'Tens, Tens, Tens Across the Board':

Representation, Remuneration, and Repercussion – *RuPaul's Drag Race* from Screens to Streets

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ABSTRACT

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Since its inception, *RuPaul's Drag Race (Drag Race)* (2009-) has pitted drag queens against each other in a series of challenges testing acting, singing, and sewing skills. *Drag Race* continues to become more profitable and successful by the year and arguably shapes cultural ideas of queer performances in manifold ways. This project investigates the impacts of exploitative labour practices that emerge from the show, the commodification of drag when represented on screen, and how the show influences drag and queer performances off screen. Through systemic content analysis, interviews, and observations, this thesis investigates the impact of the show and the evolution of *Drag Race* as a corporate empire. Aided by literature on television, labour, representation, and commodification, this project analyzes how *Drag Race*'s particular distortion of reality, undertaken as a generic norm of reality TV, not only commodifies and corporatizes drag for the benefit of the producers of the show, but also does a disservice to the art form and impacts upon the lives of the types of queer performers the show purports to capture.

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Introduction:

"Gentlemen, start your engine and may the best woman win!" – RuPaul on every episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, ever.

What is it that contestants on a television reality show win? What is the price of instant fame and recognition of one's work? How are competition shows formatted in order to ensure entertainment value and maximize profit? What does it mean to represent queer art on mainstream television? How does what we see on screen affect what we want to see in the streets? From screens to streets, this thesis tackles these questions that deal with the discrepancy between reality television shows and real life. In order to analyze a mechanism through which all this occurs, I turn to the successful reality competition show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (*Drag Race*) (2009-). The success of the show has made the world fall in love with drag and revolutionized the art form by shining a positive - yet I argue restrictive - light on a historically marginalized practice. *Drag Race* has launched the careers of over 140 mostly American drag queens and unveiled conventionally inaccessible practices of the art form to the world. After fifteen seasons, the show continues to promise entertainment for viewers through renewals and chapters in Thailand, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. *Drag Race* has made it possible for drag queens to enter mainstream media outlets, but also relegates certain performers from enjoying similar attention. I wonder, what is the price of *mainstreaming* drag?

In 2019, at the 71st Primetime Emmy Awards, *Drag Race* took home four awards out of nine nominations, including Outstanding Host and Outstanding Reality Competition Program. The year before, the show achieved five wins. In total, *Drag Race* has received twenty-nine

nominations and a total of thirteen wins at the prestigious award ceremony since 2015.[1] This monumental achievement celebrated the art of drag and confirmed the show's position in mainstream media as a pillar in the genre of the reality competition show and in the representation of queer art on television. As *Drag Race* continues to become more profitable and successful, the show arguably shapes cultural ideas about queer performances. This project investigates the impacts of exploitative labour practices emerging from the show, the commodification of drag when represented on screen, and how the show widely affects drag performance, televised and live, in North America.

Drag emerged from theatre and is the acronym for 'Dressed Resembling A Girl,' or men portraying women on stage (Sandoval, 2018, p. 100-101). However, the type of drag represented on *Drag Race* is more closely tied to vaudevillian acts and the pageant circuit (p. 104-5). Drag is now generally hosted in nightclubs where entertainers of all gender identities freely explore their expressions of masculinity and femininity (Rupp & Taylor, 2003). As *Drag Race* transforms drag from an expressive art form into a commodified product of culture based on feminine visual appeal, it obscures certain complexities. Through the exploitation of labour for entertainment value and financial gain, the standardization of drag in the show replaces a form of 'democratic street performance' of gender with a 'corporate representation' onscreen. By the former, I mean a space where performers can explore their femininity and masculinity free of conventions. A 'corporate' screen aesthetic refers to the hyper-feminine and marketable drag aesthetic tailored by the producers in search of 'America's Next Drag Superstar', the title awarded to the winner of each season. In turn, the prevalence of this type of drag identity, as favored on the show, considerably

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[1] Find the complete list of the prizes won by Drag Race at the ceremony: https://www.emmys.com/shows/rupauls-drag-race

influences the ways in which the art form is produced and consumed in the streets of gay neighborhoods.

