is most commonly discussed within the realm of cisgender, queer men who perform as drag queens. Drag is an art form for them to dabble in activities that are traditionally reserved for or used by women, such as wearing makeup, dresses, long hair, and high heels in a performance setting. Outside of this dominant narrative, drag can encompass a spectrum of gender identities for the performers and gender expression of their persona. From drag kings, to hyper queens, drag is strongly rooted in the act of challenging and exposing gendered societal expectations. As a result, drag is a complex, multivalenced performance that

does not prescribe to a single type of drag queen, but it typically relies on a similar interplay of hyperbolic gender expressions in the performance.

Drag grapples with tension embroiled in the performance and performativity of normative gender. Jack Halberstam in *Female Masculinity* explains that “both drag queen and drag king acts reveals their multiple [gender] ambiguities because in both cases the role playing reveals the permeable boundaries between acting and being; the drag actors are all performing their own queerness and simultaneously exposing the artificiality of conventional gender roles” (Halberstam 261). Justine Egner and Patricia Maloney bolster this view in their ethnographic research by concluding that “drag performers [in their study] interact with the audience and gauge what they need to do to be subversive by the audience members’ reactions. It is a recursive balancing act for most drag performers between being subversive and entertaining” (Egner and Maloney 900). From commenting on stereotypical preconceptions of gender to creating satirical narratives, drag shape-shifts throughout the different kinds of cultural productions. As a result, drag is first and foremost designed to reach an audience. However, underneath the extravagant edifice of lashes, corsetry, and hosiery lies an intrinsic defiance of gender expectations and a masquerade of performativity. Deliberately rejecting gender expectations, drag can chip away at the cisheteronormative power structures and undermine the authority they hold over both the performers and the audience members.

Social science research on drag subcultures did not originate with Newton, but was popularized by *Mother Camp*. Newton’s contributions to cultural anthropology through her use of participant observation and interviews provided insight into the underground subculture of drag performers in America in the early 1970s (Newton). *Mother Camp* is a significant text by giving academic legitimacy to research on drag and being used as an oft-cited example for

cultural research and collective identity formation. Newton's study focuses on the familial social structures between the queens, the linguistic colloquialisms, and the popular cabaret spaces the queens would perform in (Newton). Another prominent text is Laurence Senelick's *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre*, a historical analysis of documents and cultural artefacts demonstrating how drag performances have changed throughout time (Senelick). Texts from Newton and Senelick serve as foundational examples that analyze performance spaces to develop a theoretical approach to understanding the relationship between space and performance.

In the same vein of social science research, prominent articles on drag culture use interviews with performers to understand why local drag queens or kings choose this artistic outlet and what messages drag performances relay about gender (Belgrave and Berkowitz; Rupp and Taylor; Schacht and Underwood; Tewksbury). However, much of the aforementioned research was conducted prior to the rise of *Drag Race's* popularity. More recent publications focus primarily on the cultural impact that *RuPaul's Drag Race* has had on local drag scenes through interviews and participant observation (Brennan and Gudelunas; Egner and Mahoney; Horowitz; Vesey). Although the specific kinds of drag being performed have changed over time, the prominent themes in social science research aims to capture the complexities of drag performances, placing primacy on the physical spaces where such performances dominate this field of inquiry.

As well, existing humanities research on drag focuses primarily on interpreting cultural productions. These forms of productions are inclusive to literature, films, television series, photography, and performances. A major drag cultural production that has been a source of analysis for decades has been Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris is Burning*. Many scholars have conducted discourse analysis of the language in addition to the representations of race,

class, gender identity, and drag performances (hooks, Muñoz). In literary studies, research on drag dissects the characterization, literary devices, and plot development of characters in drag to further understand how fiction can contribute critiques of gender representation and the many meanings imbued in performances (Sedgwick). Thus, discourse analysis of cultural productions featuring drag develop a complex understanding of how drag culture and performances are constructed, dispersed, and observed by audiences and the themes nested in the art form.

Another form of research on drag in academic literature is the incorporation of drag as an example to demonstrate a philosophical theory. Many influential gender and social theorists incorporate drag to demonstrate the ways in which gender is social construction. Most notably, Judith Butler's text *Gender Trouble* famously uses drag performances to demonstrate the ways in which gender is performative. Other theory texts such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*," Jack Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*, and bell hooks's *From Reel to Real* deploy drag in a similar way, to allude to the ways in which identity formation, gender expression, and social roles are the result of dominant white, capitalist western forms of patriarchy. While these forms of research fall under the disciplines of social sciences and humanities, the theoretical nature of the texts and the use of drag to show the inner machinations of a theory functions differently than the study of drag being the purpose of the research. I hope to also contribute to social theories of gender, but with a more direct focus on theorizing how drag has been mainstreamed through my discourse analysis and interviews. My research relies on the academic groundwork laid in both social science and humanities literature already published on drag. In addition to building upon the existing literature, I incorporated audience reactions, show content, and theory to better understand the reality of *Drag Race*. All

the while, my own affection for both the subculture of drag and the mainstream show drove my engagement with theory to explore the source of love for *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

### **Methodological Approach**

I chose to study the cultural impact of *Drag Race* through a combination of discourse analysis and semi-structured interviews to examine the construction of reality television as a format and capture the viewers' impressions of the show. Using a feminist and queer theoretical framework to ground my research, my analysis and interviews were intended to challenge hegemonic norms associated with gender, class, race, and sexuality through research methodology and design (Harding 646-7; McCann 237; Oakley 724-5). A mixed methods (Hesse-Biber 249; Neuman and Robson 347) approach to my project incorporates audience perceptions of drag performances, a demographic that is rarely included in drag-related studies.

When interviewing, I wanted to maintain confidentiality for participants so that the interviews were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards set by Carleton University's Research Ethics Board. I understood that my role as the researcher was to ensure that participants were aware of the different sections of the consent forms. Given the nature of the interviews and the possibility of sharing personal stories, confidentiality came first and foremost with their participation. Over the course of my research, I carefully considered all of the different methodological jigsaw puzzle pieces required to fit together for this project. For example, building upon the approaches of pre-existing research in the field of drag, establishing reasoning behind my methods of choice, analyzing my positionality in relation to my project, and describing my methods provided support to my overall interdisciplinary methodology. Societal shifts occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic which required accommodations to be made in my exact methods, but the same principles of methodology remained intact. Ultimately, my

research question asks how reality television became the medium for the mainstream success of drag while also tapping into audience perceptions of drag. My methods are grounded in reviewing my positionality, the selection process, data collection, and analysis. This unconventional mixed-method of using theory, content, and interviews provides a new avenue of analysis that has not been applied to *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

### *Positionality*

I am a fervent fan of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, I have seen nearly every season thrice. I would turn to the show to find depictions of queerness on television when that was not available in my own life. *RuPaul's Drag Race* has become a conduit for me to emotionally connect with myself and other queer-identifying people. In the *Drag Race* fandom, I am considered to be an insider.<sup>4</sup> With *Drag Race* becoming more readily available to audience members, drag is becoming an artform for a wide range of people to engage with instead of just people from the LGBTQ+ community. This insider position within *Drag Race* discourse allowed me to relate to interview participants and provide space for us to share our knowledge and culture of the show. I have since been able to take my love of drag from the small screen to mainstage while attending national drag tours, and I try to diligently support my own Ottawa drag community.<sup>5</sup>

Historically, there are examples of queer and trans artists within the LGBTQ+ and drag communities being used for the purpose of research and spectacle. Throughout this research process, I want to first acknowledge that I am not a drag performer. Second, as a white, middle-class young adult who has grown up in a suburb of a mid-sized city for the majority of my life, I have been privy to many systems of privilege affording me opportunities to conduct this

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<sup>4</sup> Many different interview participants would only warm up during the conversation when I would talk about my relationship to the show and share how much I know and/or my personal connection to it

<sup>5</sup> Shout-out to Anni Elation <3

research. I recognize that settler-colonial and capitalist regimes have given me access to education and the means necessary to be able to complete this project. Throughout the process of starting and completing this thesis, the Black Lives Matter movement has responded to systematic racism and police brutality in North America. Race was discussed throughout each interview I conducted, but the end result was a series of white voices speaking on BIPOC issues. As a white researcher, my goal was to bring awareness to how white viewers consume BIPOC bodies, and to use this platform to tap at the ongoing aspects of tension towards historically Black and Latinx drag cultures that are now seen by mainstream audiences. I want to use my privilege in academia to honour the role that drag has played as being a representation of queer communities, especially during historical moments of social resistance and revolt.<sup>6</sup>

### *Selection*

Content and discourse analysis are my preferred modes for studying *RuPaul's Drag Race* as a televised production. Western society is dominated by visual culture, and research methodologies are invested in understanding either the representational or affective role the visual has in a cultural setting (Rose; Neuman Robson 326). Deconstructing how mass media is “constructed and contested” (Jorgenson and Phillips 2) and consumed by audience members contributes to understanding how gender identities and sexuality are formed on the show.

There are several drag-based competition reality television shows, such as *RuPaul's Drag Race*, *The Boulet Brother's Dragula*, and *House of Drag*. However, with the most number of seasons and the highest rate of viewership, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is the most culturally significant example to analyze. The *RuPaul's Drag Race* franchise includes shows such as *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars*, *RuPaul's Drag Race: UK*, *Drag Race: Thailand*, *Drag Race Canada*, and *Drag*

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<sup>6</sup> Pride was started by the Compton Cafe Riot and Stonewall Riot, lead by BIPOC trans women and drag queens.

*Race Australia*. After much deliberation, I decided to focus only on the most recent seasons of the American original series of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. I include a few significant moments from older seasons of *Drag Race* to provide context to the culture of the show and its progression over the seasons. As the flagship series that spurred *Drag Race's* mainstream success, it seemed the most appropriate choice for the scale and scope of this research. As well, there are several seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars* that re-enter fan-favourite contestants into the competition. However, many of the reality TV conventions and the overall goals of the original series are not replicated during *All Stars* so it does not fit my research parameters. The numerous spin-offs of *Drag Race* could be considered for future research. I focused my thesis on the most current iterations of the original show to understand the relevance it has to popular culture today.

Throughout the past few years of researching *RuPaul's Drag Race*, I have yet to find an article or book that asks fans why they watch the show. I specifically set the requirements for recruitment to be open to various types of audience members. Criteria for research participants required them to be: a) eighteen years of age or older; b) self-identified as a huge fan of *RuPaul's Drag Race*.<sup>7</sup> This is, purposefully, extremely broad to encourage a full range of applicants. The popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race* has made drag accessible and I intentionally cast a wide net to capture a wide variety of audience members representing all kinds of fans of *Drag Race*.

I selected semi-structured in-depth interviews to engage with a variety of viewers of *RuPaul's Drag Race* in a guided and casual discussion to address this gap in knowledge. Semi-structured interviews are designed to value the subjective perspective of the research participant (McCann 237; Hesse-Biber 115), and for my interviews, this allowed me to talk with other fans

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<sup>7</sup> My invitation letter outlines the requirements to participant and there is a lack of descriptors on the recruitment poster to reach the most amount of participants

of the show and give space for their love and criticisms to come through. The research schedule<sup>8</sup> provided open questions to spark conversations around my themes of reality television, drag culture, views on gender/race/sexuality, but the majority of my participants addressed the question and then took the opportunity to share their thoughts on the most recent season or tell me stories about their relationship with the show. I specifically designed the questions to establish a baseline of what elements of the show drew in the participants. Asking about their favourite drag queen, the challenges they most enjoyed, and how they started watching all engaged the viewer and encouraged them to talk about why they watch. Then, I would begin to ask participants to evaluate the content of the show; this would include discussions on how race, sexuality, and gender are depicted. Finally, I asked my participants if they have engaged with drag culture outside of watching *Drag Race* and if they considered the show to be “mainstream.” Centering the voices of audience members gave me the chance to understand the impact *Drag Race* has outside the content of each episode.

Before COVID-19, I intended to recruit participants in Ottawa where interviews would take place. Exactly one week after I submitted my ethics application, COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic and stay-at-home orders were put into place. I re-submitted my protocol to include ethical limitations for online recruitment and interviews. Consequently, I resorted to recruiting through social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit. I initially planned to recruit between seven to twelve interview participants in-person. However, an overwhelmingly positive interest in my research resulted in twenty-three candidates contacting me and nineteen interviews being conducted. Video interviews completed through platforms like Zoom expanded my reach for participants and allowed people to engage with my research and

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<sup>8</sup> Please see appendix for interview schedule and the specific wording of each question

open up about their experiences from a space of their choice. In addition, while it was not my intention, all respondents to my call for interviews self-identified as white. This certainly skewed the sample's demographic, but guided my theoretical framework to include critical whiteness.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

When watching the selected seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race* alongside key episodes discussed during interviews, I took notes on how the spaces are structured into the show, how narrative arcs are produced by contestants, and how different challenges are constructed for the contestants. First, the explicit construction of different stages in which the contestants appear invites the viewer into areas of performance that are typically restricted to performers only. For example, *Drag Race* is constructed with various stages: the onstage area where the queens are shown in drag; the backstage area where the queens get in the process of drag; and the offstage confessionals where the queens are monologuing about their progression in the competition while out of drag. Through editing, the personal stories of the contestants connected their thoughts to the greater narratives produced by the show about the experience of gay men who perform in drag. As a competition show, the different challenges in each episode are emblematic of the different skills and qualities a drag performer would need to be successful in the drag scene. As I went through my notes, I highlighted keywords or common themes that consistently emerge as a form of open coding (Neuman and Robson 331) followed by dissecting the prevalent messages, channels, communication and systems (Krippendorff 2-3) that are found in the episodes of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Data collection and resulting analysis of episodes from the show emphasized the different production spaces, how stories were structured, and what skills were valuable in the ethos of *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

When beginning data collection during my interviews, I first asked participants to complete a demographics form to capture details such as age, gender, sexual orientation, hometown, socio-economic class, and current city of residence. The form gave me insight into who is watching *Drag Race*, how they are socially located, and get a snapshot of the kinds of audiences the show is reaching. Next, the curated interview questions I asked allowed participants to share what they like about *Drag Race*, how they understand identity to be constructed on the show, and the lasting effect it has on viewers. The semi-structured interviews gave a framework of questions to work within, but the open-ended nature of the questions left room for participants to uniquely express their thoughts and share their fandom with me.

The primary analysis of data from the interviews began by transcribing the audio files and uploading the typewritten files into the qualitative data analysis software, NVIVO. I did open-coding for the transcripts to identify the core idea being expressed and to remark significant quotes or comments from my participants in relation to my research themes. This manifested as descriptive codes such as: television, reality, competition, producers, drag queen, RuPaul, race, feminine, gay, trans\*, friends, family, love, home, struggles, race, emotions. My secondary step in the analysis process was trying to interpret these frequently identified themes and keywords from both methods through axial coding (Neuman and Robson 332-5) in order to draw conclusions to the overall project. The coding process was kept separate for each method, these findings were amalgamated in a master document of research findings. In this document, I created groupings of codes (reality television, queer identities, and audience affect) to derive meaning from the qualitative data and construct the narrative (336) prevalent in the information collected. The cumulative data from this analysis provided scaffolding for each chapter's theme.

## Chapter Abstracts

Chapter One, “‘To Be Real:’<sup>9</sup> Queering the Reality TV Genre on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*,” investigates how *RuPaul’s Drag Race* combines the elements of reality television shows featuring competition with performance aspects of drag to give audience members insight into more than just the drag persona they see on stage. Using Foucault’s concept of genealogy as a theoretical touchstone, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* both adheres to the conventions of the reality television genre while simultaneously queering them through its drag-based content. Analyzing the structure of the show’s competition and weekly challenges alongside reality television theory demonstrates that *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is able to craft its own drag reality that fits within the genre of reality TV while also playing with the viewer’s expectations. Serving as more than a drag competition, it has mainstreamed the representation of drag by working within the expected tenets of reality TV shows and defamiliarizing them enough to make it new and exciting for audiences at home. Bolstered by audience perceptions of the show’s format, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is demonstrated to be more than a reality television show. Functioning under the assumption that all elements of the show are ‘real,’ *Drag Race* crafts its own drag reality and effectively influences mainstream culture. With millions of avid fans worldwide, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has successfully taken the queer subculture of drag and transformed it into a media empire.

Chapter Two, titled “‘What You Know:’ Staging Gender and Sexuality in *Drag Race*,” studies how *Drag Race* constructs the identity of the drag queens versus the “true” person underneath the edifice of drag in the backstage area and confessionals. Using specific areas of onstage, offstage and backstage sets to show the difference between the drag queen and the

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<sup>9</sup> Each chapter title is inspired by Cheryl Lynn’s 1978 song, “Got to be Real.” Not only do the lyrics chosen capture the essence of the main ideas, but the song is heavily featured as the auditory throughline in *Paris is Burning*. In this choice, I am situating *Drag Race* as a successor to the drag reality shown in Livingston’s documentary while trying to bring these themes new life in contemporary culture.

person underneath reinforces that there is typically a concrete gay, male identity underneath the feminine drag. This forges a Goffman-esque difference between how diverse expressions of gender are seen as a deliberate performance, but that being a gay man is a more real and tangible aspect of identity. Identity and queer theories supports my discussion of the performances of gender to unpack how gender is represented on the show and how a contestant's identity behind the drag queen is constructed. As well, analyzing interviews from fans of *Drag Race* elaborates on the significance that representation of queer performers has on viewers. For audience members, the construction of identity results in a shift in how they empathize with shared stories of sexuality and how gender is shown to be an act. As well, other aspects of identities such as being transgender, or experiences of race on *Drag Race* does not translate to audiences as effectively as sexuality does. This results in *RuPaul's Drag Race* being a show with the primary goal of challenging hegemonic norms in relation to sexuality to a mainstream audience.

Finally, Chapter Three, “‘What You Feel:’ Affective Audience Ties to RuPaul's Reality” ventures to understand the role of audience members and how their affective entanglements with *RuPaul's Drag Race* create space for the messages of the show to find real world applications. Understanding the phenomenological relationship that viewers have with art reinforces that the audience member's gaze holds power and gives purpose to the art beyond the viewing experience. *RuPaul's Drag Race* is able to queer this phenomenology, and use it as a platform for audience members to develop emotional and affective relationships with the show. With the rise of COVID-19, many interview participants turned to re-watching seasons of *Drag Race* to bring them reassurance in a historically uncertain time. This gave rise to audience members, regardless of how they identify, finding comfort in watching *Drag Race* again because it reminded them of home and made them feel included in the themes of queer kinship. Audiences

have been able to forge positive, emotionally-driven connections to *Drag Race* which in turn give them a glimpse of what a future fuelled by queer relationality could look like. To many audience members, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is more than just reality television escapism. The show gives people pieces of joy to hold onto, and hope for a better future to come, similar to what is depicted on screen. The mainstream success of *Drag Race* is more important than simply entertainment for people, it is an affective avenue for viewers from different walks of life to resonate with the hardships and happiness of queer people, and to identify with the futurity that drag queens represent.

### **Racers, Start Your Engines...**

As a whole, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is a catalyst for incorporating drag into mainstream media, and the success of the show indicates that there is a significant challenge to how today's society understands and represents diverse expressions of gender. *RuPaul's Drag Race* is more than just drag queens competing on reality TV, it is a cultural artefact that implicitly references queer people's experiences with gender, sexuality, and social acceptance. Drag queens have been emblematic of the queer experience, and studying how *RuPaul's Drag Race* represents the entanglement of gender and sexuality in their contestant's identity has a direct impact on viewers and how queerness is culturally understood. Similar to what Bob the Drag Queen told me at the onset of my studies, "Bitch, we all have a place here and so you might as well have enjoyed the show." Drag has belonged and will always belong to queer people of colour and LGBTQ+ communities, but the inherent mainstreaming associated with *RuPaul's Drag Race* is capable of sharing stories that may otherwise go unheard. And even as an anonymous audience member and self-proclaimed fan, we all have a place engaging with the gender-bending reality of drag.

