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Xtravaganza!: Drag Representation and Articulation in *RuPaul's Drag Race*

A strikingly beautiful woman with perfectly coiffed hair strides down the runway. Her heels make time with a throbbing dance beat. She stops at the head of the runway, her sheer blue negligee swirls around her; the lights play against her belly chain. She is channeling Brigitte Bardot, with the poise and self-confidence of Sophia Loren. She stops, confidently awaiting praise from the panel of judges. The chief judge, another stunningly regal figure, tells the runway walker she was worried about her tuck. The woman, Jade, looks embarrassed. The host and chief critic tells her, "It's interesting to see such a beautiful woman with such a big dick." Suddenly, a playback of Jade walking the runway fills the entire television screen with a close-up of her blue panties. While laughter filters through the room, Jade's voiceover explains the embarrassment she is feeling at that moment. This scene, at first glance, could belong to any competitive beauty television show. However, closer inspection reveals that this is not just any contest; this is *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Jade is a drag queen competing for the title of America's next drag superstar and her head adjudicator is none other than RuPaul, arguably the most commercially successful drag queen. Jade's "tuck problem" gets to the heart of questions I hope to raise and address that concern drag performance and gender articulation.

In this essay, I argue that the failure to repeat gender norms through drag performances is not in and of itself subversive or empowering. Successful drag, as framed in *RuPaul's Drag Race*, hinges upon the performer's ability to deploy stereotypical notions of femininity through performances of

gendered norms. The show demonstrates that limitations of the male body also contribute as constraints for gender performances. Possibilities for drag are not limitless; *RuPaul's Drag Race* relies upon and makes reference to a preceding queer history as a method of validating permissible drag constructions. In this essay, I employ the terms *legitimacy*, *queer legitimacy*, and *authentic* to refer to the ways the show strategically deploys iconography associated with queer history and entertainment as a means to situate itself within the queer historical continuum. As well, my usage of the phrase *successful drag* refers to the forms of gender performance that are rewarded by RuPaul and the other judges on the show. In this essay, I refer to the drag queen participants and RuPaul as "she," even while out of drag, because they refer to themselves with the female-gendered pronoun throughout season one of the show.

The nature of the format of *RuPaul's Drag Race* as a reality show competition positions it within the continuum of reality television shows. The show's employment of reality television tropes and techniques relegates the drag queen heroine from runway royalty to everyday television game show contestant. If queer citizens are to take advantage of the current political and cultural national attention directed upon them, is the format of reality television like *RuPaul's Drag Race* the appropriate venue for contributing to current dialogue regarding the complexity of queer representation?

One of the latest arrivals on the reality television show circuit, *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-) combines successful elements from the reality repertoire. A dash of transformational makeover scenes which employ colorful costumes and heavy makeup, competitive challenges that pit contestants against one another, and special guest stars are combined to form, at first glance, any other reality show available on cable television. However, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has unique characteristics that mark the show from the dreary rabble of other reality television shows. The contestants are drag queens, and the ultimate challenge is to win the title of America's next drag superstar. *Drag Race* does not appear on just any channel; it is a LOGO show. LOGO bills itself as "entertainment programming for lesbians and gays and just about anyone who enjoys a gay point of view. Logo is the channel for Gay America. Finally" (Frequently Asked Questions). The "channel for Gay America" is a deluxe cable channel. Unlike the reality television

available on major networks such as NBC, it seems unlikely that a viewer would stumble across *Drag Race* accidently while channel surfing. While audience exclusivity may impede gaining new viewership, it also legitimates and authenticates the show through its close proximity to a queer audience. Significantly, *Drag Race* is positioned as the official reality television show for queer America, demonstrating the permissible forms of drag and gender performance.