Since its inception, the competitive reality television show has pitted drag queens against each other in a series of challenges, including acting, lip-synching, and sewing. Each regular season, *Drag Race* invites between twelve to fifteen professional drag queens to compete for the crown and the money prize.[2] Every week, which actually represents only a couple of days on set, a contestant is eliminated based on their competence in a given challenge and runway presentation, as well as their ability to outperform the second lowest candidate in a 'lip-synch for your life'. The winner of the lip-synch gets to continue in the competition until, ultimately, one winner is crowned. The challenges include assessments of sewing abilities, comedy, dancing, knowledge of popular culture, and, finally, their ability to market themselves in the growing drag industry. Considering the format of the show, the competitors are seen working on challenges in the *werkroom*, which is a space where the cameras capture their most entertaining moves. Towards the middle of each episode, unless the challenge has involved a set relocation, contestants are required to present the finished product on the mainstage before a runway presentation of their best outfit that addresses the week's given theme. Afterwards, a panel of both recurring and guest celebrity judges critique the contestants before the weakest two are tasked with battling it out in a final lip-synch.

Drag Race thus monitors their contestants over a period of time as they compete for the coveted title, the cash prize, and many rewards, which include wigs, all-expenses-paid travel, tickets to Broadway shows, and such like. In many ways, the show also pokes fun at elements of popular culture and at times rejects some of the United States' policies. *Drag Race* has always been aware of its mainstream positionality and the show reflects its success back to viewers

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[2] The sister seasons, such as *All Stars* (2012-), function very similarly with a few exceptions.

through some of their challenges. That being said, no season has ever epitomized this more than season ten, which is why I have chosen to conduct a close reading of this edition as part of this project. Season ten, on top of casting impersonators who predominantly recapitulated feminine norms, refraining from dealing with sociopolitical concerns, imposing a strict criticism-and-reward model, and reflecting the popularization of the art form, is symptomatic of a funneling of drag into a homogenized and marketable version. Similar in scope to Etir-Anne Edgar's (2011) study of the first season of *Drag Race*, this thesis closely analyzes its tenth in order to reveal how it exploits aspects of drag, participates in transforming the art form into a product, and obscures its complexities. In addition to academic writings on competitive reality television programs, the manipulation of creative labour, and the politics of television shows, I attempt to identify the ways in which *Drag Race* erases the labour of drag and associates success with a particular aesthetic by way of typecasting and strategically designing challenges.

Research on these dimensions of queer performance on television is limited. To date, no scholarship focuses on the exploitation and commodification of drag on screen, the topic which this project specifically addresses. In addition, *Drag Race* has evolved as a television program from season to season. The first seasons appeared to be a celebration of the art form's diversity. However, as the show gained more critical recognition and popularity, as well as an active online following, the depiction of drag became universalized by the criticism-and-reward model of *Drag Race* putting forward an ultra-feminine aesthetic. The show targets mainstream viewers by providing visibility to identities that guarantee profit, which leads to the commodification of drag in the pursuit of mainstream appeal (Peters, 2011, p. 197). Because of drag's expansion into film, television, and digital culture, my examination of the impact of mainstream media in creating disparities between lived drag identities and their adaptation on television bears wider implications

for the study of representation in the media industries. Chicago drag queen and *Drag Race*'s alumnus Kim Chi once said, "If you can name every single drag race queen but can't name ten local queens in your hometown, you're a drag race fan, not a drag fan" (2017). This quote exemplifies how *Drag Race* as an empire has commodified drag largely in order to exploit queer artists, I will be arguing, rather than to expand awareness of the complexities of the art form and its lived, street iterations to the wider community.