## Chapter 1: To Be Real: Queering the Reality TV Genre on *RuPaul's Drag Race*

In 2015, during the summer break between graduating high school and starting my undergraduate degree, I was habitually scrolling through YouTube to decompress after working my part-time retail job. Starfished across my bed in my childhood room in Hamilton, I came across a clip from a TV show where two garish yet beautiful drag queens were lip syncing against each other in a highly entertaining and emotionally charged battle. I peered closer at the small screen, immediately enticed. Several hours slipped by until I had seen all the “Lip Syncs for Your Life” from *RuPaul's Drag Race* as compilation videos. The only problem was all the clips were pulled from a Latin television broadcasting network. The drag queens were speaking English, but Spanish subtitles scrolled across the bottom of the screen. Even now, several years and hundreds of hours of *Drag Race* later, RuPaul announcing that two queens must lip sync “for their lives” still autocorrects in my mind as a lip sync “por sus vidas!”

*RuPaul's Drag Race* became an enjoyable way for me to escape the monotony of my life in exchange for the vibrant frivolities of the Werkroom, and feel the same triumphs and losses as the contestants. At the specific point in time when I had discovered the show, I was grappling with family illness from the prior months, the horrors of minimum wage work, and the uncertainty of starting university and beginning a new chapter of my life. This internal vortex of stress and anxiety was relieved by spending time with the confident, absurd, and heartfelt drag queens on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. I didn't have a strong sense of myself yet, and had never seen such an alluring display of queer content on TV. In a matter of weeks, I sourced out and consumed all seven regular seasons and one all-stars season that had been created up until that point. The show connected to an unexplored part of myself, and I couldn't get enough. When it felt like my own world was crashing down around me, the reality crafted on *Drag Race* made me feel like it was all going to be all right, even if it was for just forty-two minutes at a time.

*RuPaul's Drag Race* is an American reality television show that assembles a cast of drag queens and has them compete in a series of challenges throughout the season, each one testing a skill that pertains to the drag profession. While the basis of reality television is to show real life people reacting to the circumstances of the show, it is actually a version of reality that has been carefully crafted for a wide range of audience members through its unique participatory culture (Jenkins xxii). With millions of avid fans worldwide, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has successfully taken the queer subculture of drag and transformed it into a media empire. Serving as more than a drag competition, *RuPaul's Drag Race* combines the elements of reality television competition shows with performance aspects of drag to give audience members insight into more than just the drag persona they see on stage. *Drag Race* has successfully molded the tenets of reality television to become an accessible platform for drag, while consequently mainstreaming representation of queer embodiment and the genre of reality TV.

### **What is Real: Reality Television and its Convention in *RuPaul's Drag Race***

Reality television is first and foremost a genre defined by its own characteristics that set it apart from other formats of television programming to ultimately impact viewers in a way designed by the producers. When discussing the genre of reality TV, many cultural scholars (Andrejevic, Deery, Kavka) turn to the genealogy work of Michel Foucault to assist in outlining the category. In his book *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, Foucault explains that tracing the genealogy of complex systems or cultural creations is not the process of singularly defining its origins or fabricating a linear account of its progression throughout time (Foucault 77). Instead, cataloging the genealogy is the process of understanding the relationship of the genre, those it impacts, and the power imbued in that dynamic (46). As a result, tracing the genealogy of the genre of reality television is not a mere description of the characteristics of reality TV, but a simultaneous discussion of the past it evokes, the resonance it has with viewers, and significance

the parts have to the whole. For the purposes of this chapter, understanding the genre of reality television is not just a definition and a linear history, but it is an attempt to understand the genealogy and power of the reality television genre by exploring the different parts (such as host, contestants, and space) in relation to how they impact the viewers of the show.

While carrying the layer of genealogical nuance forward, it is still a worthwhile endeavour to establish a baseline of what is known along with commonly associated facts of the genre. Reality television is broadly defined as a category of entertainment programming that features participants who are unpaid actors as the subjects of non-fiction. Described as the “feral genre” (Hill 215) of television, reality TV skyrocketed to popularity in the early 2000s when major television networks in the United States were scrambling to find alternate programming to pricey scripted hour-long dramas for their busy time slots later in the week (Deery 16). As a result, many networks began to fund a new genre of TV called “reality television” where the premise of shows was to capture real people in real situations. Soon thereafter, competition-based shows such as *American Idol*, *Survivor*, *The Apprentice*, and *Fear Factor* ruled prime time for several years (Kavka 2). Among other genres of reality television, such as lifestyle programming found on The Learning Channel (TLC) or Entertainment Channel (E!), competition-based television drew in millions of viewers to test the skills of real people casted on shows and evaluate how contestants managed conflict when pitted against one another with a cash prize on the line (3). The popularity of this style of reality television provided the architecture for many subcategories of competition shows to arise. Thus, reality TV has manifested as a variety of different kinds of shows that vary greatly in demonstrated subjects, defining sets of rules, and settings over the past two decades.

Many reality competition shows tend to follow a similar blueprint over the course of a season: there is typically a cast, weekly challenges, a host, various judges, and a notable set

(Deery 66). The producers of a show cast a group of people, typically anywhere from twelve to twenty individuals. The cast is designed to feature non-actors that appear as ordinary people who are skilled in the area of the show and compete weekly towards a grand prize. Each week, contestants engage in a challenge to showcase their talents, and typically they are ranked from best to worst with the weakest competitor being eliminated. To facilitate the competition for contestants while filming, along with narrating the events of the show, the producers will hire a host that has relevant experience or is moderately well-known to the public. There is also a panel of “esteemed” judges who evaluate the skills of each contestant based on the challenge presented. When it comes to elimination, the judge’s opinions could be the deciding factor that sends a contestant home, or it could incorporate the viewer’s votes. Many shows are filmed in a setting that provides a distinctive aesthetic for viewers at home to easily identify the program at a glance when channel surfing. All of these elements combined define the genre of reality TV, but help to create a unique world governed by the rules of the competition – its own reality.

Reality television is often mistaken as being synonymous with non-fiction because the focus of the episode supposedly surrounds the reactions of real people in unscripted situations. June Deery’s pithy comment explains that “reality shows are to real life what Pringles are to the potato” (54). Tapping at an audience’s need for authenticity, reality television straddles the border between structure and spontaneity. Deconstructing the elements of a reality TV show demonstrates the need “to recognize the dramaturgical and commercial motives of the broadcaster or producer” (27). Reality TV does more than show real people’s reactions; it is a highly curated format that relies heavily on storytelling conventions to entice viewers. By structuring both how the show is filmed and then edited, the end product of a reality television season is just as fabricated as fiction sold under the authenticity of non-fiction (Kavka 6). There are defining characteristics of reality television that balance the need to feature real people while

formatting the series in a way that is compelling to viewers by using fictional conventions in the editing process. The audience member's connection with the show is linked to how the genre is constructed, combined with how it informs the consequential genealogy of reality TV.

The cast, challenges, host, judges and setting are definitive features of reality television as a genre. At first glance, *RuPaul's Drag Race* slips into the category of reality television like a queen into a tailored sequin gown. The show perfectly manifests as reality TV because the exaggerated nature of the visuals, the drama, and the larger than life construction of the queens hits the right notes of the genre. However, casting a closer, more analytical gaze onto the show reveals that *RuPaul's Drag Race* puckers along the hemlines and pulls at the common threads of reality TV creating a notable subversion. Foucault's queering of genealogy is used to understand how denaturalizing the genre from normative expectations allows *RuPaul's Drag Race* to burst through the seams of reality television. My analysis of *Drag Race* focuses on how the definitive features of reality television stated above are executed and perceived by avid fans while also undermining the heteronormative aspects of "reality." Throughout the remainder of the chapter, I explore the queered genealogy of *RuPaul's Drag Race* through my interviews with different demographics of fans alongside an analysis of episodic structure from recent seasons of the series. This genealogy may not be wholly inclusive to the breadth of different aspects of reality TV demonstrated in *RuPaul's Drag Race*, but it focuses in on the most pertinent elements researched by reality television experts (Andrejevic, Deery, Hill, Kafka) and identified by interview participants. As a result, studying the characteristics of the reality TV genre will account for the various ways in which *Drag Race* appeals to mainstream culture sensibilities by adhering to what is known and familiar to mass audiences while also partaking in a queer genealogy.

*Reality Convention: Casting in Drag Race*

The producers of RuPaul's *Drag Race* have taken traditional elements of the structured competition show and tweaked them to suit the show's tone and appearance. This is the first reality television program to prominently feature gay men<sup>10</sup> who perform their own drag personas to demonstrate their strengths as both likeable personalities and performance artists. Over the seasons of the American series, *Drag Race* casts anywhere from twelve to sixteen contestants from all over the continental United States.<sup>11</sup> The potential queens go through a casting process that requires a showcase of their aesthetic, the characters they can impersonate, and their personality out of drag (RDRcasting.com). Although each drag queen is unique, some of the broad subgenres of drag performers cast on the show include: comedy/campy queens, fashion queens, pageant queens, avante garde club kids, and female celebrity impersonators. This survey of performers from various regions of the United States gives the semblance of a representative sample of the different kinds of drag from the nation. The vast cultural differences between different regions in the United States is reflected in the kind of drag performed there. In New York City, many of the queens are known for their comedy and nightclub routines, in the South, queens are known for partaking in pageants, and in Las Vegas, queens specialize in female celebrity impersonation. Casting queens from a variety of styles and regions exposes the audience to many kinds of drag in any given season. While the focus of this research is on the United States version of *Drag Race*, this same casting process has been applied to the spin-offs where there are queens shown on each season are from a multitude of drag scenes and cities within the designated geographical area.

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<sup>10</sup> *Drag Race* reflects RuPaul's understanding of drag— a cisgender gay-identified man performing in a high femme "Glamazon" drag persona. As a subculture, drag is much more than this singular version that has been produced by the show and a prominent critique of *Drag Race* is the show's reluctance to give a platform to other kinds of drag.

<sup>11</sup> At the time of writing, no Alaskan or Hawaiian queens have appeared

What sets *Drag Race* apart from different competition shows is its consistent casting of primarily gay men among other queer-identified contestants.<sup>12</sup> Unlike other reality TV series, *Drag Race* is rooted solely in the casting and representation of primarily gay men and, on rare occasion, other LGBTQ+ performers. As an inherently queer artform, *Drag Race* highlights the subcultural performances of drag and showcases them on an internationally reaching medium. This brings attention and oftentimes a moderate level of fame for many drag performers who are cast on the show. *Drag Race* is a unique reality TV show because it displays the contestants in two different states: the drag queen persona who performs at night and, often but not always, the gay man who leads a normal life during the day. This creates a new space for LGBTQ+ representation in the genre of reality television. Prior to the rise in popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, mainstream reality competition shows would often only cast one tokenized queer person or the contestant's queer identity would come secondary to the skills they bring to the competition. Centering a show around the customs and practices of drag queens celebrates drag culture and sets a new standard for casting while still appealing to a wide range of audience members.

The casting process is complicated by the limitations on who *Drag Race* is willing to cast and the narrow view of what drag is. Thus far, *Drag Race* only casts drag queens, and values forms of high femininity as performed by primarily gay men. There have been instances of trans women on the show, and one trans man has been cast on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, but they are still expected to perform an exaggerated form of femininity. Outside of drag queens, additional forms of drag such as drag kings, hyper queens,<sup>13</sup> and androgynous genderfuck artists are overlooked

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<sup>12</sup> While gay men could consider themselves to be queer, not all queer people define themselves as cisgender or label their sexuality as strictly same-sex attraction. This opens up the understanding that drag performers come from a wonderful menagerie of identities and expressions of queerness.

<sup>13</sup> Hyper queens are drag artists who are assigned female at birth and identify as women/femmes who perform accentuated femininity in drag

by this casting process in exchange for carving out a specific kind of performance celebrated by *Drag Race*. The queer nature of the cast may not be perfect, but it begins the queering process of the show. A duality is captured through casting by showing the drag queen caricature in contrast to the real person underneath the layers of makeup and costuming. While *Drag Race* is not inclusive in what kind of drag performers are welcomed during the casting process, it still fundamentally orients the art of queer-identified performers. This is foundational to how *RuPaul's Drag Race* queers the reality TV genre.

For instance, while each contestant is vying for the grand prize of “America’s Next Drag Superstar,” there is also an additional prize bestowed at the end of each season: Miss Congeniality. From seasons 1-10, prior to the finale’s taping, viewers vote on which queen they think is deserving of the title Miss Congeniality – a queen who has been kind, caring and supportive throughout the season. The goal is to reward a queen who is likeable and embodies the spirit of queer kinship. The show channels Black/Latinx House and Ball Culture where supporting community growth and found family dynamics are rooted, and *Drag Race* embraces this past by offering this award (Ferrante 153-6). In addition to rewarding the skills of contestants as drag performers and sources of entertainment for viewers at home, in recent seasons, *RuPaul's Drag Race* also encourages camaraderie between queens. By replicating aspects of subcultural drag practices and creating a participatory popular culture, there is an emotional stake in who is cast on *Drag Race* and what they represent more so than on other reality television programs.

While interviewing fans of *Drag Race*, I asked participants what season or drag queens they liked the most. I initially intended this question to prime interviewees to elaborate more on perceptions later in the interview by getting them to first discuss basic information about *Drag Race* itself. I hoped this would be an entry point for viewers to share their fandom with me, but

this question would usually anchor the interview. Of the nineteen participants I spoke with, there was rarely a queen that was repeated as a favourite among those interviewed, although many of the queens named as favourites were recipients of Miss Congeniality in their respective seasons. There was never a definitive answer of one contestant being on the show as the best, and the favourite cast or specific queen varied depending on the participant.<sup>14</sup>

Many interviewees would list the queen that they felt most connected to through their art or shared personal story, or even if they thought the contestant best met their own personal criteria of what makes a strong drag queen. One young, lesbian-identified woman stated, “I love Katya<sup>15</sup> [she] is like my favorite drag queen of all time.” Throughout the rest of her interview, she would refer back to Katya as her ideal drag queen because she was funny, emotionally vulnerable, and voted to be Miss Congeniality of her season. A gay-male identified participant named over twenty different queens that were his favourite from the show explaining, “I don’t know what about it... something about these queens, it hit home and I wanted to be their friends. I wanted to be them.” These queer participants were drawn to drag queens because of the sense of kinship they felt. The experience of watching the show allowed viewers to feel endeared to the cast members who served as reminders of themselves and queer collectivity.

In comparison, another demographic of participants, who identified as straight women in their forties, would connect to contestants like “Kim Chi, obviously, because she’s very unique and different, like one of the things that I learned about drag queens when I started watching the

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<sup>14</sup> There were many varying reasons for this: it could be related to the season they started watching, the marketing skills of the queens outside of the show, queens with strong Instagram presences, et cetera. The subtext I found was that, for the most part, participants would cling to one or two queens who reflected what they desired in drag acts.

<sup>15</sup> Katya Zamolochikova finished in fifth place on season 7, was voted Miss Congeniality that year, and a fan favourite on *All Stars 2*. Many fans gravitated towards Katya because she would resentfully participate in the reality TV conventions of doing talking head segments, and on the season was open about her previous struggles with addiction and substance use (addiction is common in many nightlife scenes and is often not discussed, making those moments with Katya impactful to audiences because it seemed authentic).

show was that there are different kinds of drag queens... She was more of a quiet, subdued, beauty fashionista kind of thing almost like a doll.” Another woman explained that the plus-sized drag queen “Ginger Minj is my favorite. I love Ginger, man, and if she can [walk down the runway], then I can do it. Why am I insecure and hiding and putting on a huge shirt to cover up my body.” For straight-identified women, watching *Drag Race* does not resonate because of the representation of queerness, but because they find drag queens can teach them more about the world of femininity or about being confident in themselves. Thus, audience members found a way to personalize their experience of their favourite drag queens on the show beyond the typecasting tendencies of *Drag Race* producers. There is a distinct relationship forged by the reality television genre that connects the contestants and viewers of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.

As with most reality TV shows, the producers rely on the queen’s interpersonal dynamic as a source of tension and as an emotional entry point for the audience members. While many shows cast contestants based on their skill sets, personalities, or the unique role they round out in a cast, there is rarely a consideration for the affective relationship viewers might have with the cast. Beyond the individual level of success *Drag Race* gives to many performers, the cast also creates visibility for queer people. The show provides a platform for their own stories that may become a beacon of hope for queer viewers or a novel experience for the mainstream audience members. Regardless of their positionality, audience members grow attached to the contestants on *Drag Race*, and viewers want to see how the queens engage with the show’s unique challenges. *Drag Race* queers conventions of reality television casting, albeit limited to mostly gay men, and the show creates representation in the reality TV genre.

#### *Reality Convention: Challenges in Drag Race*

Challenges are a means of testing the competitor’s specific skills to determine who will be the strongest in an area and who will win the structured competition. June Deery, reality

television scholar, explains that many contestants “have to negotiate a competitive and aspiration space conceived as a market” in the realm of reality television (30). In order to address the competitive aspects of reality TV, specific skills are selected that are valued in drag performers outside of the realm of television in the market of clubs and theatres where drag takes place.<sup>16</sup> These skills are tested through a series of themed challenges by placing the contestants under difficult circumstances, and then situationally ranking them according to the parameters of the show. The challenges fabricate stakes in the series to motivate the contestants to perform as well as they can while also mimicking similar conditions they might face in their real field outside of the realm of the show. For example, every season the queens are expected to create a look for the Ball challenge out of conventional materials, and in season 13’s Bag Ball, the contestants made looks out of materials from different kinds of bags (“The Bag Ball”). Harkening to how many drag queens make their own looks out of whatever materials they have on hand, this challenge tests queens on their ability to be innovative and create drag similar to what is expected or what occurs for many performers in the subcultural world.

While the analogy of the market fuels consumeristic and materialistic intentions that are latent in many forms of television, reality TV is unique in the use of the conditions of capitalism to facilitate the illusion of reality. *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, for example, has been able to take the drag subculture, often from marginalized or underground spaces, and commodify it for a wide variety of audience members to stream from the comfort of their own homes. When reality competition television programs place contestants in structured challenges to test their skills against other contestants, many of these structures emulate or mimic “real world” situations. This gives the contestant’s actions and reactions the semblance of authenticity or realness for

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<sup>16</sup> Capitalistic and neoliberal intent is analogous in the majority of media productions. These themes are alluded to throughout this thesis, however, it does not fit within the goals, scope, for the focus of this particular project

audience members. *RuPaul's Drag Race* simulates free market capitalism, or open market competition. The queens must compete against one another to prove to the host, panel of judges, producers, and viewers that they are the best performer and they alone deserve to win.

Addressing the challenges, *Drag Race* features three competitive events in each episode: the mini-challenge, the maxi-challenge, and the runway. The mini-challenge is introduced in the first act of the show and can include having queens get into embarrassingly rushed “quick drag,” partake in a guessing game, impressing RuPaul in a dance-off, or humorous improv while in character, and the mini-challenge winner receives some form of advantage or smaller prize. Each season there are primary mini-challenges beloved by fans, such as “Everybody Loves Puppets,”<sup>17</sup> or “Reading is Fundamental.”<sup>18</sup> The purpose of the mini-challenge is to allow the competitors to have fun and express the less serious aspects of drag without it impacting the overall competition. These are spaces for queens to engage with shade<sup>19</sup> and develop their relationships with one another. While not greatly impacting the competition, the mini-challenges are still significant because they usually give some form of advantage for queens in the maxi-challenge, although those advantages rarely translate into an episode win for the queen.

Afterwards, the main challenge is introduced where the majority of the episode (approximately twenty minutes) focuses on how the queens face the trials set before them. The maxi-challenge taps into the market expectations of a successful drag queen by asking them to demonstrate their talents in tangible, skill-based tasks (in addition to the immaterial affective labour expected of queens to be entertaining, humorous, perceptive, supportive or bitchy).

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<sup>17</sup> Everybody Loves Puppets: queens dress up their competitor’s puppets and imitate them in a satirical puppet show

<sup>18</sup> Reading is Fundamental: queens adorn wacky glasses and read their competitors in the vein of drag tradition

<sup>19</sup> Shade and reading are a fundamental aspect of drag communities where drag performers would try to make fun of one another for their looks or clothing. As explained by Ball performers in Jennie Livingston’s documentary, *Paris is Burning*, many community members throw shade and read each other as a defense mechanism against the possible harm that many cishetero could cause through their words and violence (Livingston)

Throughout the duration of *Drag Race* seasons, certain challenges have become staples for testing queens while entertaining the audience. The preliminary maxi-challenges in the beginning of most seasons includes: group lip-sync challenge (in later seasons this has morphed in a “Rusical”), a dance challenge, a ball challenge (which used to be in the back-half of the season but was more recently placed earlier to show more looks), and a themed sewing challenge. Later in any given season, the contestants will be asked to partake in a makeover challenge, a product marketing challenge, and a music video challenge.