Reinforced notions of legitimacy and drag performance run through *Drag Race* in disparate ways. As I noted, *RuPaul's Drag Race* appears on LOGO, which bills itself as "the channel for gay America" (Frequently Asked Questions). *Drag Race* is also the first reality television show that features drag queens competing against one another. In "Got to Be Real," Kathleen LeBesco writes:

> During its tenure on US television, reality TV has had a hand in changing images and perceptions of transgressive sexuality for better and worse. Both its texts and audiences reveal understandings of gay lives patterned on, but often departing from, the conventions established by generations of television thought to be purely fictional. Given the political ugliness of those old conventions for gay viewers and their allies, reality TV has been applauded for ushering in a new era of inclusive, "real," and diverse representations of queer sexuality. (271)

LeBesco goes on to discuss the establishment of the representative homosexual character (as seen in shows such as *The Real World* [1992-] and *Survivor* [2000-]) and the issues regarding the lack of quality and complexity surrounding the ways in which gay characters are represented through the format of reality television. Though *Drag Race* does provide viewers with a diverse representation of queer lives and practices, further examination of these representations is needed. How broadly conveyed is the potentiality for queers and Queens who are situated in and through the show? Does gender articulation become freed up through the activity of drag performances? Are there normalizing effects that take place through the act of legitimization?

The host of the program, RuPaul (born RuPaul Andre Charles), deploys her long and successful history as a drag performer in order to position herself as the quintessential drag spokesperson. Viewers also see further examples of a type of queer legitimacy in the show through references

to historically situated drag icons and practices. These references hail queer viewers in such a way that allows interpellation of both the legitimated positions of the show as well as themselves as audience members. Perhaps the most pervasive references found on the program are to the groundbreaking 1990 documentary film *Paris is Burning*, which chronicles the New York City drag ball culture of the late eighties. This film is viewed by many as a source of valuable insight into the transgender and queer drag community. By referencing this film, RuPaul establishes a dialogue between it and the work of *Drag Race*. This connection not only legitimates the queerness of the show in the queer historical continuum; it is also an attempt to equate the two in terms of social value. *RuPaul's Drag Race* jockeys for the same indispensability through the usage of phrases associated with the film. Specifically, RuPaul's usage of the term "xtravaganza" refers to one of the famous drag houses featured in the film. Additionally, one of the mini-challenges the contestants compete in is a vogue-off, a dance style featured by ball competitors in *Paris is Burning*. Through these references to knowing viewers, RuPaul situates her show in the context of a long and complex queer historical record. However, viewers and critics must ask themselves whether or not *Drag Race* belongs in this queer canon or if an act of encroachment has taken place. In her essay "Gender is Burning," Judith Butler responds to the movie *Paris is Burning* and to its critics. She suggests, "drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality" (Butler 125). In the case of the film, I agree with Butler in that drag is made subversive through the multiple types of competitions, the satirization of heterosexuality, and the plethora of queer performance potentialities. However, *Drag Race* arguably produces a more normalizing view of drag performance and competition.

   Drag Race showcases nine competitors who are distinctly different types of Queens. At the beginning of the first season, it seemed that the possibilities for drag were as broadly conveyed as gender itself. Virginia Porkchop served as the representational plus size Queen; however, she was voted off at the end of the first episode. At the beginning of season one, the show included Queens who ranged in age, experience, and race (RuPaul herself is African-American), and also highlighted different types of drag

performances. The androgyny of Nina Flowers and Ongina (who refers to her drag as "gender fuck") makes viewers rethink stereotypical visions of drag performance.