Television's capitalist mode of production is apparent in many reality television shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-) which, for Yarma Velázquez Vargas (2010), generates revenue from depicting queer culture on screen (p. 27). What makes *Drag Race* worthy of academic engagement is, firstly, the consideration that the art form was largely marginalized and under-represented on screen before the premiere of *Drag Race* in 2009. While RuPaul Charles was renowned in the entertainment industry, the practitioners of the art form were neither regularly celebrated nor accurately represented on screen. For example, blockbuster movies such as *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Stephan Elliott, 1994), *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (Beedan Kidron, 1995) and *Kinky Boots* (Julian Jarrold, 2005) cast non-drag queens to portray drag characters. Secondly, as a non-lucrative profession (Berkowitz & Liska Belgrave, 2010, p. 178), generating financial profit from the labour of drag competitors is problematic, especially considering the massive revenue spawned from *Drag Race*'s annual renewals, spin-offs on YouTube, upcoming international editions, and the annual convention event Drag Con. Lastly, according to Claire Alexander (2017), the depiction of drag on screen has influenced its performance as well as its reception in the streets. Given all these factors, the exploitation of labour and the commodification of identity inherent to many television shows

become all the more crucial to study in relation to *Drag Race* because of its repercussions offscreen.

My first chapter presents the three driving concepts of this thesis: representation, consumerism, and ecology. As such, it offers a review of relevant academic studies that strengthen my main arguments. While all three concepts are present within each chapter, I have designed the thesis in three parts that deal, in turn, with: the exploitation of the labour of the contestants, the capitalist strategies driving the popularization of the show that have transformed drag into a product, and the off-screen consequences of the commodification of the art form.

My second chapter, which examines televised drag as a potential form of exploitation, draws on creative industries and television studies literatures in order to assess how drag risks being taken advantage of because the work is pleasurable and personally fulfilling (Pang, 2009, p. 55-78; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011, p. 6). As reality television shows are fundamentally concerned with representing labour on screen (Hendershot, 2009, p. 244), this chapter also analyzes the metrics of reality television. By providing an insight into aspects of drag usually inaccessible to an audience at nightclubs, *Drag Race* is a reality television show that, for Jean Retzinger (2010), is a genre offering "viewers access to otherwise hidden processes of commodity production, revealing the conditions of labour, and delivering that information directly into our living rooms" (p. 442). The non-contextual editing, harsh criticisms, and the brevity of work televised reduces the labour performed on screen as it visually erases significant dimensions of it (p. 457). In addition, considering that reality television, in part, functions in order to feature advertisements (Hendershot, 2009, p. 255), the televised labour benefits largely the producers and networks.

The third chapter engages studies on queer representation and queer theory in order to analyze how the leap to mainstream screen leads to the commodification of queer art (Kohnen, 2015, p. 3). Queer male bodies have been sexualized and commodified in television shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007) and turned audiences into consumers of a capitalist lifestyle, which ends up profiting networks (Miller, 2005, p. 112-3; Vargas, 2010, p. 95). This mechanism is tied to a globalization of television that boosts demands for non-fiction programming, which is cheaper to produce, more popular and profitable (Fürsich, 2003, p. 141-2). Networks, while they may be genuinely celebrating queer minorities on screen, improve their ratings, viewership, and engagements by programming queer content (Peters, 2011, p. 194). This framework challenges definitions of drag by corroborating how *Drag Race*'s "main goal seems to be to sell an image as a product" (Sandoval, 103).

The fourth and last chapter continues to discuss the process of turning drag into a product, in line with Marcel Mauss' (2002) understanding of commodification. Commodification, the process that converts often immaterial entities into saleable items, simultaneously attributes to these products a sociopolitical framework (Sharp, 2000, p. 291). I wonder, how does representing queer communities on screen impact queer performers? By conducting interviews with local drag queens and fans, I have attempted to find concrete examples of how *Drag Race* affects their careers and success. Does the limited representation in *Drag Race*'s tenth season, as explained above, influence what viewers and drag enthusiasts associate with drag? Have viewers developed a level of expectation from the show? Discrepancies between what reality television offers and its lived practice create a new set of values that form personal conceptions (Rose & Wood, 2005). Opening drag to the mainstream by representing it on television shapes understandings of what successful representations of the art form resemble (Edgar, 2011). By establishing norms and expectations of

what drag is, audience members at home or nightclubs now judge other drag queens based on their lateness, unpolished aesthetics, and the quality of their numbers; basically, what the show associates with successful drag (Edgar, 137; Alexandre, 2017).