Beyond the explicit episodic challenges in *Drag Race*, contestants are evaluated on their makeup, costuming, and strut while partaking in a themed runway walk.<sup>20</sup> The queens are critiqued for their performances in the maxi-challenge in the episode, and there is an added layer of how the queens perform on the runway that contributes to their standing in the competition. The runway is not explicitly stated as a challenge, but the queens are expected to have their own interpretation of the weekly theme to prove that they can create a uniquely fashionable aesthetic. Many interview participants claimed the runway segment was their favourite part of the episode because viewers get to clearly see creative perspectives on the theme, while also relishing in the visual elements of a drag performance. While many reality television shows focus on testing their contestants, *Drag Race* is unique in that it evaluates the contestant both in the episode’s challenge and the visual performance because drag is grounded in the visual spectacle. Another more conventional experience associated with a drag performance is the lip sync that takes place between the two queens who were placed in the bottom of the main challenge and the least entertaining drag queen in the lip sync is eliminated from the competition. This is another example where a common practice among drag artists, a lip sync performance, has been

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<sup>20</sup> Season 13 Runway Categories include: “Lamé you Stay,” “We’re Here, We’re Sheer, Get Used To It,” “Trains for Days,” “Little Black Dress,” “Yellow, Gorgeous,” “Fascinating Fascinators,” and, “Drag Excellence.”

transposed into the reality television competition convention to assess the value of a drag queen in the context of the show.

During my interviews, participants were keen to share their personal scoreboards, what kind of challenges they patiently await, and what makes *Drag Race* sparkle for them. One participant stated, “I like the routine between seasons,” and these challenges are how they judge what makes a drag queen successful or a strong competitor. Another participant even went as far as describing her own evaluation system of the “hard and soft wins.” In seasons where the crowned winner of the year won the most challenges, the participant would consider it a “hard win.” However, if the winner of a season did not win the most challenges, a “soft win” would be when “you see the allure of the win in the context of the show but you don’t see them perform or the performance skills in the challenges.” For this participant, “the ball challenge will be one of my favourite episodes regardless. More is more, three looks of a queen in succession is a good way to show what their aesthetic is.” Viewers greatly enjoy the Balls (which are conducted in the style of *Paris is Burning* and Harlem Latinx ball culture<sup>21</sup>) because they are an opportunity to spend time with the season’s contestants and watch them showcase their aesthetics and personality through three interconnected looks. Throughout the interviews, most participants did not take note of the acting challenges or Rusicals because they found that these episodes served more to establish who the contestants are and what they are capable of. One participant, someone who works in the arts, said, “I don’t like the acting challenges and I have a problem when RuPaul just tells queens to be funny. Someone gets nervous and forgets their lines. I don’t think that’s a drag queen skill.” While interview participants adore the Balls and the chance to watch

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<sup>21</sup> A fictionalized version of this culture is shown on Ryan Murphy’s television series *Pose*, and the new reality TV show *Legendary*, in addition to being studied by academics such as Marlon Bailey, A. A. Ferrante, and bell hooks among a multiplicity of others.

queens interpret the challenge in their own approach to drag, they felt disenchanting from the acting challenges. These challenges became a departure from the skills associated with drag and forced viewers to engage with cultural expectations of entertainment. The ability to market oneself, create a recognizable style of makeup, or even perform under pressure in a music video are all applicable skills that reach beyond the confines of the reality television taping, but are not traditionally associated with drag culture. *Drag Race* uses the convention of challenges to evaluate the overall skills of the contestants while also adapting the genre of reality TV to showcase drag-based skills.

Arguably the most important challenge for queens is the “Snatch Game,” a maxi-challenge that evaluates many of the properties of an impressive performer, according to the producers of *Drag Race*. First appearing in season 2, the remaining queens in the competition must partake in a parody of the popular 1970s game show, *Match Game*,<sup>22</sup> RuPaul, appearing out of drag, acts as the host while two celebrity guests appear as the “contestants” who answer fill-in-the-blank style questions while trying to match with the panel of celebrities. In Snatch Game, however, the goal is not to match but to answer the question in the most entertaining or humorous manner. Snatch Game is a linchpin for *Drag Race* because it tests most of the skills expected of drag queens to find success as entertainers. The queens in the game will embody celebrities or figures from popular culture through their dress, mannerism, speech, and makeup while answering raunchy fill-in-the-blank questions while in character. In earlier seasons of *Drag Race*, queens have won this competition by impersonating the likes of Britney Spears, Carol Channing, Cher, Little Edie Beale, Maggie Smith, Little Richard, Adele, Uzo Aduba, and

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<sup>22</sup> This is a pun involving Match Game. However, Snatch Game could be interpreted as an extension of misogyny and/or trans-misogyny where having a vagina is worth parodying in a phallogocentric culture. *RuPaul's Drag Race* has been implicated in this kind of misogyny before with removal of the phrase “you’ve got she-mail” from the beginning of episodes (Molloy).

Liza Minelli. Successful queens in this challenge appear in likeness of their chosen celebrity and breathe life into a specific characterization through humour and integrating facts while playing the game. Queens must be able to depart from their own drag style and use their performance skills to make RuPaul and the viewers laugh. Through their appearance, idiosyncrasies, wit, sense of humour and ability to entertain under pressure, queens are given the opportunity to demonstrate their range of talents in a single challenge.

Snatch Game deeply resonated with my interview participants. Consistently, participants would discuss Snatch Game as a pivotal aspect of *Drag Race* and an essential part of every season they look forward to watching. One participant explained it well claiming that for her “it’s what I most look forward to because every season at least one or two really stand out like snatch game performances, it always feels too like a critical part of the story arc. Whether somebody is good at Snatch Game or not seems to be a big predictor of how they’re gonna place in the competition as a whole.” Another participant echoed this statement explaining that “sometimes it’s really surprising who does well in that competition because some of the queens that you feel like are very funny or over the top kind of personalities, they don’t always do well in that competition even though you feel like they should and then some of the quieter ones actually come out of their shell and do really well.” Each interviewee acknowledged the importance of Snatch Game as a make or break challenge for each of the queens. While it may not have been everyone’s favourite, it embodies the expectations that a successful drag queen is a funny female impersonator. These gendered implications will be explored in the next chapter, but there is a mutual understanding among participants that *Drag Race* will test their participants in many different challenges. However, the episode that specifically isolates the contestants’ ability to impersonate a well-known celebrity (oftentimes a woman) and make an audience laugh is of utmost importance. As a result, *Drag Race* includes familiar challenges that can be seen

across reality shows such as expecting the queens to sew, dance, sing, act, and market products. The importance of Snatch Game, however, firmly secures *Drag Race* in a new subsection of the reality television genre by testing the contestant's ability to impersonate a celebrity.

There are a multiplicity of challenges drag queens face in *RuPaul's Drag Race*. At first glance, it appears that *Drag Race* conforms to the standard practice of creating skill-based challenges to evaluate and rank drag queens in order to determine who continues in the competition and who must "sashay away."<sup>23</sup> The mini-challenges facilitate jovial connections between the contestants and the viewer at home while paying homage to some of drag's history. In comparison, the maxi-challenges derive from a set of carefully curated skills that tap into specific demands and expectations of the drag queen as a performer and a celebrity on the rise. These are standard reality television practices that facilitate the translation of market skills within an episode to what is found in the "real world"<sup>24</sup> outside of the show. These skills are recognizable to the audience while still being unique to the context of drag queens. However, what differentiates *Drag Race* from the wealth of other competition-based reality television shows is the inherently queer elements of drag culture that have infiltrated the show's structure. Challenges in the show are not exclusive to the games, advertisements, or campy movie trailers the queens perform in, instead there are multiple facets of competition woven throughout the structure of episodes in an attempt to encapsulate the spread of competencies a successful drag queen must possess. This range of abilities that the format of *Drag Race* allows for contestants to display gives the viewer insight into many aspects of drag culture. This allows viewers to develop their own criteria for evaluation of what makes a strong drag queen while also offering a variety of alluring challenges to enjoy. *Drag Race* exists on the edge of queering challenges in

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<sup>23</sup>When queens are eliminated from the show, RuPaul tells the queen to "sashay away."

<sup>24</sup> As real as performances of exaggerated gender fantasy can be.

the genre of reality television as a whole while simultaneously creating a matrix of cultural norms and expectations for drag performers that pervades the medium of reality television.

*Reality Convention: Host and Judges in Drag Race*

In conventional reality television, the host can play various roles from narrating the episode's events for the audience, to serving as the face of the show, or even mentoring the contestants during their run on the show. On the whole, the host has a designated role in the process of creating and marketing the television show for targeted/general audiences. The host can be a selling point for the television show and assign a recognizable feature for the program. However, the primary function of a host is to connect the audience members to the contestants, describe the challenges, and support the flow of events throughout the episode to make it enjoyable and easy to follow. Beyond this purpose, hosts are also used to market the show and become the face of the brand. Like Ryan Seacrest is to *American Idol*, or Jeff Probst is to *Survivor*, these hosts are synonymous with the series they are attached to and act as a vessel for the audience's viewing experience by narrating events and influencing the pace of the show's segments. Additionally, some hosts are considered to be experts in the subject matter of the show and act as a mentor to the contestants. Tyra Banks in *America's Next Top Model* or Tim Gunn on *Project Runway* are examples of how the host of the show represents the manifestation of success that the contestants long to achieve while also mentoring them to build a similar career. Contributing to the aforementioned illusion of equality within competitive capitalist conditions, the host serves as a symbol of financial and career-based success in these examples. *RuPaul's Drag Race* is not easily categorized as either a show where the host is a marketable face or an expert; therefore RuPaul's image, renown in the field of drag, and pseudo-motherhood to all the contestants becomes the crux of the entire program. Formulating the show after the image and career of the host, *RuPaul's Drag Race* queers the role of a host by showing RuPaul himself in

and out of drag and going beyond the scope of a host to facilitate the facsimile of a guide and a mentor to the contestants while they grapple with challenges designed to imitate RuPaul's career.

As the titular figure, RuPaul is the host of *Drag Race*. Although he has been performing different kinds of drag for the past forty years, RuPaul rose to popularity as the first spokesperson for MAC Cosmetics in 1994 with his "Supermodel of the World" drag persona (Klein 113). Gaining notoriety in the mainstream world throughout the 1990s, RuPaul became the face of drag through his MAC advertisements, music videos, and appearances in blockbuster films such as *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Love Julie Newmar*. RuPaul then transformed this fame into a lucrative career pitching a reality television show that tests the skills of drag queens across America. As a host, RuPaul began as a familiar entity to some viewers and used this platform to once again become relevant in popular culture (Mercer, Sarson and Hakim 383). Many of the interview participants revered RuPaul as the ultimate drag queen and elevated him far beyond the role of a host. One participant went as far as calling herself "a junkie for *RuPaul's Drag Race*," and to say "RuPaul is literally my idol, I love Ru so much." Contestants are humbled and honoured to follow the directives RuPaul gives for his protégés to "call-me-mother" in her song entitled the same. "Ru" is a parental figure playing a motherly role<sup>25</sup> giving the contestants (and by extension the viewer) confidence to be successful. Throughout the series, RuPaul has become more than just a host with a tailored suit and kilowatt smile, he serves as a narrator for the audience, a mentor to the contestants, and a living example of the pinnacle of drag success that the many other queens aspire towards. RuPaul not only fulfills the expectations

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<sup>25</sup> The role RuPaul assumes is a part of a lineage of Black motherhood and House Mothers in the ballroom scene. His version of motherhood is a watered down version played towards cameras, but is still emblematic of this significant part of drag culture (Heller 142)

of the host of a reality television program, but becomes a pillar of grace, strength, and the queen of his own drag kingdom.

RuPaul appears in various roles throughout the duration of an episode. More than just a narrator for the audience, RuPaul gives cues to the viewers on when to expect for contestants to be in and out of drag throughout the episode/show's formatting. Unlike any other reality television series, RuPaul appears as himself wearing an eccentrically patterned and meticulously tailored suit while introducing the challenges to the contestants and providing mentorship during the challenges. Meanwhile, later in the episode when it is time to evaluate the contestant's performance throughout the episode, RuPaul appears in her drag persona. Being shown both in and out of drag establishes a clear boundary between the contestant outside of drag and the drag queen they have created – a dynamic introduced by RuPaul and replicated among contestants. During the interview process, many participants identified the duality in RuPaul's appearance and the understanding that he is the representation of success both onstage as a drag queen and offstage as a strategist. As well, participants use RuPaul's appearance in drag as a standard to compare other queens in order to understand what successful drag looks like. As a result, RuPaul as the host of the show uses his appearance in and out of drag to do more than show his range as a performer, but also to give visual clues to the audience about the pacing of the show and to model what strong drag looks like.

As well, RuPaul uses his role as a host to mentor the contestants throughout the series. While using the trajectory of his career to develop a new path to stardom for a gay man performing in feminine drag, RuPaul reinforces that he is a living example of how celebrity, fame, and fortune can be made from drag. He makes an effort to listen to the queen's issues in order to offer guidance and help them possibly achieve a similar level of fame and ultimately sell the dream of a life that mirrors the culture of celebrity. An example of this is when contestants

call RuPaul “Mother.” A clear allusion to ball culture where an established performer teaches new performers, known as his “children” or “drag daughters” how to hone their craft and be successful at the balls where they would display their skills such as sewing, styling, walking, dancing in categories. RuPaul is the blueprint for a successful drag queen and his eponymous show gives him a stage to reinforce himself as the face of drag while also providing guidance to up and coming drag talent. RuPaul is mimicking the dynamic of a house mother with the contestants, which is unlike any relationship a reality television host has with the individuals competing on a show, and thus, inherently queers the role of a host in a competition-based reality television show.

In addition to RuPaul, there is a panel of judges, including rotating permanent judges, and celebrity guest judges. The judges assess the queens’ individual performances in the challenges and their various runway presentations to determine who the “tops” and “bottoms”<sup>26</sup> are for the week, who will win, and who will have to “lip sync for their life.” The members of the permanent judging panel have shifted throughout the series, but from season 7 onwards there is a “hard truths” judge played by Michelle Visage, a “fashion expert” judge played by Carson Kressly, and a “comedy and culture” judge played by Ross Matthews. The featured guest judge spot rotates each week for the producers to hire a new celebrity for advertising allure and ratings purposes, not to actually impact the competition’s results. Many well-known LGBTQ+ supporters such as Lady Gaga, Christina Aguilera, Nicki Minaj, and Lizzo have been featured on the show to entice audience members from the queer community and straight viewers to tune in to see their favourite celebrities. Meanwhile, the criteria for the permanent judges requires them to be experts in their fields of work outside of the show and fans of drag. The prime role of the

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<sup>26</sup> The language of “top” and “bottom” is heavily queer coded. Alluding to sexual positions, this language speaks directly to queer audiences and heteronormative audience members might not understand the layers to the joke.

panel of judges is to provide feedback on how each queen is performing in the week's challenge and progressing in the overall competition. Many interview participants express distaste for the judges, explaining that their opinions are cruel and not reflective of their own thoughts on the queens they support in the season.

However, other interview participants explain that queens "getting read on the runway" is their favourite part of the episode and they look forward to the critiques as a form of entertainment. The inconsistency in viewer thoughts on the judging process connects with how many viewers respond differently to the competitive elements of the show. Typically those who dislike the judges and criticism also dislike the competition, whereas those who like it also relish in the drama of queens being pitted against each other. As a whole, the judging process on this show is to evaluate the performances of the cast, to communicate with the audience members how queens are performing, and to reinforce the competitive elements of the genre. Thus, RuPaul's status as the host and primary judge queers the expectations of reality television. The role of the judging panel is to primarily give the audience an idea of what good drag is while also tapping into elements of mainstream and recognizable queer culture to pique the interest of viewers and secure *Drag Race*'s status as a queer-coded show.

#### *Reality Convention: Setting in Drag Race*

Most reality competition shows are filmed on a large sound stage to suit the needs of the show being filmed. For example, talent competitions like *The Voice* and *Dancing With the Stars* have large stages with screens, a judging panel, and a large seated audience. Lifestyle competition shows such as *Big Brother* and *The Bachelor/ette* have house-based settings that are customizable to the circumstances on that week of the show. The setting in a reality television show functions by establishing a unique aesthetic that serves the demands of the competition throughout the season. *RuPaul's Drag Race* queers this notion of setting in the genre of reality

television by latently leaning into queer aesthetics and then subversively using the setting to allow viewers at home to connect with the adapting set beyond the need of competition.

Reality TV must have a distinctive style to catch the channel surfer's attention and create a sense of continuity between different workdays or even seasons of the show. As a result, *RuPaul's Drag Race* uses a unique aesthetic with clearly defined stages that the show is filmed on.<sup>27</sup> Across the seasons, the drag queens typically occupy an onstage, backstage, and offstage area. The Mainstage or onstage is where the runway walks, judgements, and lip syncs occur. The contestants only appear in drag in this area. The Werkroom is the backstage where the queens often prepare themselves for competitions by getting into drag, rehearsing, sewing, or writing. The Werkroom is where the majority of social interactions between the queens takes place, and the audience in this area would see contestants both in and out of drag. Finally, the third major performance area is the offstage or Confessionals, where talking head versions of contestant's out of their drag selves talk about the social dynamics between queens, performances for that week, and discuss their costuming. In the onstage, backstage, and offstage versions shown to the audience, the television show's producers are carefully crafting and editing together versions of an autobiography. This includes the onstage drag queen persona, the offstage individual underneath the makeup and fashion, and these are both negotiated in the backstage between the drag queens and how their subjectivities interact. These great efforts to create layered identities through performance areas are designed as a mechanism of reality television to tease out the individual narratives of the contestants, to fabricate tensions, and to form an overall cohesive reality. For audience members who watch the show, the editing between different performance areas and use of voiceover narration develops the impression that events and emotions

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<sup>27</sup> The colour palette for *Drag Race* is easily identified by its fluorescent pink and neon purple tones

experienced in competition are real instead of being understood as a representation of reality that has gone through processing with added musical scores to heighten what is depicted on screen.

*RuPaul's Drag Race* is a manufactured reality television show that relies on its unscripted nature and access to the liminal backstage area to develop a sense of reality for the gaze of the viewer. On the Mainstage, the queens tap into all the elements of performance to depict a certain identity to the judges and the greater audiences watching on their television screens. For example, during the runway segments where the queens all have to wear outfits according to the theme of the week, the drag queens will walk down the runway using appearance, mannerisms, and the setting to perform a specific message for the audience; this message could be one of confidence, promiscuity, or even whimsy. In the Werkroom and the Confessionals, the performer appears out of drag and getting into drag. Finally, the Untucked lounge<sup>28</sup> gives the viewer insight to the backstage area, where the audience gets the chance to see the drag queens interact in an unscripted format when they are just relaxing and conversing with their fellow contestants. Viewers are given visual access to the traditionally hidden backstage areas to watch interpersonal drama between the queens unfold as they get into drag. In three different interviews, the participants I spoke to all talked about the Werkroom as their favourite set because it is the place where the queens seem the most real. Participants on the whole were most interested in seeing and hearing from contestants out of drag. Seeing drag was a given for the show, but behind that novelty was the audience's desire to witness gay culture and communication that is typically not accessible to everyone. Behind the curtain, audience members hear the queen's "innermost" thoughts while being interviewed in talking head

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<sup>28</sup> *Drag Race* also has a "backstage" show called *RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked* where queens are shown sitting backstage and talking about the competition. Analyzing *Untucked* does not fit within the scope of this project but provides an avenue for future research.

segments while also seeing the connections forged between queens as they recount their hardships and triumphs. Consequently, reality television is providing a platform for viewers at home to experience a version of queer culture that is not typically found in mainstream media. Queering the overall visible set and establishing a separation of social spaces by design allows for unique interpersonal and emotional ties between the contestants and the people watching at home to develop.