However, I must turn to the three finalist Queens in order to examine the qualities of drag performance that qualify as winning material. Bebe Zahara, Nina Flowers, and Rebecca Glasscock are diverse types of Queens. But in the process of reaching the top, the Queens face differing critiques aimed to the effect of normalizing their performances. Nina Flowers, mentioned previously, is one of the most androgynous performers. Even in this androgyny, Nina must conform to certain standards. Out of drag, Nina is covered with tattoos on her neck and arms. When she is on stage, heavy makeup hides these masculine markings. Through the critique leveled at her, she learns that, at times, her drag appearance needs to be more identifiably feminine and less androgynous in order to be well received. Rebecca Glasscock is not normalized or corrected during the course of the show; she and the other Queens learn that she is the most ideal in terms of her appearance. Repeatedly through the season, Rebecca is told by many of the judges that she is the most naturally beautiful of the Queens. Though all the competitors are beautiful, Rebecca is the Queen who looks most like a woman; she is most capable of passing. The last Queen and subsequent winner of the show is Bebe Zahara. Bebe's drag performance is notable for the amount of compliments she receives about her body. Her hourglass figure is widely featured in close-ups during her runway walks. She is also normalized and legitimated in a different manner on *Drag Race*. Unlike her fellow Queens, Bebe speaks frequently of her cause. Much like a beauty pageant contestant, Bebe has a platform, a cause, for which she is speaking. Bebe states that her goal on the show is to raise money and awareness for Cameroon's battle with AIDS. Through close examination, we see that the Queens of *Drag Race*, while appearing distinct from one another, are eliminated or normalized through discourses of natural beauty and stereotypical depictions of womanhood. Bebe's platform also reveals the way in which the show itself is normalized through the practice of borrowing elements from the reality television repertoire.

Drag Race employs many successful elements or strategies used by other shows from the reality television repertoire. As well as Bebe's pageant platform, displays of cattiness, emotional confessions to the camera,

and catch phrases pepper the program. In "Teaching Us to Fake It," Nick Couldry discusses "gamedocs" or reality game shows (55). Couldry specifically focuses on media rituals, such as the eviction ceremony from the reality show *Survivor.* These formalized actions, such as the "lip sync for your life" moment at the end of *Drag Race*, create a framing mechanism for which reality is accessed through artifice. This moment on the show involves the bottom two Queens of the particular episode lip-syncing to a pre-assigned song; the worst performer is then booted off the show. Couldry writes:

> At stake in these often much-hyped programs is a whole way of reformulating the media's (not just television's) deep-seated claim to present social reality, to be the "frame" through which we access the reality that matters to us as social beings. In the gamedoc, this involves the promotion of specific norms of behavior to which those who court popularity by living in these shows' constructed spaces must conform. (58)

The elements that *Drag Race* borrows from other reality television shows could arguably be a way to present new elements (such as drag queens) in a framing device that viewers feel comfortable with. However, based on my previous discussions of normalization tactics on the show, does *Drag Race* present drag and other queer identities and potentialities in a complex way? If the persistent calls from queer activists for complexity in representation are not answered, the show runs the risk of becoming merely entertainment.

More importantly, as this television show progressed to the end of its first season, it contributed to the ongoing dialogue surrounding the performance and articulation of gender in a way that other makeover reality shows have not. *Drag Race* illustrates that drag is much more than a man putting on a dress. Instead, we see a constellation of feminine performances that help us better understand the constructed nature of gender. In this show, the goal is not just for a man to perfect the appearance of a woman; rather, it entails the successful employment of multiple acts or qualities that illustrate femininity. However, mere subversion of gender performance is not enough to win on *Drag Race*. Gender performance is complicated by slippages and references to what is ultimately the performers' maleness peeking through the layers of makeup and artifice.

In order to better understand my usage of the term *femininity* or *femininities*, I turn to Carrie Paechter's terminology in the article, "Masculine Femininities/Feminine Masculinities: Power, Identities, and Gender." Paechter's primary frustration with gender and performativity stems from the inability to separate either "masculinity or femininity except in relation to each other and to men and women" (254). The author points out that socially, members associate masculinities as what men and boys do, with corresponding femininities as the negative of those acts. She further asserts that either gender can be associated with the performance of these acts. For example, the art of drag kinging employs a variety of masculinities by a body which is gendered female. Most importantly for my discussion of *Drag Race*, Paechter asserts, "Gender is thus centrally concerned with who one considers oneself to be, not how one appears to others" (259). In *Drag Race*, competing Queens must successfully fulfill assigned tasks that demonstrate various femininities, such as sewing or performing a choreographed dance routine. Through successfully demonstrating these femininities, the Queens play with gender attributes and expectations. Through the successful deployment of various femininities, Queens prove their adaptability in performances of gender. The emphasis then is on knowledge rather than a thin façade of womanhood. In the case of *Drag Race*, contestants perform female gender through the performance of femininities. However, these performances of femininities and knowledge underscore that the Queens are being rewarded for overcoming their inherent masculinity. It is the adaptability of the Queen and her performance of femininities that is rewarded through these competitions and challenges.