### **Conclusion**

The categories of casting, challenges, host, judges, and setting all play significant roles to firmly situate *RuPaul's Drag Race* in the genre of competition reality television shows. Beyond the mere adherence to conventions of the form, *Drag Race* actively challenges and queers the boundaries of reality television. Framed by Foucault's theory of genealogy, *Drag Race* plays with the familiar aspects of reality television competitions to deliver viewer expectations while simultaneously using the medium to integrate elements of queer and/or drag culture otherwise absent in mainstream media. The intrinsic goal of *Drag Race* is to give drag queens a platform to showcase the amplitude of their talents through reality TV. The episodic challenges and competitive elements of the show are a claim to the realism of the capitalistic influence in entertainment industries, recreating these elements in a way that is amusing to viewers at home. Additionally, the role of RuPaul explains the process to viewers at home, represents the pinnacle of drag success, and he encourages the queens to hone their craft in his image. The evaluation of the competition and use of judges on *Drag Race* focuses on the translation of drag culture to the mainstream. Finally, the setting of *Drag Race* embraces a uniquely queer aesthetic that celebrates camp, and the layered use of spaces encourages unconventional glimpses into the interiority of drag performers to show audiences what lies underneath the glitter and glamour. By tracing the genre genealogy of reality television in *RuPaul's Drag Race*, I have demonstrated

that the medium of reality television accounts for creating visibility for members of the LGBTQ+ community, and tells the stories of many queer people in an accessible format with diverse forms of representation on television. What initially began for me as just watching a reality TV show to escape the pressures of everyday life, *RuPaul's Drag Race* eventually gave me access to a queer community and the ability to celebrate the queen's achievements and share their hardships.

Through an initially typical format, *Drag Race* outstretched a hand of comfort and hope through familiar conventions that were then bent and made unique to queer the genre of reality television.

## Chapter 2: “What You Know:” Staging Gender and Sexuality in *Drag Race*

A few years after watching all the available seasons of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* over and over again, I built up the courage to attend a live drag show. As an avid fan of the show, I wanted to witness my favourite queens perform and see if they were just as electric in person as they were on television. The tickets went on sale for Voss Events’ Werq the World tour and seats in Toronto’s Danforth Music Hall were selling quickly. I bought three tickets on the balcony. It was certainly a lot more affordable for me as a student, but the main reason for sitting so far from the stage was the ability to sit a comfortable distance and watch other people enjoying themselves at the show while feeling anonymous in a very public venue. As a still very closeted person at the time, I longed for a sense of queer community without being ready to directly identify myself.

In the midsummer of 2017, after a lengthy drive, a lack of parking, and a long wait in line, we finally entered Danforth Music Hall. My fellow audience members varied from people in drag, to young white women wearing jean jackets and crop tops, to young men holding hands with their boyfriends. The packed foyer buzzed with anticipation. As we all slowly shuffled through the bottlenecked crowd, I had my turn to approach the black tablecloth merchandise tables and quickly tell the associate which of the various t-shirts and pins I wanted.

“Do you have any XXL in the Werq the World Shirts?”<sup>29</sup>

“No. Biggest size we have for all shirts is medium.”

“Oh, I’ll take the tour fan, then.”

“Forty bucks.”

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<sup>29</sup> Fatphobia is common in queer communities and being able to access merchandise in my size has been exceedingly difficult. Why won’t these neoliberal and capitalist systems let me buy their monetization of celebrity queers? Because my body is undesirable to them? Oh.

I handed over my two twenty dollar bills and took the cellophane-wrapped, rectangular bundle placed in front of me. The herd of fans trickled into the auditorium, and my posse and I climbed the stairs to our seats on the balcony. We sat down in our velvet seats, and waited for the show to begin as the audience members chatted among themselves, their collective voices swirling around us. I took the stowed away fan out of my bag, unsheathed it from its protective packaging, and THWOORP'd it for the first time. This emphatic motion was achieved by holding one of the stakes and flicking my wrist to display the full wingspan of the colourful fan.

Looking at it, this fan was by all means cheap. It had 13 wooden one inch slats with polyester haphazardly glued to each long, black painted tendril. It was affixed at one end by a screw, with the black paint already starting to scratch off. On one side, the block letters for DRAGQUEENFAN.COM were redacted by a black sharpie. This forty dollar fan was shitty. But still it means everything to me. To most people, the twelve characteristic faces that occupy the fan could be interpreted as either grotesque or picturesque – but to fans of drag, these faces become a shared symbolism of community. A commonality that cuts across identity barriers.

As the house lights dimmed, the crowd hushed and then roared. I held the fan in my lap and looked at the stage with my mouth agape, full of wonder and awe. I thought my heart was going to burst out of sheer excitement. Throughout the show, the MC<sup>30</sup> would ask fans to THWOORP, wave their fans, and take part in the show. Despite my distance from the stage, I was a part of the queer community and the drag community for the first time. As something I had watched from afar for years, I was suddenly closer, encompassed with people who either felt or thought the same way. Even if the only thing we had in common was an affinity for drag, I had found my people. Much to my mother's chagrin, I have since gotten a tattoo of a fan to

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<sup>30</sup> Bianca Del Rio to those it matters to... and she was the most raunchy, nasty, and hilarious host I've ever seen.

commemorate this moment and my love of drag. Years of watching the cast of *RuPaul's Drag Race* clothe themselves with self-love and confidence in who they are encouraged me to be confident in my queer identity and seek out community for the first time. Among other *Drag Race* fans, I felt like I was welcome to be myself. Symbolized by this moment of interacting with drag with our THWOORP'd fans in hand, both near and far from the stage, over a thousand people showed that they found joy in expression of queerness. Regardless of how everyone in the audience identified that night, we had found each other, and together as fans we celebrated drag.

In popular culture, drag queens have been treated as representatives of the LGBTQ+ community. Casting practices on *RuPaul's Drag Race* have typically favoured contestants who are gay cis-men performing distinctly feminine drag. *Drag Race* is unique because of the dual role that the contestants have both performing as their drag persona and acting as their "true" self in the backstage area and confessionals. For live drag shows, such as the *Werq the World* tour I attended and drag found in local bars, the backstage area does not generally allow the audience to experience both the drag persona and the performer alike. Instead, the audience only sees the gender fantasy performed on stage. However, showing both the onstage and offstage personalities of the drag queens on *RuPaul's Drag Race* creates a kind of duality that reinforces that in the context of the show, there is a cisgender male identity underneath the boisterously feminine drag. *RuPaul's Drag Race* is a catalyst for incorporating drag into mainstream media and the success of the show indicates there is a significant challenge to how today's society understands and represents diverse expressions of gender. *Drag Race* is more than just competing drag queens, it is a cultural artefact that implicitly references queer people's experiences with gender, sexuality, and social acceptance. Drag queens are emblematic of the

queer experience and studying how *RuPaul's Drag Race* represents the entanglement of gender and sexuality in identity has a direct impact on how queerness is culturally understood.

In this chapter, I explore how identity is constructed on *Drag Race* through onstage and offstage areas to give the audience insight into the contestant's "subversive" life experiences as drag queens and gay men. Interviews from fans of *Drag Race* elaborate on the significance that representation of BIPOC and trans performers has on viewers at home and how identity is understood. Superficially, *Drag Race* seems to be a show about performing femininity and the social constructedness of gender, but the lasting impressions of the show assert it as a platform for gay men to share their thoughts and identities with a mainstream audience.

### **Construction of Identity in *RuPaul's Drag Race***

Despite contributing to drag's growing ubiquity in mainstream culture, RuPaul himself insists in a *Vanity Fair* article that "a superficial aspect of drag is mainstream [...] But true drag really will never be mainstream. Because true drag has to do with seeing that this world is an illusion, and that everything that you say you are and everything it says that you are on your driver's license, it's all an illusion" (Lawson 80). In this quotation, RuPaul explains that drag reorients the perspective of the viewer to reveal that gender, and much of identity politics, is a societal construct that is used to reinforce power hierarchies. By demonstrating how these social categories are "an illusion," drag embodies the spirit of poststructuralist feminist theory. *RuPaul's Drag Race* expands on this concept to use drag's deliberate performance of gender to structure how identity is formed and communicated to viewers.

The representation and expression of gender exists at the forefront of many drag performances. Undermining normative conceptions of the gender binary between feminine and masculine, gender was previously seen as a determinant of biological sex. As Simone de

Beauvoir explains, “One is not born, but rather made a woman” (Beauvoir 330). As a bedrock feminist foundation, Beauvoir’s quotation recognizes gender as a social category and how gender is culturally reproduced to afford power to patriarchal structures. Linda Alcoff goes further to define how poststructural thinkers continue to deconstruct the “concept of a subject having an essential identity and an authentic core that is repressed by society” (Alcoff 415). In the past few decades, theorists have been challenging hegemonic beliefs that assert a person’s gender identity is rooted in their biological sex, and should be reflected in their gender expression.

Poststructuralist thinkers argue that people’s identities are “over-determined by a social discourse and/or cultural practice” (Alcoff 416) and that these biologically essentialist constructions of identity are just societal facades designed to reduce individuals to mere subjects of greater power. Identity theorists try to reconcile the divide between cisheteronormative gender constructions and the poststructural conceptions of identity being a social practice.

### *Performativity and Performance*

There is a delineation to be made between performativity and performance. Usually associated with performance and drag, Judith Butler’s theory of performativity is often misapplied to the study of gender in *Drag Race*. Performativity refers to the ways that an individual or one’s personal identity is made up of a constellation of experiences and social influences that have been consciously and subconsciously internalized (Butler 91). This constellation of experiences then impacts how a person develops their sense of self and engages with the greater world. Drawing connections to gender, Butler contends that “the view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body” but that “internality is a false metaphor” (Butler xvi). Typically, actions and appearances

tend to project a certain message about the individual's internality, intention, or identity. Butler uses drag as a metaphorical example of the very performative nature of gender to exaggerate the gender being a repetitive, public fantasy (186). Butler's gender performativity can be summarized by a RuPaul song lyric: "We're all born naked and the rest is drag" (Charles and Browne 0:52-0:56). However, when *Drag Race* makes a clear division regarding who the drag queen is on and off stage, identities are less performative and more of deliberate performance.

Similar to Butler, Erving Goffman, a social anthropologist, understands identity formation and expression taking place in a social setting, but his concept of performance contrasts with performativity. Goffman elaborates stating "a performance is 'socialized,' molded, and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented" (Goffman 34-5). For Goffman, there are social expectations that performers are obliged to meet, but there is a "true self" that is negotiated through various performance layers including: setting, appearance, and mannerisms (22-4). Goffman's theory also uses a metaphor of the *onstage*, the *backstage*, and the *offstage* to show how people perform their identities. The onstage is the place where the person is explicitly performing a version of themselves for their audience members (22). In the backstage, the performer is still playing a role that is apparently closer to their "true identity" and "the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course" (113). The backstage is characterized by the inability of the audience to see the performer. However, the performer is still maintaining a level of identity performance for other people occupying the backstage area as well. In comparison, in the offstage "the performer can relax; he [sic] can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character" (113). The offstage region allows the performer to return to what Goffman speculates is their "true self." Throughout his theory, Goffman uses these spaces as a way to

explain how identity is relational, and there is a “core self” that is performed to different degrees depending on the setting.<sup>31</sup> As I discuss below, these three regions or dimensions of Goffman’s setting theory are a useful framework for analyzing how “reality” television programs present performers. While Butler’s performativity is the naturalized, or seemingly innate gendered actions of people dictated by social ritual, Goffman’s performance is the precise actions of an individual used to communicate ideas or identity to others.

### *Onstage, Offstage and Backstage Performances*

In *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, Goffman’s metaphor of the onstage, backstage, and offstage spaces are made literal so that it is easier for audience members to see the difference between the performativity of the contestant’s male identity and the exaggerated gendered performance of their feminine drag persona. The editing of the runway, confessionals, and Werkroom spaces on *Drag Race* makes it easy for viewers to follow the contestants and their performances. Instead of being a metaphor for how a person expresses their identity in social spaces, the physical spaces are designed for viewers to understand the different layers of a drag performance. These stages are crafted to reinforce the performativity of identity and the performance of gender expression. Contestants may have their own fluid relationship to their identity, but the construction of drag is shown to be a deliberate performance regardless of the extension of self it may embody.

The runway is the main site of the contestant’s onstage performances where they are clearly performing in drag for the sake of the competition and the audiences watching at home. As a competitive space, queens are expected to walk the runway stage in a fashion that tells a story to the judges. The queens are evaluated in the challenge from that week, and they are

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<sup>31</sup> I am doubtful of a “true” or “core” self existing, but there is an evident tension between performativity influencing performance and how the performative nature of identity creation and sharing brings a claim of authenticity and realness to the performance.

expected to “lip sync for their LIVES” to keep their place in the competition. The lip sync is at once an expression of self through the body, and a manufactured performance by embodying someone else’s words. In this clear place of performance, the queens use costuming, mannerism, speech, and the setting to their advantage to showcase their drag persona. For example, during the runway segment in each episode the queens in a voiceover clip will narrate their thoughts for the fantasy they are trying to convince viewers of when they strut to the tune of RuPaul’s song, “Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve, and Talent.” As the lyrics of this song explain, “Trust in the virtues / The rhythm within you / Let your body tell the truth” (Charles 0:17-0:30).<sup>32</sup> The separation between the contestant out of drag and the drag queen occurs when the contestant uses language of “fantasy” and “realness” to reinforce that their drag is a deliberate performance that taps at feminine performativity. As the song suggests, there is still a claim to the authenticity and truth of performativity in the drag performance. An instance of this is in season 12, episode 4 where the queens were asked to walk down the runway in their best “Ball Ball” realness. During voiceovers, the queens described their looks to share with viewers the aesthetic they were trying to capture. For example, in the “Balls to the Wall Eleganza” runway, Jaida Essence Hall describes her bathtime-inspired look as “giving me this rich bitch fantasy, dipped in beautiful, sudsy, foamy bubble bath and I just feel the fantasy sweeping over me” (40:00-41:20). The pearly white bubbles cover and contrast the rich colour of skin, creating a moment of iridescent innocence for both drag queen and viewers to dip into together. The “realness” of the drag performance is an allusion to the performativity of this wealthy femininity laden in the

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<sup>32</sup> Somewhat ironically, at the beginning of most seasons, he explains that the judges are looking for the queen that has the most “Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve, and Talent.” This is a nod to the audience because the acronym of these characteristics is “C.U.N.T.” RuPaul is inadvertently asking the contestants who has the skills necessary to perform “cunt” or be the most “womanly”

imagination and experience of a luxurious bubble bath. This realness is tapping at a cultural narrative of a self-indulgent and sensual femininity through the contestant's drag persona.<sup>33</sup>



*Jaida Essence Hall in season 12, ep 4 “Balls to the Wall Eleganza,” 40:00-41:20*

The onstage setting of the runway becomes a clear place where RuPaul and the contestants alike are determined to perform, and the core sense of self under the layers of makeup and girdles remains undisturbed. On this level of the show, the queens are evaluated for their worth in the challenge and their aesthetic contributions, and their gender presentation is tied to their standing in the competition. During the penultimate episode of the past several seasons, RuPaul has held up photographs of the contestants when they were small children and asks them to share what advice they would tell their child self. Many queens tearfully recall moments of hardships, but explain that they will find themselves and become the drag queen standing on stage. In season 13, episode, RuPaul asks the contestant “Symone, what advice do you have for your three-year-old self?” She responds while sobbing to say, “Reggie, you’re going to grow up

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<sup>33</sup> Jaida Essence Hall goes as far as to describe her style of drag as “exuding feminine energy. I don’t consider myself as much of a drag queen but more of a female impersonator” (“You Don’t Know Me” 8:10-8:20).

and you're going to believe all the things that people say about you – that there's something wrong with you, that you can't be Black and gay, and that you can't be feminine and successful, and you're going to hate yourself. Please don't make the mistake I did. Love yourself" ("Gettin' Lucky" 51:00-51:45). These moments demonstrate that drag is a means for the queer contestants to find themselves and express their femininity and relationship with race. Gender performance is the main focus as a means for creative expression for the "core self" that is under the drag.

As examined in the previous chapter, the contestants are their "true selves," or as the queens colloquially call it, their "boy" selves in the talking head segments throughout the episodes. This is where contestants are asked to dress in masculine clothing (as selected by producers), and answer the questions of an unseen producer to provide narration and commentary on the episode's event. An example of this is when contestant Monique Hart speaks directly to the camera and addresses the camera as "America" throughout the confessionals to seem as if she is talking directly to the viewers at home ("PharmaRusical" 20:32). Throughout my interview process, participants identified these narrations and others as a way to get a clear sense of who the contestant was as a person outside of the drama of the television show. One participant explains, "I really like seeing [the contestants] just more raw and being who they really are so that part I enjoy a lot." They found these moments to be vulnerable touchstones with the contestants by giving them the ability to see how the person was doing beyond the edifice they perform to the judges or their fellow contestants.

By imitating a confessional of the contestants, these offstage talking head segments are woven throughout the episodes to seamlessly allow contestants to narrate the episode's events and share their thoughts and feelings about what is happening.<sup>34</sup> In season 11, Nina West talks

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<sup>34</sup> Arguably these confessionals reenact aspects of Foucault's *The History Of Sexuality: Volume One* on becoming "a singularly confessing society" (Foucault 59) to find and share a notion of the "true" self.

about her experiences with homophobia when she received threats of violence in college, “I can remember thinking... that I was in trouble [...] This was during the time of Matthew Shepard” (“Trump: The Rusical” 26:32- 26:56). West takes this opportunity to talk about how violence against queer people still persists and shares a message of hope that the world will change so others will never feel the same way she did. Although many queens are emotionally open in different areas of the show, because the contestant is temporarily removed from the circumstances of the competition, they seem to be speaking directly to the camera creating a level of intimacy with viewers. Here, the talking heads mimic Goffman’s offstage area where the contestant is not blatantly performing for anyone and they are divulging what *appears to be* a “true self” through their thoughts and feelings. Despite this claim to authenticity, one interview participant identified that they take these confessionals as a great opportunity to check in with the queen in the competition, but that they take these comments “with a grain of salt” knowing that there are many elements of producing, editing, and control that go into manufacturing the image of the contestant. Another participant echoed this sentiment by explaining that producers can frame identity and “make choices about what they’re showing and what they’re not showing. I always think about this with those heartfelt moments and like flashbacks to childhood [and] how they’re prompting people to talk about those things.” Although this is Goffman’s version of the “core self” in how identity is constructed, my interview participants saw this as a chance to get to know who the “real” person is underneath the drag with complex emotions and thoughts, but recognizing that the person is still on a highly manipulated television show. The offstage area is used to establish that beyond the drag queen persona there is a gay man that has a distinctly separate gender expression from the previously explored onstage persona.

Next, the “Werkroom” is the manifestation of Goffman’s backstage where the contestants are shown getting in and out of drag and they typically take these moments to relate to their fellow contestants and share stories and experiences. The Werkroom serves as the intermediate space for interpersonal connections and personal depth to be shared among the contestants and viewers at home. During interviews, participants claimed that the discussions between queens while they were getting in drag were their favourite parts of the show. The stories the queens share would pluck at the heartstrings of viewers as the queens pluck their eyebrows and apply makeup while sharing how they understand the experiences of coming out, discrimination they feel as gay men, and gay culture. One interview is a parent and watches *Drag Race* with their child explaining, “My favourite parts are definitely in the Werkroom and those like heartfelt stories and things like that that they tell each other and because I think that that’s really helpful for my kiddo to understand.” The viewers get to witness the “behind the scenes” community between drag queens to understand their experiences and choices to support each other despite being competitors on the show. Framing the Werkroom as the backstage area allows viewers to see the relationships between drag queens that is usually inaccessible to audience members. The backstage forms empathy and insight by facilitating an opportunity for audience members to listen to what it is like to be a gay man/drag queen in America. As a result, the Werkroom allows audience members to be a part of the backstage relationships that occur between drag queens and see the humanity of the contestants in their interpersonal relationships as they share moments of weakness to recover a feeling of strength when sharing their stories.

What was initially Goffman’s metaphor for how people negotiate their identities in public has been made literal in *RuPaul’s Drag Race* during pivotal moments when the contestants reveal themselves to viewers of the show. For starters, there is a clear difference made between

the onstage drag queen persona and the contestants outside of their performances. Partly this is to make it easy for viewers to identify the contestant in and out of drag, but this is also to show that the innermost gender identity of the contestant (presumably the offstage persona) is unencumbered by indulging in diverse gender expressions. Suffice to say, this is intended to alleviate gender panic and show that the performance of femininity does not result in identifying with femininity. Initially, the different stages are used to make it easier for the audience members to tell the difference between the contestants in and out of drag, yet they ultimately facilitate a connection between the subjects of the show and the viewers at home. As explored in the previous chapter, one of the main goals of the genre of reality television is a claim to legitimacy by showing the viewers real people going through high stakes challenges. The various Goffman-esque stages are utilized to meet the requirement of authenticity to peel back the layers of performance through the onstage persona, offstage confessionals, and interpersonal relationships. More than a pageant of the many facets to a performer's identity, *Drag Race* uses these carefully constructed layers to give a platform for LGBTQ+ artists for new audiences who may have never experienced drag or gay culture before. In sum, while there may be a misconception that personalities shown on reality television are not necessarily performative, *Drag Race* uses the performance of identity onstage, offstage, and backstage to develop a nuanced depiction of queer gender and sexuality.

### **Gender, Sexuality, and the Viewers at Home**

The relationship between gender and sexuality are like two ends of an ouroboros; the more I try to differentiate them, the more they seem to engulf one another. As identity categories, gender and sexuality are interlocked in a matrix of attraction and adherence (or lack thereof) to gender roles. Drag is a symbol of the LGBTQ+ community because it playfully defies the

gendered expectations of cishetero relationships and desires. Like a lightning rod for rebellion against hegemonic identities, drag as a source of entertainment carves out a space for LGBTQ+ people to gather with kindred spirits and relish in the uncommon commonalities they share. Driving a wedge between the thematic analysis of gender and sexuality denies the interconnected relationship between the two. Analyzing stages on *RuPaul's Drag Race* and listening to audience impressions shows that gender and sexuality facets are treated as mutually exclusive identity categories. Differences between gender identity and gender expressions are established through these Goffman stages, resulting in *Drag Race* centering the stories of gay men and their experiences with sexuality. According to the ethos of the show, under the outward performance of feminine drag, all the contestants are gay men and these are their stories. For the show, drag queens are not “gender” pioneers, but gay men exploring sexuality and performing femininity. For straight-identified viewers of the show, they saw the contestants as gay men who have struggled, are sharing their story of coming out, and challenging gender roles/expressions but not gender identity/binaries.

### *Gender as Expressions and Performance*

The more I study gender through coding of masculinity and femininity in cultural productions, the more evident it becomes that the way a person experiences gender is akin to a feeling. It is something that brings individuals and communities sorrow, anxiety, contentment and joy. Gender is the traces of feelings one gets from interacting with the world. The way one dresses or behaves and the way that makes one feel is gender. After social interactions, one gets a firmer sense of their own identity and what makes them feel secure and excited or even fragile and small.<sup>35</sup> Many of my interview participants saw gender as what was being evaluated in the

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<sup>35</sup> In *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach*, Kessler and McKenna use “gender attribution” (145) to describe the distress caused by gender ambiguity because of the need to categorize as either a man or woman.

context of the show, and none of my participants claimed that their perspective on gender or femininity and masculinity was challenged by *Drag Race*. One participant, a gay man in his seventies, explains that:

I have friends that are effeminate but in drag it's just a persona. Right now a lot of drag queens come out and they really overdo the hip swing, they overdo the walk, as long as it is just for effect on the show. If they walked out on the street and walked like that and acted like that. I wouldn't associate with them, right? But if they were just, naturally effeminate or whatever, it doesn't bother me because I mean, I'm not exactly the butchest thing on the face of the earth.

For this participant, he sees effeminacy as not inherent to sexuality and discusses his complicated relationship to not using gender to define his sexuality and vice versa. Instead, this participant sees drag as femininity and does not wish for it to be seen as a naturalized aspect of his gay identity. Another participant, a white heterosexual woman in her forties, stated:

I've read criticism of drag that women are the butt of the joke in some ways of drag and that like these [are] highly sort of emphasized and stereotyped. That's the criticism that I've read but that doesn't track with my actual experience watching the show, and it's refreshing or rewarding to see men celebrating femininity because outside of drag men reject anything feminine and see it as insulting or lesser [...] being compared to a woman, is seen as an insult to men. I heard those messages my whole life. I feel uplifted that there are men that exist that actually embrace and celebrate the feminine.

In this instance, men embracing femininity seemed like feminist action, and returning to cishetero understandings of gender without actually disrupting norms or embracing difference.

In Western society, political, economic, racial, and religious institutions among many others reinforce presumed biological differences between men and women (Laqueur 229-43) through gender roles and the expectations of masculinity and femininity. All of these institutions stand to gain from reinforcing cis-hetero gender roles and relationships. As a result, gender has been alienated from its affective roots in sensation and/or emotion and made complicated

through the series of systems that not only communicate but uphold normative standards of gender. Drag's strength is the ability to distill all of the frustrations and oppressive expectations associated with masculinity and femininity and explore them through staged performances. There are entire fields of study dedicated to analyzing performances on stage, in film, on television and in literature to understand how sex and gender are culturally constructed and individually experienced. In *Female Masculinity*, Jack Halberstam explains that "gender performances within public spaces produce radically reconfigured notions of proper gender and map new genders onto a utopian vision of radically different bodies and sexualities (Halberstam 41). More than entertainment, drag on *RuPaul's Drag Race* functions as part of a longstanding tradition where performance is a medium that withstands pushing the boundaries of how gender is experienced and presented.

Underpinning this discussion is the femininization of the gay male identity. Raewyn Connell's *Masculinities* explains that gay men are not seen as "real men" because "hegemonic masculinity forbids the receptive pleasures of the anus" and "anal sexuality is a focus of disgust, and receptive anal sex is a mark of femininization" (Connell 219). Using gender to convey sexuality, gay men are coded as passive, effeminate, and subordinate to hegemony. Grappling with the homophobia associated with an effeminate masculinity, gay men perform in femme drag to have an outlet where it is acceptable to present the mannerisms, dress, and speech limited by masculinity. Research done prior to the rise in popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race* in drag communities across the United States finds that many drag queens turn to performing drag as a way of embracing femininity instead of repressing it (Belgrave and Berkowitz 178; Egner and Maloney 881; Horowitz 304; Schacht and Underwood 2-4; Taylor, Rupp and Shapiro 289).

These studies discuss how drag gives gay men a platform to express this femininity, feel celebrated for their performances, and find community.

These findings are replicated on *Drag Race* where the drag queen's successful presentation of femininity is at the forefront of the performances, challenges, and judge's evaluations. In an interview with *Vogue* magazine, RuPaul states that "our job as drag queens has always been to remind you that this outfit you're wearing, or this label you put on yourself, is just a label. Drag queens are the shamans or the witch doctors or even the court jesters – to remind you what is really real" (Aguirre 184). This mantra is made apparent when drag is contained to a creative outlet on the show. As demonstrated through drag queen personas being an "onstage" and carefully crafted performance, the exploration of gender through drag is shown not to make a significant impact on the person's identity and understanding of gender as more than entertainment. Many queens talk about drag saving their lives because it gives them a chance to express themselves and find community, but very rarely does that branch out to how gender is experienced and understood.

Drag can be used as a way to explore femininity, but translating the performance of drag through *Drag Race*'s stages often reinforce homonormativity. In his interview with *Vanity Fair*, RuPaul explained his desire to make drag palatable, "I'm going to take some of the sexual subversiveness out of it and make myself like a Disney caricature, so that Betty and Joe Beer Can won't feel threatened by the sexual aspects of drag. They won't be threatened by the fact that I'm actually mocking identity. That was the scientific combination that I used to break through to the mainstream" (Lawson 82). RuPaul reveals that he tempers the implicit sexuality associated with being gay to appeal to heteronormative audience members, but being gay is explored through the femininity of drag. This results in a contradiction between *Drag Race*

reducing drag to a performance to feature the performative voices of gay men while trying to distance sexuality from gay identities.

The show's understanding of gender is reinforced by RuPaul's concept of a "court jester" that jeers at labels instead of taking a meaningful stance on gender as a social institution that is subjected to other facets of identity. Subjecting gendered expressions and deliberate performances to critique and evaluation, drag is untangled from the subversive knot of queerness. Gender is broken down to a performance on the onstage, liminal dressing and undressing in the backstage, and seemingly natural performance offstage. In these reality television settings, gender is sanitized primarily for the sake of capitalist competition and entertainment; a far cry from drag's potential for cultural subversiveness in exchange for palatable identities the audiences can understand.

### *Race on Drag Race*

There is an undeniable need for BIPOC to be represented within mainstream media in meaningful ways. The lives and experiences of POCs need to take centre stage rather than mere calls for representation to be "accommodated" via side characters and tokenism. Gender and sexuality do not exist in a vacuum – race and class disproportionately influence queer people, and this struggle should be reflected in *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Much of the challenges and structuring of *Drag Race* can be attributed to Black trans drag queens competing in ballroom culture.<sup>36</sup> Despite being strongly rooted in this ball culture, my interviews demonstrate that *RuPaul's Drag Race* has great appeal for white straight cis-women. Similar to bell hooks' critique of *Paris is Burning*, she contends that mainstreamed drag illustrates "black people (in this case black gay brothers, some of whom were drag queens) worship at the throne of

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<sup>36</sup> There are many references to ball culture as it is shown in *Paris is Burning*, such as *Drag Race's* ball challenge, the reading mini-challenge, and the ritual of doing a runway each episode.

whiteness” (hooks 281). *Drag Race* gives a platform for black queer performers to showcase their art for a wide audience, but there is a power dynamic that asks how Black and queer drag queens are represented on the show and if whiteness is addressed from both the viewers and the producers of the show.

Visual representations of non-normative bodies often cater to the gaze of mainstream audiences, but these representations can instead be crafted for queer people to create their own queer narratives. The introduction of *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* explains that the visual is often a trap for trans narratives, where representation on film or in other forms of media does not engage with lived experiences of trans people and focuses only on how the politics of identity are policed on screen (Gosset, Stanley, Burton xvi-xvii). Instead, visual culture can be used as a “trap door” where these narratives do not have to meet the expectations of audiences, but are specifically designed to subvert the viewer’s preconceived notions of gendered and racialized embodiment (xxii-xxiv). In the interview, “Cautious Living: Black Trans Women and the Politics of Documentation” from *Trap Door*, Cece McDonald says “that if there were more trans, queer, and GNC people of color having agency in mainstream spaces, then our narrative definitely could change” (Gosset, Stanley and Burton 36). Stories about trans, queer, gender non-conforming, and people of colour should not be designed to just appease the gaze of the viewer because, as McDonald articulates, “They’re not for them to consume in such a way that makes them feel better about themselves. Our narratives should make them get their shit together” (37). Media is an important tool that can be used to subvert the gaze and manipulate the direction of its power. When queer and people of colour challenge how the media represents their identities, it is then possible to confront the gaze and usurp its power over how bodies are represented.

Throughout this chapter, I have been teasing out the differences between the intertwined identity aspects of gender and sexuality. This is a logical fallacy. Gender and sexuality are overlapping and experientially inseparable, much like racialized sexuality. Instead, *Drag Race* suggests that gender and sexuality are very different elements of identity by how they are relayed through the different onstage, offstage, and backstage areas of the show; and race is reduced to an oblique talking point between contestants while they are getting ready. Different from sexuality, which is used to differentiate the drag queen from the contestant, race is treated as an afterthought and the onus is on the contestant to discuss their experiences with discrimination. For example, season 13 was filmed during the summer of 2020, so many of the queens of colour used their appearance on *Drag Race* to talk about the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests that occurred worldwide (“The Bag Ball” 23:52-27:20). While crying in the confessional, LaLa Ri explained that “you can just be a Black person in this world and just get killed for nothing” (25:50-26:06). Many of the queens were moved to tears discussing their own encounters with systemic racism and the resulting violence against Black lives in America. As well, season 8 winner, Bob the Drag Queen, is very political and mentioned during his tenure that he was arrested in drag during a protest (“Shady Politics” 17:15-17:45). In these instances, the queens are taking it upon themselves to talk about their thoughts and stances, and use their platforms to raise awareness about the violence that people of colour endure. It is raised several times throughout the series that there are many challenges associated with being Black, gay, and a drag queen in the United States, and the likelihood of Black trans women being murdered (“The Bag Ball” 26:40). As well, social commentators often rejoice when they notice that any given season of *Drag Race* features a “diverse” cast with more than half of the contestants being People of Colour (Randall). However, is it enough for the queens to talk about

race and for the show to have symbolic diversity? Whose responsibility is it to decry racism: contestants who are being used for entertainment, or the greater structures around them manipulating circumstances to meet the gaze of millions of viewers? At what point should a show like *Drag Race* address the intersectional nature of identity by speaking directly to evident racism that disproportionately impacts their performers?

When I set out to conduct interviews for this project, I purposefully designed loose requirements for participation to cast the widest net possible to see who was watching *Drag Race*. All participants had to be eighteen years of age or older, and self-proclaimed fans of the show. After I interviewed all nineteen of my participants, I noticed that each of them wrote on their demographic sheet that they are white. I see this whiteness to be both a problem, and an avenue for change. As a problem, if white people are the only ones to have their voices heard in relation to cultural productions, would networks and show producers be more inclined to pander towards white spectators more than they already do? In contrast, knowing that white privilege is staring at the television screen night after night, how can this platform be used to genuinely address experiences of racism without falling into the traps of empty tokenism and performative activism?

I purposefully asked each participant for their thoughts on how race is depicted on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and there were a plethora of different responses. For the most part, many of the participants had never considered the impact race and racism has on *Drag Race* before. I was met with many initially uncomfortable, "I don't know," and, "I'm not sure" responses. There were no two similar follow-up points from the participants. One participant thought that the producers of the show should be doing more to advocate against racism and support their queens. In contrast, another participant thought that the producers should segregate *Drag Race* and have

an “all Black queen season” and an all white season. One interviewee thinks the show needs to be more overtly political to keep up with the fight against oppression, and a different interviewee thinks politics does not belong on reality TV and they would prefer if race was not discussed. For every impassioned, progressive take on how race is handled on *Drag Race*, it was met with equal and opposite apathy. The sheer range of responses demonstrates that *Drag Race*’s current mode of addressing race as a back-burner aspect of identity rolls the punches of showing identity to be more than just sexuality. When these important protests against systematic oppression are left to organically emerge through conversations the queens are having backstage, the viewers see this as optional. They can “chalk” (Bhanji) these racially charged experiences as something far from themselves where they are not implored to do anything other than sympathizing and saying “that must have been hard.” This is not enough. The majority of the white viewers of *Drag Race* I interviewed were colourblind and failed to notice, let alone understand, the interconnectedness of race, gender, and sexuality for a queer person of colour and the oppression they can experience.

*RuPaul’s Drag Race* does a wonderful job of casting Black, Asian, Latinx queens from all over America and gives these people of colour a platform for their art. In fact, seasons 11, 12, and 13 winners were all fierce, opinionated, and strong Black queens. Yet, this representation is limited in how it reaches audience members. Our cultural spheres demand more of our media. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* may just be a reality television show, but the way the show fashions and represents identity gives it an explicit advantage in showing audiences the impacts of discrimination. Gender, sexuality, and race exist in relation to one another, and *Drag Race*’s sole focus on sexuality does a disservice to the intersectional nature of identity. In order to adequately respond to the problems highlighted by activists, *Drag Race* needs to continue to push how race

is shown to reach viewers at home, and with an effort to implore the audience, viewers need to answer the call to radically reform systematic racialized oppression.

### *Trans Performers and Gender Identity*

Beyond just the drag performances, *Drag Race* also has a vexed relationship with gender identity. Trans women and men are pioneers of both drag culture and LGBTQ+ representation in mainstream culture (Ellison 1-2). At the time of writing this thesis, there has only been one openly trans identified drag queen cast on *Drag Race*. Many trans women have competed on the show but oftentimes their trans identity was either concealed during the season,<sup>37</sup> they transitioned after their appearance on the show,<sup>38</sup> or the disclosure of their trans identities became a dramatic focal point in an episode.<sup>39</sup> Gottmik, a finalist of season 13, is the first openly trans cast member on a regular season<sup>40</sup> of *Drag Race*, and the first transgender man to compete in the show. There have been several contestants who engage with their audiences after the show and come out as non-binary or genderqueer after filming,<sup>41</sup> or even Gigi Goode who was working through their gender identity while on the show. However, in these instances the show does not take a stance in supporting all kinds of drag performers, instead their identities are expected to conform to layering of identity to disassociate gender performances from gender identity. By piecemealing identity into neat boxes of sexuality and gender, *RuPaul's Drag Race* leaves little room for venturing outside of strict categories of identity. Drag can be more than a reductive performance on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, it is also an avenue to self discovery and a mode

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<sup>37</sup> Kylie Sonique Love (season 2)

<sup>38</sup> Carmen Carrera (season 3), Kenya Michaels (season 4), Jiggly Caliente (season 4), Gia Gunn (season 6), Laganja Estranja (season 6)

<sup>39</sup> Monica Beverly Hillz (season 5), Peppermint (season 9)

<sup>40</sup> On All Stars 5, Gia Gunn was the first openly trans drag queen to be casted on the show. This is a different situation from GottMik because Gunn was first cast as a gay man in season 6 and became a fan favourite. She then appeared on All Stars because of her popularity from the regular series.

<sup>41</sup> Aja, Sasha Velour, Shea Coulee (season 9) are just some examples.

of expression for trans and gender non-conforming to explore gender in relationship with sexuality and race.

While RuPaul has not made a public statement against casting transgender performers, the existing practices make it clear that there is a preference for cisgender gay men who perform as feminine drag queens to be given a platform for their art. When conducting interviews, there were three main narratives that emerged among participants. First, some participants have the complete opposite view: they completely support RuPaul and see drag as a performance or an elaborate act; therefore identity politics should not factor into a reality television show. *Drag Race* should be a televised competition open to transgender contestants.<sup>42 43</sup> The demographic of this group was generally over forty years old, straight cis-women and gay cis-men that believe drag has little to do with gender identity and see it as merely a symbol of “gay culture.” When asked if there is room for trans drag performers on *Drag Race*, one participant thinks:

I don't know how fair it is when [trans contestants] are transitioning into a female because they already have an advantage [...] but on the other hand I like inclusivity and representing everyone. I was thinking that it wouldn't be a bad idea if they brought in, let's say straight men who want to dress up as drag queens, but then I was wondering, but then it would just open the door to women saying that they want to be on the show or everyone. So I mean, I kind of understand why they want to limit to just gay men, but I don't know how this show would be if they opened it up to like all sexualities.

This interview participant's stance was shared among many of the people I spoke to, and quite different from my own views. Many of the participants were uncertain on who they want to see

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<sup>42</sup> In American culture, drag is closely tied to queerness so there have been no publicly announced instances of heterosexual, cisgender men auditioning for *RuPaul's Drag Race*. However, in Australia, the popularity of cisgender, heterosexual men performing in drag is much more common with the fame of Dame Edna. It would be interesting to see if *Drag Race: Down Under* will cast any cishet men in the future.

<sup>43</sup> As Halberstam writes in *Female Masculinity*, femininity is assumed to be an exaggerated performance whereas masculinity is understood as the naturalized base gender. This results in misogyny against female-identifying drag performers. Halberstam does not discuss hyperqueens in his work, but I believe the same misogyny is extended towards AFAB hyperqueens.

perform drag, and often perceive drag as written in the body instead of written by the body. This produces a popular culture that celebrates cis gay men performing drag and leaves audience members apprehensive and willing to label trans performers (despite being the backbone of the LGBTQ+ community and drag communities) as abject and unwelcome on their screens.

The second stance was from participants who are critical of RuPaul and the show and felt that all kinds of drag performers (drag queens, drag kings, hyper queens, and genderfuck artists) needed to be represented. The majority of participants in this category are in their early twenties, queer-identified, and are very engaged with local drag and art scenes. One participant states, “I don’t think there’s any reason why there shouldn’t be trans queens on there.” Another participant is a drag performer in Ottawa and had the following to say on trans performers and *Drag Race*:

I don’t think there’s any excuse. I just think RuPaul is, to put it nicely, a pussy ass little bitch who’s afraid of putting people on who don’t really, who don’t fit in a certain box that he has in mind. He seems to think people won’t be as receptive. I think that is just a hindrance on niches where [drag] kings and AFAB performers are. I feel like a representation would help a lot of people rethink their own biases for how they consume drag and I think more exposure to trans performers would dissolve this notion a lot of people have that they’re not as exciting.

This participant, being a part of a drag community, was frustrated by the lack of representation on *Drag Race* and saw it as the show’s obligation to feature more trans and gender non-conforming drag artists to understand that meeting the audience member’s gaze is more important than supporting often overlooked trans performers. Despite their suggestive views, they still identified as big fans of the show, but think there are many shortcomings in the kind of drag represented and the limitations it has in supporting LGBTQ+ identities.