Referring back to Paechter's discussion of gender, that it is "who one considers oneself to be," we see that the performances of the contestants of *Drag Race* illustrate the mutability of performing one's gender (259). Gender is articulated in this show in different, messy ways. One of RuPaul's many catch phrases in every episode of the show is, "Gentlemen, start your engines. And may the best woman win!" Examining this phrase helps us understand that the audience (and the contestants) should view the participants' gender as both male and female, depending on the situation or context. Here we should consider West and Zimmerman's crucial discussion of the situational doing of gender in the article "Doing Gender." Building on

Erving Goffman's discussion of everyday presentation, West and Zimmerman write:

> In one sense, of course, it is individuals who 'do' gender. But it is a situated doing, carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to its production. Rather than as a property of individuals, we conceive of gender as an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society. (126)

Though it is clear that the contestants of *Drag Race* are not interested in changing their biological sexes for the audience, they are engaged in convincing performances of femininities that are associated with female gender in the context of the stage, or as it is most often referred to, the runway. During episode five, Queen Bebe Zahara is asked if there is ever confusion about her gender when she appears in drag at clubs. Bebe notes that confusion happens all the time, but she responds by telling the confused club patron that drag is an illusion, that she has created a character for the show. Bebe also stresses that she does not want to live as a woman. We also see messy displays of gender in another way on *Drag Race*. Before the start of every episode's challenge, RuPaul reminds the Queens that judges will be looking for their "Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve and Talent," their C.U.N.Ts, if you will. While on stage, the Queens need to make sure that their C.U.N.Ts are present for the judges to rate. The articulation of femininities (and the contestants' metaphorical cunts) helps us see that gender is situational; its display in the context of this show spills over socially constructed demarcated binaries that separate man from woman.

Other conceptions of the contestants' selves provocatively assert a re-thinking of the linkages between gender and identity. The contestants (whether they are in or out of drag) are known only by their feminine drag names. Mirroring this, RuPaul is both in and out of Queen drag throughout the span of the show and is referred to only by her drag name. (Editor's note: When in male clothing, Rupaul has been known to speak of being in male drag.) In episode eight, the remaining three Queens discuss the issue of not knowing one another's "real" names. Rebecca Glasscock says, "Within the drag world, we never really call each other by our guy names, whether we're in or out of drag." The girls tell one another their male names, but

Bebe seems to have a hard time connecting Nina to her male name, Jorge. After Nina/Jorge repeatedly tells Bebe her male name, Bebe, the winner of season one, can only respond by asking, "huh?" Finally, Nina gives up and the girls continue to prepare for their drag challenge. In this scene, we see that Bebe is unable to separate Nina, the drag persona, from Jorge, the figure who becomes Nina. Perhaps Bebe's confusion stems from her relationship with Nina: Because the show focuses upon the participants' identities as drag queens, Bebe has not had contact with the part of Nina that is truly Jorge. Even out of drag costume and makeup, the participants still occupy their drag personas. In the context of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, there is tension between the contestants' male personas and the drag personas that many have professionally developed (and named) over time. The show also illustrates that the way identity is conceived by the contestants involves a layering or doubling of their daily selves with their drag selves. However, these selves are not without some sense of demarcation. Though the performers on the show blur gendered norms, they must know when to utilize elements of performance depending upon the situation.