The final group of participants were apathetic to current casting themes on *Drag Race* or they were uncertain if casting trans performers would improve or hurt the show. These middling participants were twenty to forty years old, white, cishetero women who stated repeatedly they

did not have strong opinions on the matter. A late twenties female viewer of *Drag Race* responded, “That’s really interesting because I don’t really know that much about the recruitment sort of process for these people, but you know as a casual viewer and as someone who just wants to be... and I mean, this makes me sound like a Roman emperor that’s just sitting back and being like ‘entertain me!’ I think I’m quite happy to be exposed to a broader swath of the queer community. Why not?” This same idea was repeated when another participant said, “I sometimes feel like I can’t comment on these things because I’m not involved in that community so I don’t know maybe fully of a history behind that so [...] is there an insensitivity there? I don’t know.” This group of interviewees did not dislike the existence of trans performers, but several others repeatedly stated that a television show was not the place to take a political stance. The participants did not want to change the show as it is, but they were not blatantly against the inclusion of trans or more subversive kinds of drag. While there was no clear consensus on what fans of *Drag Race* think about how the show has changed their view of gender, it is evident that younger generations demand representation of all kinds of gender identities and expressions while older generations simply look to be entertained while watching television and do not see the platform as fitting for changing hearts and minds.

Thus, audiences of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* do not see the show’s ability to push the boundaries of how gender is understood and accepted culturally. Instead, *Drag Race* is a drag-based economy where the strongest performer is valued the most and the gender identity underneath the drag is reduced to a measuring stick to test the strength of the performer based on the transformation they go through to get in drag.<sup>44</sup> For many trans artists, drag is a way to

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<sup>44</sup> In Aikenhead’s (Mar 03, 2018) *Guardian* interview, RuPaul publicly states he does not support trans women on his show. This has since been proven null by casting Gottmik in season 13, Gia Gunn in *All Stars 5*, and Sonique in *AS6* but it clearly has impacted audience perceptions of trans drag performers.

explore their feelings of gender and perform to audiences that encourage public displays of exaggerated femininity and masculinity. With a range of reactions from audience members, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is beginning to take a stance in support of trans drag artists to legitimize their art alongside cis-queens, and perhaps in the future can begin to see gender as more than a parody to create a political statement. The lack of consensus on the role of trans performers demonstrates that many of the audience members I spoke with are not clear on the role that gender as an identity category has for the contestants, and many viewers do not see drag as a means of exploring gender. As a result, capturing audience perspectives on how identity is featured on the show illustrates that *Drag Race* provides a platform primarily to cis gay men, and not necessarily for all kinds of drag performances.

#### *Prioritizing Sexuality on RuPaul's Drag Race*

Gender in *RuPaul's Drag Race* may be minimized to a mere onstage performance for an intended audience, but the platform is used to evoke a sense of empathy from audience members with perspectives about sexuality. As aforementioned, sexuality is heavily connected with notions of gender, especially when discussing same-sex relationships. Yet, in the context of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, sexuality becomes a way to differentiate between the drag queen and the gay man underneath; being gay is an unspoken permission granted to these men to defy gender norms and perform as feminine fantasies. Because drag is understood as *just* a creative outlet, the show tries to create emotional touchstones through what is “really real” – living their real lives as gay men. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues in *The Epistemology of the Closet* that “the historical search for a great paradigm shift may obscure the present conditions of sexual identity” (Sedgwick 44). As Sedgwick suggests, there is no exact moment in time where society has become more interested in queer stories or even one exact cultural production that has radically

shifted demands for diverse sexualities on screen. Much more like an ebb and flow in media representation, there is a current swell in stories about gay men finding mainstream audience with box office success for movies like *Love, Simon* and the popularity of the reboot “Queer Eye” on Netflix. More than ever, there is positive visibility for gay characters and personalities with audiences looking for queer content. Riding the wave of this interest, *Drag Race* as a show not only sells the vestige of drag, but centres around real stories about life as primarily gay men as an emotional anchor.

Almost counter-intuitive to sexuality on screen, RuPaul articulates, “I took the subversive sexuality out of my persona so Betty and Joe Beer Can could invite me into their living room.” (Lawson 86). *RuPaul’s Drag Race* attempts strikes a balance between allowing the drag queens to be genuine in their Werkroom interactions, and making queer sexuality respectable to anyone watching at home. *Drag Race* gives audiences insight into the difficulties of living against the grain of hegemonic expectations. Discussions such as coming out, homophobia, found family dynamics, and ultimately self acceptance are common themes among drag queens while getting ready in the Werkroom. In season 12, many drag queens talked about coming out to their families to varying degrees. For instance, Jackie Cox remarks about having a distant relationship with her own mother and a difficult time coming out as gay in a Iranian immigrant family (“One Queen Show” 21:54-22:30). Whereas in the same season, the young frontrunner, Gigi Goode, remarks that her mother helped her sew all of the garments she wore on the runway (“I’m That Bitch” 7:08-7:20, 18:18). This is just a snapshot of a single season of the show where the queens were all getting ready for the competition at hand and shared varying moments of their own lives with their new drag sisters. This reasserts the humanity of the contestants while giving viewers at home insight into what it is like to be a gay man, and the difficulties and victories associated.

Another important moment in the show is during season 9 when the queens talk about the Pulse Nightclub shooting on June 12, 2016, and the violence perpetrated against LGBTQ+ people along with the explicit hardships and discrimination that still exist (“Draggily Ever After” 16:46-19:54). Regardless of what season these examples are from, *Drag Race* at its core focuses first on sexuality and the gay identity. In the labyrinth of competitions and reality TV drama, the most “real” moments are when the queens have opportunity for meaningful discussion in order to find community with each other in their shared gay identities. Showing a real person grappling with a range of experiences, whether it is discrimination or pride, is grounding for the audience. Same-sex relationships are often demarcated as “other” under the social pressures of cisheteropatriarchal society. As a result, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has immense strength in the show’s ability to centre the stories of gay men to an empathetic audience and advocate for a better world.

Throughout my interviews, my participants were inconsistently opinionated and hesitant to speak on gender; however, each participant was vocal regarding how *Drag Race* has impacted their view on sexuality. There was no singular narrative of how sexuality works from my participants, but each one recognized that *Drag Race* sets a new standard for understanding gay culture. One participant summed it up in a single statement: “RuPaul walks around a room and gets people to cry. The show is a good way to hear a lot of stories and you can use that experience to inform yourself.” Another participant, a gay man, explained that *Drag Race* “allowed me to connect with people who I think may have shared or share somewhat of a similar life path as myself [...] for some people, it’s more than a show. But then my fear is that 99% of people walk away from the show and they don’t change or advocate for change.” All of the self-identified fans of *Drag Race* agreed that in many ways, the show creates awareness for what it is

like to be a gay man in American society. Through those stories they are able to learn more and understand that many of the “sexual deviant” stigmas associated with being gay are instead challenged. However, only participants who identified as LGBTQ+ advocated for change beyond performative allyship from straight fans. What *Drag Race* does is centre an understanding of sexuality and identity. The format allows people to empathize with gay men through storytelling measure in the backstage area of identity creation and dissemination while hopefully imploring viewers at home to support queer people around them.

In both an analysis of the reality TV show and the audience impressions, there is a blaring difference concerning how gender and sexuality are illustrated and interpreted. As a result, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is organized around a series of competitions testing the skills of drag queens, but it is ultimately a show about what it is like to be a gay man in contemporary society. The focus of this chapter has not been to provide an in-depth discussion of the ever-expanding spectrum of sexualities and attractions, but to demonstrate that audiences primarily associate *Drag Race* with the stories of cis gay men. As Sedgwick suggests, it is not productive to study *Drag Race* as a paradigm shift in cultural constructions of identity. Instead, it is emblematic of how sexuality is discussed on mainstream platforms and understood by audiences at home. Drag as an artform is supposed to serve as a symbol for the LGBTQ+ community, and there is a severe shortcoming if only RuPaul’s version of drag is rewarded and replicated season after season.

## **Conclusion**

Sitting in the balcony at the live “Werq the World” show, my nervous energy had quickly turned into a spark of excitement as I cheered, a singular voice connecting with many. In the dark of the hall, mesmerized by the lights and the glitter and THWOORPing my new fan, I had found a place to identify with and participate in queerness. On *Drag Race* itself, identities are

complex, sprawling, and ever-changing with how a person engages with the greater world around them. *RuPaul's Drag Race* reaches viewers by constructing identity according to gender and sexuality through Goffman-esque stages where gender is not challenged but asserted as a performance in drag while experiences of sexuality are shown to be real and an integral part of delineating between the contestants in and out of drag. Yet, sitting in the “Werq the World” audience, these queens from the show were not shown offstage and backstage, but just performing their drag. How identity is crafted and relayed to audiences is meant to meet their gaze and create awareness but not deliberately challenge the power structures that enable the show to continue to showcase drag queens. While there is no defined answer to the issues raised by *Drag Race* or results to quantify the positive representation it has created in the world, *Drag Race* speaks to audience members and compels them to see more than just the drag queen – the whole person. *Drag Race* showed me a group of queens who were willing and able to embrace every side of themselves, and taught me to do the same. Watching *Drag Race* encouraged me to engage with drag outside of the show, and I now aim to get the better seats in the house. I have gone from being the kind of person who chooses balcony tickets to instead finding a seat in the front row of my own life as I continue to brandish my fan alongside many others while I get to know myself.

### Chapter 3: “What You Feel:” Affective Audience Ties to RuPaul’s Reality

I first yearned for the sense of home found on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* when I was sitting at the back of a small plane of a now defunct discount airline<sup>45</sup> on a red eye flight to Reykjavík. It happened to be Valentine’s Day in 2019, and as a reward for hustling several jobs throughout my undergrad, this trip was supposed to be my own congratulations for nearly finishing my degree. But as the plane rattled across the endless ocean, I felt tense, sweaty, and acutely aware of turbulence, making me regret all the life choices I had made leading me to what seemed like a doomed flight. Pumped full of adrenaline, I was sitting in a cramped seat in the emergency row just waiting for the five hours to magically disappear so I could once again stand on icy but real ground and shake off my exhaustion and nervousness.

Feeling nauseous and sleep deprived, after all budget airlines save money by not offering food or beverages, my eyes wandered along the fuselage to find some sort of visual reprieve to distract me from my irritation. In the row across from me, a young woman sitting in the window seat, using her Canada Goose coat as a neck-pillow,<sup>46</sup> was watching episodes from season 6 of *Drag Race* on her phone. I was initially surprised to see RuPaul appear on that woman’s screen, but I was also struck by how the far-sighted glimpse of *Drag Race* brought me joy in a disagreeable circumstance, and how I longed to be wrapped up in the show’s cheerful glow. With its fast-paced structure, heartfelt moments, and vibrant sets, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* was the perfect antidote to my travelling malaise. Over the coming months, my life was about to take drastic and unexpected twists and turns as I faced new opportunities and the start of grad school. Much like being on an unsteady plane headed towards the solid but sure unknown, I would turn to *Drag Race* to bring me a kind of warmth and moments of joy.

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<sup>45</sup> Rest in Pieces, WOWAir.

<sup>46</sup> Most expensive airplane pillow I’ve ever seen.

While previous chapters have explored the form and content of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, my interviews revealed a recurring theme among participants. For them, the significance of *Drag Race* was oftentimes more than the reality TV entertainment value, and instead was the emotional resonance it struck with viewers. For the majority of the interviewees, the drama and competition between contestants was amusing at best, but the emotional connections remained with viewers and enticed them to return to the show season after season. Ann Cvetkovich writes that affect is a “category that encompasses affect, emotions, and feeling, and that includes impulses, desires, and feelings [...] acknowledging the somatic or sensory nature of feelings as experiences that aren't just cognitive concepts or constructions” (Cvetkovich 4). Gender and sexuality are sensate and emotional social phenomena, experienced on a cellular and psychological level. *Drag Race* taps into so many of these embodied affects and felt emotions. The resonance that *Drag Race* has with its contestants and audience members contributes significantly to understanding why this reality show is culturally and individually important. It creates a shared space that extends personal validation for performers and the audience alike while also building social relations, or queer kinship networks. Similar to my plane realization, a recurring theme that emerged throughout many of my interviews was the concept of home. Whether they were studying abroad, experiencing depression, or isolated during the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the people I interviewed shared a similar sentiment that watching *RuPaul's Drag Race* gave them a feeling of security. This affect of familiarity and home was not in the sense that watching *Drag Race* reminded them of their own lives or family dynamics, but that their understanding of comfort and family was actively expanded to embrace a queer sense of belonging beyond the limitations of normative definitions of the words.

The process of interviewing has revealed that *Drag Race* as a reality television show can value individuals beyond simply entertainment as it evokes feelings of comfort and familiarity for viewers at home. Television is a unique medium that creates an intimate bond of sharing between the contestants on screen and the personal nature of watching. Studying audience engagement tests the social awareness a show like *RuPaul's Drag Race* creates. Audiences allow the show to take on new life beyond the forty-two minutes of an episode. The lasting impressions and emotional provocations of *RuPaul's Drag Race* contribute to an affective response among people at home. Viewers are able to form feelings of attachment to *Drag Race* by introducing queer familial dynamics to develop affective bonds to the show. *Drag Race's* ability to queer the gaze of the audience, foster comfort viewing relationships, and evoke a sense of non-normative home creates an emotional affect that will shape the hearts and minds of viewers even after the final airing of the show.

### **There's No Place Like Homo: Queering Home for Affective Resonance**

A television set is the heart of a home. The history of TV as a form of popular media is brief, but it is intertwined with contemporary notions of home and domesticity. Television scholar Lynn Spiegel writes in *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* that “television’s inclusion in the home was subject to pre-existing models of gender and generational hierarchies among family members – hierarchies that have been operative since the Victorian periods” (Spiegel 12). And that the illusion of the Victorian family appears to be “tied together by love and affection” but in actuality it was “a clear hierarchy of dominion and subordination” (13). Societal pushes for normalcy after the Second World War resulted in nostalgia for the past and a reversion to gendered family dynamics where the “man’s domain” was the public sphere of work and social life, and “wives” overlooked the private sphere of home

and domesticity. Similarly, queer culture emerged from a private sphere of life, much like domesticity, forced to develop and exist away from the public eye. At the same time historically, television was a novel technology that was rapidly introduced into millions of homes and began to mass produce entertainment that reflected this contrived Victorian notion of separate, gendered spaces through its shows. Televisions are more than an ugly box that furniture is pointed towards, but a fixture of a home and a talisman of domesticity. TV is integrated into our contemporary understanding of what a home is, and its programming actively prescribes gendered norms and represents family dynamics.

Queer identities shown in *Drag Race* carve out space for gay men to show themselves and tell their stories in a way that is emotionally poignant and invites the viewer to empathize with them. As a significant emotional touchstone, “home” in this context is not intrinsically linked to a geographical location or even a physical place that each person has visited. Instead the reality that *RuPaul’s Drag Race* crafts has become a home for each of the participants, myself included. Whether the interview participants identified as heterosexual or queer, they were still comforted and inspired by the contestants and the environment fostered through the show regardless of where they watched. The reality television components of the show made the absurdity and extravagance of drag tangible for the viewers. One interview participant who identifies as a straight, white woman discusses her struggles with depression over the past several years and how she repeatedly turned to *Drag Race* for a feeling of home. Although she is not queer identified, *Drag Race* offered her refuge from the stresses of the world and made her feel like she was welcomed in the Werkroom among the queens.. Similarly, several other viewers of the show likened the Werkroom performance area to a metaphorical extension of a

living room, blending the performance spaces of the runway and domesticity concept of the home.

In the Werkroom, typically many of the contestants in the show will retell stories of hardships they endured, recall coming-out stories, or even mend fences with their fellow contestants. This is a place where the contestants are shown at their most vulnerable as drag performers (getting in and out of drag), but also as human beings where they share their lives with the people in the room and beyond. In the first episode of every season, each contestant debuts by showing them walk into the Werkroom, look into the camera, say an entrance catchphrase, and pose to show their aesthetic. Many of these catchphrases are about competition, the queen's niche of drag, but many are comments on the Werkroom itself. For example, in season 6, Adore Delano says "I'm home! Fuck yeah, I'm the first one" ("RuPaul's Big Opening, Part 1" 2:13-2:17), and in season 7, Mrs. Kesha Davis says "Hi my honeys, I'm home" ("Born Naked" 3:52-3:55). While these may not be the most dramatic or memorable entrance lines, they are direct messages to the audience that there is a sense of belonging associated with the Werkroom. For the contestants, this commentary can be associated with competing on the show, but it is an establishing line that the Werkroom is likened to the feeling of home, a metaphorical space and connection where people can find themselves comfortable and secure.

The messages in the entrance lines are echoed season after season where queens bond over the trials of the competition, fight with each other, and share their life stories. One audience member revealed the complex relationship with emotion and performance explaining that for her, it is "hard to tell if emotional displays on the show are real or a Hail Mary to continue competing," but acknowledging that they are still powerful moments regardless of the intent behind it. Whether the goals are for the contestants or the producers, *Drag Race* is still able to

facilitate emotional moments for viewers to return and experience solace. Comparable to the affect of comfort, when watching reality television, “audience studies suggest that within [reality TV’s] affective reality, viewers react emotionally because real people are expressing real emotions and it is the emotion that creates a sense of authenticity” (Deery 80). Emotion can then be expanded and queered to a melodrama or sentimentality that manifests as an extreme of what is real when performed, but this still evokes an emotional response from viewers. What emerges is the most important dynamic of the camera, the participant and the viewer. In this instance, *Drag Race* reaches the viewer in many locations, whether at home, in gay bars, or even on turbulent airplanes, and gives them a place to emotionally connect and seek out a refuge for and from their feelings. They can feel like they are at home watching the show, even if they feel unsafe or uneasy in their houses. In this sentimental relationship, audience members identify with the struggles and joys of the drag performers, and find the affect of “home” while experiencing these queer moments regardless of their gender identity and sexuality.

### **We Are Family: Finding Love Through Found Family and Queer Kinship**

With the correlation between the rise of television with the nuclear family, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is emblematic of how the medium of TV can be used to challenge notions of family. Foundational to the drag community, found families and queer kinship are a significant aspect of queer communities. Many LGBTQ+ people find family-like aspects of closeness, guidance, and love in friends or community members. In “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” Gayle Rubin introduced the notion that “a kinship system is not a list of biological relatives. It is a system of categories and statuses that often contradict actual genetic relationships” (Rubin 169). As Rubin explains, many kinships have a similar closeness that is traditionally associated with the family unit, but queers do not replicate the gendered elements

and instead actively defy them. In *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*, Kath Weston elaborates on queer kinship by introducing found families describing them as specifically selected for communal support and prosperity regardless of the acceptance of blood family relatives (Weston 74). Thus, queer kinship emerges in practice through found family dynamics among the queer community. Relating to Spiegel's work on normative gendered hierarchies implicit in television's past, queer kinship challenges the future of how audiences connect to television shows by inviting them to find support in the found family dynamic that is prevalent in drag communities and replicated on *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

Although many shows demonstrate familial relationships, *RuPaul's Drag Race* invites the viewer to be a part of this found family dynamic. Other reality shows like "America's Next Top Model" or "Survivor" also show many of the contestants developing strong bonds over the course of the season. However, these instances rarely explain the cast to be one family or the host to be considered a parental figure. Rooted in a history of Drag Houses where BIPOC queers would find family among drag and ballroom performers, found families are a foundational aspect of how drag queens have historically and presently connected with one another. The past of drag communities coupled with the high pressure circumstances of competing on the show introduces strong bonds that appeal to a longing to belong among viewers at home. *Drag Race* as a show values emotional vulnerability that many of the viewers can understand or relate to. The viewer is a part of this family and watching the show feels like coming home to your bickering sisters and unflappable mother, and this can be equal parts irritating and exhilarating.

The brightly coloured set of *Drag Race* has not only become a familiar, home-like surrounding for the viewer, but the contestants of each season are considered to be an extension of the queer notion of found family. A pillar of emotional moments in *Drag Race* surfaces during

the memorable lip sync from season 5, episode 7. At the end of the episode, competitor Roxxy Andrews is lip-syncing against the equally matched Alyssa Edwards to Willow Smith's song "Whip My Hair." Both queens are awaiting RuPaul's judgement which will eliminate one of them from the competition when Andrews begins to break down on the runway and shares a heart wrenching story of childhood abandonment. Moved to tears, RuPaul explains that "we as gay people, we get to choose our family [...] we are a family here. I love you" ("RuPaul's Roast" 40:36-41:00). This has become one of the most poignant memories with which the majority of my interviewees could identify. They understand what it means to be rejected, and whether or not they understand the exact circumstances that the queens are describing, they deeply empathize with the raw emotions of pain and loss, and the yearning for love and acceptance. Due to their non-normative status in the mainstream society, many queer people form intimate relationships with their friends and community members, a found family, in lieu of their nuclear family. This notion is introduced to *RuPaul's Drag Race*, where the deeper connection between queens is demonstrated to be stronger than the coincidence of being cast on the season together.

Competitors are implored to enact this found family for the duration of the season. While this was not always the case,<sup>47</sup> more recent seasons dedicate valuable air time to showing how the drag queens have bonded. As RuPaul is making his Werkroom rounds in season 11, episode 7, "Farm Fresh to Runway," Plastique Tiara shared with RuPaul how she feels rejected by her Vietnamese family and she longs for her family to not see her drag performance as an abnormality but an artform. RuPaul responds by embracing Plastique as she cries and comforts her by saying, "This is your new home. I am your new mommy. You'll always be my baby"

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<sup>47</sup> "This is not RuPaul's Best Friend Race!" ("Untucked: RuPocalypse Now") is a popular catchphrase yelled by Lashawn Beyond in season 4 of *Drag Race* to reinforce the notion that the show is a competition. However, the queer kinship between the queens has proven to become a more common sentiment shared among the casts throughout more recent seasons.

(20:00- 20:10). Moments like Roxxy Andrew's or Plastique Tiara's are examples of *Drag Race* reinforcing the love associated with queer kinship. Notoriously so, *Drag Race* devotes a lot of screen time to conflicts and fights between queens, but this is not intended to divide the queens or poison their relationships because following a major fight, the contestants hug and make-up. The imposition of a found family dynamic does not eliminate tension between the queens throughout episodes, but suggests that the fighting shown on *Drag Race* is similar to disputes between family members. Love and conflict go hand and hand within family, and found families provide an opportunity for queer individuals to rehearse and participate in the family dynamics they long for. Regardless of the drama recorded between contestants, RuPaul, and the show itself, returns to the notion of being a part of queer kinship. No matter how they get along together, underneath the tension is still love. This is reinforced by the language RuPaul uses to address the queens at the end of the episode prompting, "Everybody say love," or asking the queens to all say together, "If you can't love yourself, how in the hell are you going to love somebody else?" (Bailey, Barbato, and Charles) Assuming the role of the House Mother in the world of the show, RuPaul, or "Mama Ru," assumes a role of a mother-like figure, and the queens themselves describe their fellow competitors as their sisters. RuPaul has even released a song titled "Call Me Mother" (RuPaul 0:34-6) to reinforce this idea that the cast of a season is taking part in a queer found family dynamic that develops over the course of the show.

*RuPaul's Drag Race* creates a home with its setting and how viewers connect to the stories they tell. As well, queer kinship is a strong affective force where viewers are drawn to the relationships between the people on the show, and are made to feel as if they too can be a part of this bickering, resentful, loyal, and loving family that ultimately supports one and other as unique individuals. *RuPaul's Drag Race* introduces queerness and camp into the historic aspects

of television by relying on gendered norms and the conventional family and then expanding this representation to include queer kinship and found family as they are understood by drag communities. The drag families that form over the course of each season are not perfect, however, they revel in the messy “realness” that appeals to audiences and fosters affective attachments to the show. *Drag Race* does not follow heteronormative scripts of domesticity. The set does not reflect the suburban house that is perfectly maintained and a Stepfordwife who attends to everyone’s needs but her own. Fans of *Drag Race* know they are home because the show extends them the opportunity to witness the vulnerability of others, spend time with Mama Ru, and receive assurance that, no matter what happens, they belong because this house is built on love. As a result, *Drag Race* takes the notion of queer kinship and makes it palatable for both straight and LGBTQ+ audiences by making them feel included in the found family explored in the season to rewrite who can be included. Regardless of the reality of the show and what occurs behind the scenes, the realness of *Drag Race* is the feelings of acceptance and queer kinship that linger with the audiences long after the episodes have ended and credits have rolled.

### **Curling Up With a Good Show: Comfort Viewing as an Emotional Conduit**

*RuPaul’s Drag Race* makes audiences feel welcome and at home, so many viewers turn to watch the show for more than entertainment in order to find comfort and community in the process. Individuals might watch to unwind after a stressful day or escape the heaviness of a bout of depression. And groups can watch together to create a tangible community by connecting with friends through a watch party or viewing in a collective venue such as a gay bar. Whether solo or collaborative, comfort viewing has given meaning to watching *Drag Race* in order to access the emotions it provokes. The process of watching television series has evolved since the introduction of on-demand services and internet streaming, ultimately making television

accessible for audiences to watch again and again at their convenience. The ability to watch many shows is no longer limited to scheduled timeslots and syndication contracts. Much like revisiting a worn out copy of a book, the availability of many television series has enabled viewers at home to re-watch beloved scenes and episodes at will. Seeing new episodes as they are released each week on network television is stimulating through the sheer novelty aspect of the show unfolding in real time. But when re-watching seasons over again, the novelty morphs into a new experience of catching previously missed moments on screen, laughing at familiar punchlines, and feeling comforted by knowing our beloved characters will find themselves. Television has transformed by how viewers interact with the medium at home, and with this change comes an affective shift in how people connect with the shows they love. Starting and pausing episodes at will, scrubbing through discomfort, and binging an entire season in one sitting grants us control over the story and the ability to engage with TV on our own terms. Comfort viewing, as a result, facilitates an affective relationship between the viewer at home and the television show that brings them joy when re-watching a series multiple times.

A common theme that emerged in my interviews was the turn of phrase, “So the *first* time I watched *Drag Race* was...” where the participant would cite how they came to discover the show and what season was their first, but many found that the show was easy to re-watch again and again. One of the questions on my interview schedule specifically asked participants when they started watching *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and how they accessed it. The majority of participants became familiar with *Drag Race* when it was uploaded to either Netflix Canada, Netflix UK, or CraveTV. There were some outliers, much like myself, who knew about *Drag Race* before it was available through major streaming services and had instead purchased the

Canadian LGBTQ+ cable channel, OutTV,<sup>48</sup> to watch the episodes on a weekly schedule.

However, many of the interview subjects who came to the show through cable means typically re-watched episodes later through a streaming service. One participant explains that he has seen *Drag Race* many times saying, “I watch on Netflix. I consume most of them on my own. And then recently my partner has gone into it with me, so he’ll watch with me, he’s watched with me the last couple seasons. But then I’ll go back and rewatch [...] I just put it on and let it play.”

Through the availability of *Drag Race* on streaming platforms, a viewer explains that she “thinks there’s a comfortability in watching *Drag Race*. It’s very methodical, you know what to expect. I’ve watched all of the seasons an embarrassing amount of times now, but I find if I’m having a low day or I can’t really find one else to watch, I’ll just re-watch some of my favorite episodes and I feel better because I feel comfortable. That and the music, the colors; everything’s so lively.” Many of these audience members return to *Drag Race* not for just the dramatic fights or entertainment factor, but because they know what to expect and find reprieve returning home to the Werkroom to spend time with some found family.

Audience members use *Drag Race* for comfort viewing as a way to forge relationships through re-watching and finding community among other fans of the show. The first seasons varied greatly, but there was one trend that was made clear: many people started watching because a friend encouraged them to do so or so they could talk about it with others. Eight different interviewees explain that they have friends or co-workers that were big fans of *Drag Race*, and they were encouraged to pick up the show themselves to watch. Likening the

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<sup>48</sup> Shout out to my mom for caving and including it in our cable package. I appreciate you making that awkward call to Cogeco Cable’s customer service.

experience to queer-coded watercooler talk,<sup>49</sup> one participant describes the kinship with other viewers like when someone “drops that they saw [*Drag Race*] I’m like, oh! I got you, you’re safe, you’re a safe person and in some capacity. Which is really a tell, right? It’s a tell.” In this case, the participant sees it more as more than a shared interest with others; being a fan of *Drag Race* indicates that someone is an ally and can empathize with the queer experience by hoping that the show has had a similar affective impact. As well, four participants in their twenties host watch parties to view the latest episode of *Drag Race* or even compete in *Drag Race* fantasy leagues for each season as it airs. In all of these examples, the affective impact of *Drag Race* encourages people to seek out others to share in their experiences of the show. Whether a recommendation got them to start watching, knowing an interest in *Drag Race* makes a co-worker a safe person, or using the show as an excuse to spend time with friends, comfort viewing *Drag Race* is not always a solitary experience as its affect encourages community development.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated the significance that comfort viewing has in bringing people solace during difficulties. While this cannot be generalized for every person’s experience over the past year, as I found myself stuck at home unable to carry on with my ordinary life, TV became a fast friend. In her book, *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant introduces the idea of a social catastrophe impasse which she describes as “when one no longer knows what to do or how to live and yet, while unknowing, must adjust,” and it is “the name for the space where the urgencies of livelihood are worked out all over again, without assurances of futurity, but nevertheless proceeding via durable norms of adaptation” (Berlant 200). While Berlant uses this term in relation to neoliberalism and labour, COVID-19 has become a new form of impasse,

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<sup>49</sup> A Canadian sketch comedy show, *Baroness Von Sketch*, brilliantly parodied the homonormativity of *Drag Race* and how white middle-aged women in the workplace have adapted elements of the show into their speech and actions (Baroness Von Sketch).

where the world has come to a halt, yet we still exist within the impermanent boundaries that deeply impact our society. Understood as engulfed in crisis “dogpaddling around a space” (200) without a clear end, an impasse deeply impacts individuals. The pandemic is an uncomfortable place to be and there I discovered a cruelty when existing solely within the same four walls, but an optimism emerges in the potential to take a break from regular life and possibly have the space and time to engage with new activities or television shows. Yet, it is also cruel because of the severe limitations and the lack of genuine self-care practices<sup>50</sup> occurring after being at home for over a year. For myself, *Drag Race* helped to facilitate my own internal introspection and was a part of processing repressed feelings and hardships that the pandemic afforded me time and space to work on. Watching *Drag Race* started as a distraction from the COVID impasse, but soon the process of watching *Drag Race* became a way to engage with emotions and find an outlet in the same emotions of stress, grief, loneliness and joy that the contestants go through.

Although *Drag Race* is a structured reality television competition, each episode crafts stories that viewers can empathize with, which speaks to the range of emotions spurred by the world of COVID. One participant who was open about her declining mental health during the pandemic explained that there is still the “positivity and the magic and the sparkle of the show, especially during COVID when like there was really strict lockdown like March, April, May. I was like, okay, I need a comfort show, I need to do something so I started re-watching all the seasons and it just became so much easier to get through being at home all the time.” For her in particular, she was experiencing “depression and anxiety again like I haven’t had it for like thirteen years. I find that watching TV really distracts me and it makes me feel calm and positive [...] I literally just put on *RuPaul* in the background and I watch it and it puts me into a positive

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<sup>50</sup> While I can be at home and meditate and exercise and do things that should be self-care, I can’t help but wonder what things were a distraction from the pain of living in the past year and what were self-care praxis.

headspace before I sleep.” Similarly, many of my interview participants related to this and found themselves engaging with comfort viewings of older seasons of *Drag Race* to see their favourite queens and laugh at the catchphrases that never seem to get old. One participant explained that episodes of *Drag Race* are the soundtrack of his life because he is always streaming seasons as background noise while he goes about with chores or household tasks. While many of my participants lost their jobs, moved, or worked from home while COVID rates rose, watching older seasons of *Drag Race* gave comfort and familiarity in the midst of unprecedented times.

Despite knowing that we live in the midst of a global tragedy, comfort viewing is actively choosing to see the silver linings when it comes to home, kinship, and shared interest in *Drag Race*. The leisure of television has become more than entertainment, and comfort viewing is a means of survival, a symbol of resiliency, and a sign of futurity. Watching TV gives hope that people can find feelings of contentment and resolve, overcome hardships and look forward to what comes next. With the declaration of a state of emergency and the normalcy of masks, incessant hand-washing, and social distancing, the anxiety of COVID-19 drew my participants in once again to gather in the inescapably cheerful Werkroom on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and watch the real world melt away in exchange for RuPaul’s reality. Of course, the events on TV are taken with a grain of salt, but the promise of a better world filled with laughter, success, and hope rises without the perils of discrimination and COVID-19, among the other hardships the world bears.

There is a complicated relationship that exists between the cruel optimism of comfort viewing and the veiled visions of utopia imbued in queer art. How does inviting all willing viewers to live in the world of *Drag Race* to escape the hardships of current circumstances impact the show’s ability to incite change? If participants find comfort in the show, to what extent is the show’s impact a tool of comfort instead of a tool for queering identities and

relationalities? As evidenced by the testimony of various interview participants, the cruelty of the pandemic and how it spurred personal difficulties ushered in space for optimism as found on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. As more than escapism from the pressures of hegemony or experiencing the perils of a COVID impasse, stories told through television serve as the illustration of utopia and give hope for a future to come. José Muñoz writes in *Cruising Utopia* that “queerness is primarily about futurity and hope” (Muñoz 11) because in our world, “heteronormative culture makes queers think that both the past and the future do not belong to them” (112). From employment to social services and personal interaction, much of the world is inhospitable to LGBTQ+ people and visual depictions of queerness. As Muñoz explains, embracing queerness through subcultural art becomes a way to grapple with difficult feelings of otherness, the erased past and the unguaranteed future. He elaborates by explaining that “queerness is not yet here but it approaches like a crashing wave of potentiality [...] willingly we let ourselves feel queerness’s pull, knowing it as something else we can feel, that we must feel” (185). Throughout *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz analyzes how different rebellious acts and performances of queerness have ushered in glimpses of queerness to come on the horizon. There is an implicit tension between the cruel optimism of comfort viewing and the affective connections all kinds of audience members have forged with *Drag Race*. Is the potentiality for cruising utopia nullified by alienating representations of queerness through the comfort viewing cycle viewers grasp for?

Beyond what the show depicts, people develop strong emotional ties to *Drag Race* that may or may not actually positively impact the real-world lives of queer people. Perhaps the stories of queering home, television, and family has allowed glimmers of utopia to shine, or perhaps it just enables cruel optimism to continue to cycle – there is no simple answer. This unresolved tension demonstrates that studying audience affect does not neatly explain the

cultural role that *RuPaul's Drag Race* has for viewers. Despite the limited answers it provides on queer futurity, it is certain that *RuPaul's Drag Race* is more than just bottomless entertainment, as the show plays a significant role in comforting people and helping them connect with others.

### **Gaze for Gays: Importance of TV Spectatorship in Public Spaces**

Getting the chance to sit down and talk with other fans of *Drag Race* recreated a feeling of community that was stifled during the pandemic. While they each shared their individual relationships with the show, we were able to momentarily reclaim the real life experiences that public fandom grants. In a way, trying to capture the show's individual affect in the interview showed the transference between viewing in private to public spaces. Typically, television has a significant presence in the home and in shaping cultural notions of family, however, as explored through *RuPaul's Drag Race*, this relevance permeates beyond the boundaries of home to influence cultural constructions of queerness. Watching *Drag Race* outside of the home highlights the way that television shows can be just as impactful in public spaces as they have been in private. In *Ambient Television Visual Culture and Public Space*, Anna McCarthy explores how the ways people view television impacts their relationship with the medium. McCarthy explores how television screens, or the televisual as she defines it, can be the sites of social spaces and how everything except the content of the show can reflect the magnitude of television's relevance to social institutions (McCarthy 23). One major theme that emerges in the text is McCarthy's understanding of television existing outside of the home. She explains that "more politically charged examples of media events in which bars became informal polling stations include the famous 'coming out' episode of the sitcom *Ellen*, when journalists descended on gay bars to gauge reactions of gay and lesbian fans to the event" and "public screen practices materialize political forces of everyday life" (8). How television is engaged with outside of the

physical home in a public space opens up places for people to gather, connect with others, and show the relevance of an event through the social impact it has on a community.

To elaborate, the popularity of *Drag Race* has inspired people to engage with the show outside their homes in order to gather in bars and social settings to host weekly watch-parties for the most relevant episodes.<sup>51</sup> From university campuses to drag bars, *Drag Race* is known as a social event wherein, much like McCarthy's example with *Ellen*'s coming out episode, socialization is centred around the *Drag Race* episode and it becomes a culturally relevant moment to gauge the importance of the show and become a way for people to connect. While many heteronormative men watch football/hockey/basketball/baseball in sports bars to spend social time with their friends, process feelings of defeat and loss, and watch professionals compete, *Drag Race* gives many queers and allies the chance to do the same in the setting of a gay bar to watch contestants perform drag. These participatory audience-based cultures are enabled by the notoriety of screens in public spaces to encourage people to gather as a coterie and relish in their shared interests. What separates sports fans and drag fans is the newfound public acceptance of drag. No longer confined to underground bars and subculture circles, drag is watched and enjoyed by millions of people who may not identify as LGBTQ+. As a benchmark of the mainstreaming of drag and queer culture, a wide audience captures a variety of different members who connect with the stories of gender and sexuality splashed across the screens of people streaming *RuPaul's Drag Race*. No matter the location chosen to engage with the show, the boundaries of private television viewing and the subcultural status of drag have been

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<sup>51</sup> An example of this is the drag bar "Roscoe's" in Chicago, IL where they will typically hire the winning/sent home drag queen for their watch-party and have a show afterwards. The event has been put on hold because of the COVID-19 pandemic

simultaneously permeated by the popularity of *Drag Race* through the connections people make while watching the show.

During my interviews, participants cited many different reasons for why they watch the show. For older gay men, it was a way to keep in touch with younger generations of queers and to engage with the broadening of cultural representation. One participant, who self-identified as a sixty-year-old, gay, cisgender man and a fan of the show explained:

I'm hugely grateful for the difference *Drag Race* has made for the gay community, the broader community. Back [in my past, drag] was an impersonation, a small limited thing. I'd love to know what other people have received, but [*Drag Race*] made me feel like there so many other gay people out there. I have a sense of gratitude and appreciation for what RuPaul has offered us and as much as you can, move forward with the times and acknowledge we aren't in 2009 anymore. We have a duty to the younger people coming up behind us to acknowledge them and appreciate them.

For him, *Drag Race* signified a major shift even within the past five years of the visibility and acceptance of queerness in public spaces. I think it is important to note that the existence of *Drag Race* does not mean homophobia, transphobia, and both physical and systemic violence is eradicated. Discrimination continues to disproportionately target queer people and their embodiments in favour of bolstering hegemonic norms and values. The prolific nature of *Drag Race* has given a mainstream platform to an inherently queer counterculture to humanize drag performers and make them relatable to an empathetic audience.

Another participant, who self-identified as a twenty-year-old, gay cisgender man in Eastern Canada explains that through watching *Drag Race*, "Drag has peeked it's way through culture. I'm lucky enough growing up, being gay was fine (which was amazing). I think that gender identity, and gender performance will be the next thing that goes down. It's just going to be fine for people to wear and express whatever they want." He continues:

*Drag Race* does a good job of [sharing] all the stories that [the drag queens] have, the sob stories, and they always end with them saying, ‘Yes, now I’m here and in a much better place.’ I think for a lot of the community who struggle with stuff, seeing people they can relate to, overcoming issues is very valuable. At the same time, because ‘*Drag Race*’ has become mainstream, sharing those kinds of stories with the public at large... At least they can say this one gay person on a TV show I like went through it and learn from that experience.

The relevance of *Drag Race* goes beyond the impact it has with its content on screen and the way it depicts the lives of LGBTQ+ people. Using the veil of authenticity associated with reality television, *Drag Race* is able to reach many people and share their stories. Consequently, the ubiquitous nature of *Drag Race* to be watched both in private and public spaces blends the viewing nature of the show and alludes to how important it is to positively support LGBTQ+ views. Seeing the lineage between the intergenerational reactions to *Drag Race*, it is more than a television show that is watched alone at home, and becomes indicative of a societal touchstone of tolerance of a queer presence on television. It matters how viewers are impacted by the shows they watch because of the real potential in changing how queer people are treated outside of the realm of television. *Drag Race* can be a home away from home and a tether to queer comfort, community, and family outside of their “real” life connections.