When an individual begins to put on drag, a type of boundary is crossed. As with most boundaries, this crossing is not neat or clean, but is messy and blurry. Drag is ultimately successful (and most subversive) at the very moment that a type of doubled-ness occurs, a layering of the performances of everyday gender and drag gender. For a drag audience, there is a tension between what they see and what they know. Audiences see a woman on the stage, but know that underneath the makeup and clothing lies a man. The tension comes from the queerness of the individual who is, simultaneously, a layered construction of genders. The drag performer plays with this tension and in those moments exposes and subverts conventional gender expectations. These contestants illustrate the layering that occurs between both masculine and feminine as well as daily performances and drag performances. Judith Halberstam writes, "Layering really describes the theatricality of both drag queen and drag king acts and reveals their multiple 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" (261). In this chapter of *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam writes about successful drag kings, such as Mo B. Dick, who exposes his

breasts mid-act while sporting facial hair or wearing men's suits and accessories. As she notes, the attention to "layering" (the performer's female body juxtaposed with a masculine appearance) exemplifies the performer's queerness: The individual is neither this nor that, but both; this layering collapses the constructedness of the gender binary into a wonderfully queer and messy reality. I see the layering of drag performance on *RuPaul's Drag Race* as layering that differs from that of Mo B. Dick. The performances on *Drag Race* rely upon seamlessness while also requiring a demonstration of situational knowledge. Halberstam's discussion of layering involves a degree of visibility of queerness; the emphasis is on the seams themselves in these drag king performances. Ultimately the more complex view of queerness, that of the visible seams of Mo B. Dick, and gender performance is the most liberating.

Besides playing with audience expectations, this tension also affects the performer. In episode six of *Drag Race,* contestant Nina Flowers talks a few minutes about the process of transformation from masculine persona to feminine drag queen. She says,

> My favorite part of doing drag is the transformation. It's amazing how I'm able to change while I'm doing my makeup, my pads, my hair… and while I'm doing every single step, Nina takes over more and more. And finally, when she's done, the different persona comes out. And to me, [that's] where the art is.

Successful drag hinges upon an audience's awareness of this layering; the moments when the seams of various masculinities and femininities are sewn tightly together call attention to the skillful artifice necessary for a winning drag presentation.

A return to Jade's flawed performance on the runway reveals complex issues of drag performance and authenticity or legitimacy. Though the notion of authenticity seems to contradict the essence of drag (it is, after all an imitation), a successful performance requires a seemingly real performance of femaleness. Certain acts are performed in order to legitimate this authenticity. One key act on *Drag Race* is tucking, to make the penis and scrotum undetectable under even the skimpiest layer of clothing. During the review of Jade's performance on the runway and her challenges throughout that episode, RuPaul asks her fellow panel members, "Below the creamy surface was a package. Was I the only one who noticed that?" The other judges laugh and affirm that they too are able to detect Jade's penis. In the

reunion episode, RuPaul returns to a discussion of Jade's penis. She asks her how big it really is, but then claims she is only kidding. She follows this by stating that tucking "is a legitimate part of being a drag queen." Noticing Jade's discomfort, RuPaul asks why it bothers her that she would point out her penis-tucking failure after her performance. Jade responds by stating, "Obviously, when you're dressed as a woman, you don't want to be asked questions about your penis. It's very embarrassing." Viewers see the constraints of the male body in this moment of situational gender performance. Unlike Halberstam's discussion of Mo B. Dick, Jade's performance is not heralded for its messiness, its ultimate queerness of layered femininities and masculinities. Instead, Jade's tuck fail and RuPaul's insistence that the ability to hide one's penis is a hallmark of Queenhood reveal the limitations of drag performance on the show. Rather than the queerness of mixing gender norms which illustrates that the individual is neither this nor that but both, we see that the form of drag that is rewarded is merely a reassertion of stereotypical gender performance that prescribes the shape and form of the Queens' appearances and behaviors.

Despite Jade's shame stemming from her inability to completely hide her genitalia during her performance as a woman, RuPaul insists on Jade's redeeming quality as a man (i.e. his genitalia are so large he cannot possibly hide them). Though Jade has failed at performing femininity, ultimately her masculinity becomes a powerful redeeming factor. This disjuncture raises questions about authenticity and drag performance, as well as illustrating the physical limitations of the performative construction of gender.

Though transsexualism differs from drag performance, the article "Transsexuals' Embodiment of Womanhood" helps readers better understand notions of gender performance. To clarify, transsexualism involves an individual who assumes the identity of and lives as the gender opposite to his or her biological sex. This differs from the performance of drag, in which a Queen performs femaleness on the stage or runway. In this study, Douglas Schrock writes about a group of nine transsexuals who analyzed the women around them, how they drove a car, smoked a cigarette, and performed other mundane tasks. The group of transsexuals also scrutinized media representations of embodied gender transformation. The author found "the increased self-monitoring and policing ironically made enacting their [the transsexuals in the study] self-definitions feel inauthentic, at least ini-

tially" (Schrock 323). Though these feelings of inauthenticity are connected to the individual's transition from male to female and their performance of femaleness, I argue that this experience connects to notions of authenticity and scripted-ness in relation to drag queen performance, specifically illustrated in Jade's performance. The transsexuals' experience with achieving authenticity refers to ease of performance; i.e. 'naturalness' vs. forced renditions of femininity. Joyce, a transsexual discussing her early experimentation with female gender performance, notes that at times she "looked like a drag queen" (Schrock 324). In this case, Joyce's identity was doubled – she, uneasy in her performance, felt like a man in a dress. Her display of femaleness was not natural to her nor did she feel as if it appeared natural to a social audience. Authenticity and the notion of passing are connected in Joyce's situation, while in the case of drag the display and art of the performance itself are stressed. Jade having a penis is not the problem; her inability to render it invisible resulted in her performance failure. For the transsexuals in this study, the penis became a signifier of inauthenticity of femaleness: "having lost its virility [after hormone treatment] the penis became merely an uncomfortable reminder of their gender-discrepant bodies" (Schrock 329). However, RuPaul's emphasis on the size (and the potential for pleasure) of Jade's penis marks the distinction between the inauthenticity of penises for drag queens and transsexuals. Jade's failure in performing female-ness is purportedly overcome through the reification of her manhood. Though Jade was not successful in exuding femaleness on the stage, the evidence of her virile manhood overcame that humiliation. This maleness is portrayed as a type of saving grace for Jade's poor performance of femaleness.

In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, RuPaul is asked about her "reemergence" into the public eye. RuPaul states, "'It wasn't a meltdown or anything. It really had more to do with understanding the temperature socially. Now'—in the Barack Obama era—'it's the perfect time to reemerge'" (Stransky 62). Is this the perfect time for drag queens to be featured in a reality television show? Though Proposition Eight (which was passed by California voters and eliminated same-sex couples' right to marry) has been overturned, currently, no new legal marriages can be performed in the state. On the other hand, six states and one district have recently passed bills to allow gay marriage within their borders, the validity of which is

widely debated. The film *Milk* (2008), which tells the story of Harvey Milk, California's first openly gay elected official, lagged in box office numbers, but was nominated for several Oscar awards. These moments send conflicting signals about queer acceptance and recognition in our current political and cultural climate. Though many have argued that queer visibility on television and in film is a good thing, I believe that in the case of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, that visibility through the limiting scope of the show impedes progress for drag culture. Because the show does not reward or recognize the complexity of drag performances, it becomes merely entertainment. Queer performances such as those of drag king Mo. B. Dick illustrate what drag *can* do while *Drag Race* prescribes the sort of work that gender performances are *expected* to do. While some may argue that entertainment and reality television are not the place for education, our current political and cultural environment demands an inclusion of the complexity of queer representation.

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