## **Conclusion**

Splashing drag queens across millions of television sets introduces a strain between the history of television and the subversive nature of dissolving notions of home from gendered standards. This works to undermine cisheterosexual notions of family in exchange for intimacy found in queer kinship. The entire series of *RuPaul's Drag Race* is full of tensions, not only from the manufactured fights between contestants, but also the actual effect the show has on viewers and the role it plays in popular culture. Drag itself is a magical and wonderfully challenging subculture that exists through various spaces, performance balls, gritty queer bars, Halloween

parties, and many closets around the world. *Drag Race* is not the same as this subculture, but its contestants are from these spaces, and the sheer number of people who are connecting with queerness results in a mainstreaming of drag.

The systematic appeal of the mainstreaming of the show enables a byproduct of homonormativity and the capitalist complex we live in, but my interviews forced me to reconcile my criticism of, and desire to protect, *Drag Race*. *Drag Race* is not precious, but a resilient symbol of its time. *Drag Race* adheres to normative television conventions, yet defies them through queering, and exists by teetering in between. While the show is not mine to protect, the hope it gives people is emblematic of the queer collectiveness and community that watching *Drag Race* encourages. There may be future generations of scholars who study the tentacles of white, cis-heteropatriarchy power wrapped around *RuPaul's Drag Race*. But until then, my research reveals that the power of *RuPaul's Drag Race* does not reside solely in the content of the show or the structuring of the medium, but rather, the legacy of *Drag Race* is the impression it leaves on its viewers. Affect emphasizes the emotional strings connecting audiences to shows, and then uses these ties to reorient viewers towards queerness to usher in hope of a future to come.

When the seatbelt sign was flicked on and the WOWAir plane began its descent to Iceland, the Canada-Goose-Gal clicked off her phone and tucked the world of *RuPaul's Drag Race* into her pocket. With the Werkroom home snuffed out, I resumed my armrest-clenching teeth-grinding position in my reality while the plane landed. Ever since I started watching *Drag Race*, it has become precious to me, and that fierce love propels the reason why I study the show to this day. *Drag Race* shed light on aspects of my own gender and sexuality that I sheltered in darkness, and years of avid viewership have enabled me to step out of my own shadows.

However, the process of interviewing participants and sharing our lights together has shown me that I will always possess the brightness *Drag Race* taught me. I have learned that the show doesn't just belong to me, but rather to all of us fans who piece themselves together using our love for the show as a glue.

### **“Can I Get an Amen Up in Here:” Queer Catharsis and Final Thoughts**

I have spent a great deal of time telling you, dear reader, about the different moments throughout my coming of age story where *RuPaul's Drag Race* helped me dial into my feelings and connections with queerness. I am afraid I have buried the lead and withheld my most important tale. It was July 2017, the height of summer and height of my *Drag Race* admiration. I saved up and bought meet-and-greet tickets to see my favourite *Drag Race* contestants live. I originally intended for my sister to attend the show with me, however she had travel plans that interfered, and the majority of my friends were not interested in driving for an hour and a half across the US border to see drag queens. I distinctly remember sitting at a vinyl booth in my favourite hometown breakfast diner, The Egg and I, relaying my exasperation over an omelette as I was on the hook for these tickets and no one to go with. Surrounded by an alarming amount of egg themed decor – my mom, lovingly called Kath, looked up from her Egg and I Sunrise breakfast and reassured me that she would go with me to the show. Kath, who had only seen *Drag Race* in passing while meandering through in the living room, signed up to accompany.

Despite the fact that Kath was not an avid drag fan, I pressed onwards and meticulously planned every detail of the trip. I chose a route from Hamilton to Buffalo, located parking, found somewhere to eat dinner, figured out timing for waiting outside the theatre, and researched how the touring company Murray & Peter Presents runs their meet-and-greet sessions. I was determined to get the most out of this experience. After crossing the border and explaining to the US agent what a “War on the Catwalk” was, I found myself standing outside of the theatre nervously waiting to meet my heroes. By this point, I had been to a few live performances to see my favourite queens, but this was the first time I had gotten this close to them. Kath and I stood in a sprawling line of enlivened fans that weaved through the lobby. As the line moved closer

and closer to the queens, Kath reassured me that she was not interested in being in the photo and would just stand back during our turn. She wanted this to be my moment. The line moved into the auditorium until finally we were standing in the chilly black curtained wings of the backstage. I could see the tops of the queens' wigs, and the closer I got, the more details came into focus of their make-up, dresses, and voices making jokes between fan photos. I was so close to this thing I had been moving towards for years. Finally, it was my turn. I reached out. I had brought a handmade card for my favourite queen, Sasha Velour. I told her how much I loved her art and she welcomed me with a hug (she smelled like Irish Spring). I stood in the middle of the queens to pose for my one photo, and quickly grabbed Kath's wrist and pulled her into the centre with me. She leaned over and said "I don't know what to do with my arms."



*Back: Shea Coulee, Trinity "The Tuck" Taylor, Myself, Kath, Alexis Michelle, Eureka O'Hara;  
Front: Farrah Moan, Sasha Velour (holding a handmade card I crafted for her)*

Riding my elation from meeting the queens from TV that I had spent so many hours with, Kath and I found our seats. This time, I was sitting in the front few rows of the theatre soaking in the spectacle. The show was thrilling. There comes a point in the majority of these drag tours where the host will ask the audience: “Where are my gays at?” “Where are my lesbians at?” “Where are my straight ladies at?” The audience will hoot and holler when their demographic is called, but I chose to sink further in my seat beside my mom and remain silent. Paralyzed at the thought of outing myself so publicly filled me with apprehension. I was surrounded by my peers, people who love drag as much as I do, but I was still internally grappling with my own identity. I didn’t want to make a public declaration in front of Kath just yet, let alone in a category I didn’t align with. In that specific moment, feeling discomfort and slouching in my seat, I looked over and saw my mom beaming and clapping along with the rest of the crowd – she was having a great time. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and watching live shows was a kind of exposure therapy where I could spend time with my people and ease into my own skin. Surrounding myself with a community was important to me, even if that community was not necessarily filled with queers. Much like *Drag Race*, that live show was designed to reach everyone in the audience and create a connection between us all. I realized at that moment that if my own mother can have a blast watching drag queens make raunchy jokes, and then subsequently watch seasons of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, then maybe she can accept me just as much as she accepts the drag performers that entertained her. And it was one hell of a show.

*RuPaul’s Drag Race* is a far cry from a queer subculture; some glimpses of its origin peek through in the fabric of the show, but the fit and styling is designed for a much bigger crowd. The magic *Drag Race* bottles and reproduces season after season is showing audiences what it means to be queer in a way that invites the viewers inside – immersed in the drag reality

RuPaul has crafted, and into the hearts and minds of the drag queens as they perform their art. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick remarks in “Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*” that “whether particular performances (e.g. of drag) are really parodic and subversive (e.g. of gender essentialism) or just uphold the status quo. The bottom line is generally the same: kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic” (15). Even at this live drag show, the world of RuPaul has stretched out for the audiences to be a part of an in-person community. The show was designed for fans of *Drag Race*, both queer and straight. It was the meeting place that was kinda subversive for people like my mom to be thrust into the world of drag, and kinda hegemonic for people like myself where drag shows have become my happy place. Throughout my thesis, this mantra of “kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic” has guided me through the many different tensions embroiled in watching *Drag Race* and listening to what other fans of the show think.

The mainstream popularity of drag might not endure past the cultural relevance of *Drag Race*, but what will persist is how it demanded more from the genre of reality television, centred the stories of gay men, and meaningfully connected viewers to demonstrate that there can be a sense of home and kinship within drag circles. “Kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic” persists in each chapter. There is no singular role *RuPaul’s Drag Race* plays in today’s cultural milieu. The show may be responsible for giving a platform for drag queens to reach the homes of millions of viewers at home, but the overall impact lies in its emotional resonance. When I was juggling the stress and strain of early adulthood, I could barely contain my excitement for a new season to air because it gave me a place to be. A place where I could come home to what felt like my family.

This thesis strove to analyze form, demonstrate the boundaries of critique, and aim for the reparative in audience affect. For myself, I have been able to trace the thread of *Drag Race* as it has been intricately woven into my identity. From when I was an eighteen year old lounging in

my childhood room stumbling across dubbed *Drag Race* lip syncs on the Internet, to sitting in my Ottawa attic apartment re-watching old seasons while diligently taking notes for my Master's thesis, and all the moments in between, *RuPaul's Drag Race* makes up part of the material in the ever-expanding quilt of my life. Similarly, each interview participant had a story to tell about their relationship with the show. For some, *Drag Race* made the viewers feel at ease in queerness and comforted by Mama Ru's pearls of wisdom, and for others, the content of the show introduced them to ways of life different from their own. Whether they were feeling lonely, misunderstood, or just wanted to laugh, *Drag Race* resonated with them. In this patchwork fabric of audience affect lies the reparative importance of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Regardless if the show is seen as hegemonic and homonormative *or* subversive and groundbreaking, *Drag Race* incites a queer catharsis. *Drag* and *Drag Race* is more than a performance and more than a show; it is an emotional release and a chance to experience a version of the world according to queer-iousities. *RuPaul's Drag Race* exists in the textured lives of the fans, and after the episode is over and RuPaul has let the music play, what remains is the way that *Drag Race* has shown its viewers what it means to be queer and radically choose to love yourself. As RuPaul reminds the queens and the audiences alike at the end of every episode, "If you can't love yourself, then how in the hell are you going to love somebody else?" (Bailey, Barbato, and Charles).

Can I get an amen up in here?

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## Appendix



**Pauline Jewett Institute of Women's  
and Gender Studies**

1401 Dunton Tower  
1125 Colonel By Drive  
Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6  
Tel: (613) 520-6645

Email: [womens\\_studies@carleton.ca](mailto:womens_studies@carleton.ca)

Website : [www.carleton.ca/womensstudies](http://www.carleton.ca/womensstudies)

### Letter of Invitation

**Title:** “Got to be Real: Reality Television and Mainstreaming Drag Culture”

**Funding Source:** SSHRC CGS-M, OGS

**Date of ethics clearance:** To be determined by the REB (as indicated on the clearance form)

**Ethics Clearance for the Collection of Data Expires:** To be determined by the REB (as indicated on the clearance form)

Hello,

My name is Erin McHarge and I am a Master’s student in the Pauline Jewett Institute of Women’s and Gender Studies at Carleton University. I am working on a research project for my thesis under the supervision of Dr. Dan Irving ([dan.irving@carleton.ca](mailto:dan.irving@carleton.ca)).

I am writing to invite you to participate in a study on the mainstreaming drag culture through the reality TV show “RuPaul’s Drag Race.” The purpose of this study is to understand audience perceptions of drag and social values surrounding queer culture and diverse representations of gender and sexuality.

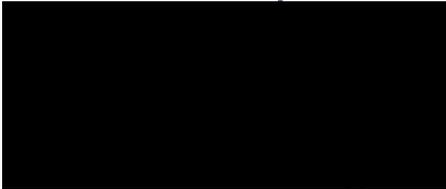
This study involves one 60-90 minute semi-structured interview that will take place in a mutually convenient, safe location on Carleton University’s campus or at a café/restaurant depending on your preference. With your consent, interviews will be audio-recorded. Once the recording has been transcribed and analyzed, the audio-recording will be destroyed. While this study does not foresee any risk to your participation, your identity will be kept anonymous. This will be done by keeping all responses anonymous and I will be assigning a pseudonym. You will have the right to end your participation in the study at any time, for any reason, up until 30 days after the interview has taken place. If you choose to withdraw, all the information you have provided will be destroyed. Throughout the study, as the Primary researcher I will be in contact with you so your identity will be known to me. As per ethics protocol, your identity will be kept anonymous and confidentiality will be maintained throughout the entire process.

All research data, including audio-recordings and any notes will be encrypted. Any hard copies of data (including any handwritten notes or USB keys) will be kept in a locker in the Pauline Jewett Institution of Women's and Gender Studies Graduate Office at Carleton University. Research data will only be accessible by the researcher and the research supervisor.

This ethics protocol for this project was reviewed and cleared by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board. If you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact the Carleton University Research Ethics Board-A (by phone at 613-520-2600 ext. 2517 or via email at [ethics@carleton.ca](mailto:ethics@carleton.ca)).

If you would like to participate in this research project, or have any questions, please contact me at [erinmcharge@email.carleton.ca](mailto:erinmcharge@email.carleton.ca).

Kind regards,



Erin McHarge



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Website : [www.carleton.ca/womensstudies](http://www.carleton.ca/womensstudies)

### **Informed Consent Form – Semi-Structured Interview**

**Researcher:** Erin McHarge, Carleton University, Pauline Jewett Institute of Women's and Gender Studies (erinmcharge@cmail.carleton.ca)

**Supervisor and Contact Information:** Dr. Dan Irving ([dan.irving@carleton.ca](mailto:dan.irving@carleton.ca))

**Title:** “Got to be Real: Reality Television and Mainstreaming Drag Culture”

**Funding:** SSHRC CGS-M, OGS

**Carleton University Project Clearance:** #112635 **Date of Clearance:** March 30, 2020

You are invited to take part in a research project because you are a viewer and fan of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The information in this form is intended to help you understand what I am asking of you so that you can decide whether to participate in this study. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and a decision not to participate will not be used against you in any way. As you read this form, and decide whether to participate, please ask all the questions you might have, take whatever time you need, and consult with others as you wish.

*RuPaul's Drag Race* as a competition-based reality television series has given drag culture a mainstream platform. The significance of drag queens have risen in prominence in popular culture alongside the success of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The purpose of this study is to understand audience perceptions of drag and social values surrounding queer culture and diverse representations of gender and sexuality.

If you agree to take part in the study, you will be participating in a semi-structured interview that will last between 1 and 1.5 hour(s). The information requested through the questions of the interview pertain to your interest in *RuPaul's Drag Race*, perceptions of gender and sexuality, and the impact you think the show has on popular culture. Interviews will take place on Carleton campus or café/restaurant depending on the participant's availability. The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed. Once the transcription and analysis has taken place, the recording file will be deleted. The participant does have the option to not be recorded if that desire is expressed at the offset of the interview.

Skype will be used for interviews. It is impossible to provide a 100% guarantee of privacy over an online connection, but you will be informed of Skype's encryption standards. Skype includes

the following relevant security information in their terms of service: “All Skype-to-Skype voice, video, file transfers and instant messages are encrypted. This protects you from potential eavesdropping by malicious users. Skype uses the AES (Advanced Encryption Standard\*), also known as Rijndael, which is used by the US Government to protect sensitive information, and Skype has for some time always used the strong 256-bit encryption. User public keys are certified by the Skype server at login using 1536 or 2048-bit RSA certificates.” This standard of encryption makes the risk of confidentiality break minimal. No recording will take place within the Skype program, all recording will still take place on the handheld audio recording device that the researcher will use for all other interviews. You are able to withdraw from the study at any point during recruitment up until one month after the interviews have taken place. If you choose to withdraw your interview, the digital recording of your partial interview, interview/research notes, and transcript (if interview has been transcribed by that point) will be deleted.

There are no physical or psychological risks to participating in this study. You will not be compensated for your participation in this study. However, your participation may allow researchers to better understand the significance of reality television in giving a platform to queer performers and how this platform is viewed by audience members of the show.

If you withdraw your consent during the course of the study, all information collected from you before your withdrawal will be discarded. After the study, you may request that your data be removed from the study and deleted by notice given to the Principal Investigator (named above) [within *30 days* after your completion of the interview].

I will remove all identifying information from the study data as soon as possible, which will be after the interview and during the transcription process. We will treat your personal information as confidential, although absolute privacy cannot be guaranteed. No information that discloses your identity will be released or published, pseudonyms will be assigned to ensure anonymity. Research records may be accessed by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board to ensure continuing ethics compliance. All data will be kept confidential, unless release is required by law (e.g. child abuse, harm to self or others).

The results of this study may be published or presented at an academic conference or meetings, but the data will be presented so that it will not be possible to identify any participants. You will be assigned a code [or pseudonym] so that your identity will not be directly associated with the data you have provided. All data, including coded information, will be kept in a password-protected and encrypted file on a secure computer. I will encrypt and password protect any research data that we store or transfer. Your de-identified data will be retained in a locked box for a period of 5 years and then securely destroyed. In the event that any changes could affect your decision to continue participating in this study, you will be promptly informed.

This project was reviewed and cleared by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board A. If you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact Carleton University Research Ethics Board (by phone at 613-520-2600 [ext. 2517 for CUREB A or by email at [ethics@carleton.ca](mailto:ethics@carleton.ca)).

**Statement of consent – print and sign name**

|   |                              |                             |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.     | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| I agree to be audio recorded                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| I would like to receive a copy of the complete thesis | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |

---

Signature of participant

---

Date

**Research team member who interacted with the participant**

I have explained the study to the participant and answered any and all of their questions. The participant appeared to understand and agree. I provided a copy of the consent form to the participant for their reference.

---

Signature of researcher

---

Date



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### **Demographics Forms**

Please fill out the following to the best of your abilities, you can also choose to leave sections blank. All information will be kept confidential and anonymous.

Age: \_\_\_\_\_.

Hometown: \_\_\_\_\_.

Current City: \_\_\_\_\_.

Gender Identity: \_\_\_\_\_.

Sexual Orientation: \_\_\_\_\_.

Socio-Economic Class: \_\_\_\_\_.



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### **Semi-Structured Interview Schedule**

1. How did you first hear about *RuPaul's Drag Race*? What did you hear? When did you first start watching?
2. Do you have a favourite season or favourite drag queens? Why do you like those seasons or queens?
3. Typically, how do you watch *Drag Race*? Is there a certain streaming platform or channel? Do you watch it with others or more alone?
4. Some of the main challenges on *Drag Race* that have become staples in each season, such as the snatch game, makeover, design, ball, music video challenges just to name a few. Is there a certain kind of episode you look forward to each season? Why?
5. The episodes themselves have a formulaic structure to them. Starting with entrance in the "Werkroom" to clean the lipstick message, then new day in the "Werkroom" with the video message from Ru, a mini challenge, prep for the maxi challenge, challenge presentation, runway, judges deliberation, lip-sync, and sending a queen home. Is there a part of the episode that you enjoy the most? Why?
6. Why do you watch *RuPaul's Drag Race*?
7. How do you judge performances on the show? What makes a good performance, drag queen, or strong competitor in your opinion?
8. *Drag Race* is often edited to show queens both in and out of drag, and showing them in the in-between stages getting into drag as well. What do you think of these contrasting representations of gender? Has *Drag Race* challenged your ideals or approaches to femininity and masculinity?

9. Many of the queens talk about their experiences growing up as young gay men and the process of coming out or some of the hardships they have endured. Has being exposed to these stories on a television show impacted your understanding of sexuality?
10. What do you think about *Drag Race*'s depictions of race on the show?
11. RuPaul has stated on many occasions that the show is mostly interested in casting cisgender men. There have been exceptions where queens have come out as transgender on the show, but there is still an overwhelming preference for gay men to be cast. What do you think about this practice? Do you think drag kings, hyper-queens (drag performers who are female-identified out of drag and performer hyper-feminine drag), and gender nonconforming performers should be cast on *Drag Race*?
12. As a reality television show, do you think *Drag Race* reflects actual queer communities or drag communities?
13. Do you watch drag performances or engage with the drag community outside of *Drag Race*?
14. If you have social media accounts, do you follow any of the queens or affiliated celebrities?
15. RuPaul himself has been quoted in many interviews over the years claiming that drag is always changing and that it will never be mainstream. Do you agree or disagree? Do you think drag culture or *Drag Race* is mainstream?
16. If you could provide feedback to the producers of *Drag Race*, what would you say to them? What do you want to see more of, what could be cut from the show, and what could be changed?

**DO YOU WATCH**



**Interview Participants  
Needed**

**Spill the tea on**

- **Your favourite Queens**
- **Reality TV as a format**
- **The social significance of Drag Race**



**CONTACT: ERIN MCHARGE, MA STUDENT  
ERINMCHARGE@CMAIL.CARLETON.CA**

**CUREB-A Ethics Clearance:  
Clearance Date:**

**In case of ethics/protocol concerns contact Carleton University  
Research Ethics Board-A (by phone at 613-520-2600 ext. 2517 or via  
email at [ethics@carleton.ca](mailto:ethics@carleton.ca)).**