What does including drag on a mainstream platform such as *Drag Race* mean in terms of visibility? More precisely, what is the balance between expanding the art form and underrepresenting its complexities? As the art form is made for the consumption of viewers who seek entertainment and pleasure, drag is turned into a product, which, unfortunately, is often the case when queerness is represented on screen. RuPaul said in episode six of season ten, "I have branded every damn thing I can," which alludes to an understanding of drag as a new form of economy on television. Analysis of writings on commodification and reality television shows have helped me, in the upcoming pages, to research the transformation of a democratic art form into a corporatized representation. As outlined above, by 'corporatization', I mean the fabrication of a universally and visually appealing aesthetic, the exploitation of labour for the benefit of producers, and, finally, the depiction of a limited and customized representation of drag. To grasp the ramifications of this, the thesis incorporates ethnographic study that investigates the influence of the art form from the perspective of Montreal drag queens and drag fans, who will appear in my second, third, and fourth chapters. This thesis analyzes whether *Drag Race* associates successful drag with a refined image, which might become the very definition of the art form for the viewers unaware of its diversity. In turn, I question how this business model influences the lives of those whom *Drag Race* depicts.

<u>Chapter 1:</u>

<u>Screening Drag: Between Ecology, Representation, and Consumerism</u>

Does what we see on screen affect what we want to see in the streets? This question lies at the heart of this thesis where I focus on the mechanisms and outcomes of screening a queer subculture on mainstream television. Using academic literature on television and queer studies, I wish to address how reality television celebrates, but both ignores and shapes elements of the culture it represents. In order to focus this research on a significant case study, I analyze the depiction of drag on the primetime, hit competition reality television show, *Drag Race*. Academic engagement with the art form and its adaptation for television has generated a noteworthy pool of research queries. Relevant studies that are essential to the understanding of the show while not being necessarily about *Drag Race* include a historical mapping of drag and gender performance (Butler, 1990; Senelick, 2000; Brennan, 2017; Sandoval, 2018), the correlation between screened queerness and its commodification (Kirsch, 2000; Sharp, 2000; Miller, 2005; Velázquez Vargas, 2010; Peters, 2011), a study of the metrics of reality television and its exploitative conditions (Rose & Woods, 2005; Hendershot, 2009; Retzinger, 2010; Winant, 2014), and ethnographic studies conducted in local drag venues (Brian Brown, 2001; Rupp & Taylor, 2003, Berkowitz et al., 2007 & 2010; Sarid, 2010; Alexander, 2017).

This chapter provides a review of the literature relevant to my study, frequently channelling it in an introductory way through themes that preoccupy Chapters 2 to 4, while focusing on three pertinent overarching ones: ecology, representation, and consumerism. I firstly use Neil Postman's (1970) account of ecology to analyze the impact of mediatizing cultures on viewers. I then turn to Melanie Kohnen (2015), and many other queer studies scholars, to discuss the representation of

queerness on television, keeping in mind its positive and negative aspects. Drawing from Max H. Kirch's (2000) association of queerness with a capitalist mode of consumption, I analyze the commodification of identities as it unfolds on prime-time television. Topics that emerge from these discussions include: the relation between reality television, labour and its exploitative practices; the homogenization of drag representation; the creation of marketable identities; and the aftermath of treating drag as a new economy based on queer performers and their performances.

A thorough engagement with these themes establishes the groundwork for queer representation on television and its impact. Closely analyzing the tenth season of *Drag Race* provides a concrete case study of these mechanisms. In this thesis, I investigate precisely how depicting drag - a marginalized and precarious queer subculture - on mainstream television does a disservice to the art form by corporatizing and standardizing representations, and impacts viewers' perceptions of the community. I hope to reflect exploitative conditions within reality television, the commodification of drag, and the direct impacts of both depicting and celebrating the art form on mainstream screens.

Ecology: Acknowledging the history of drag on and off the screen

Why does the representation and regulation of queer visibility matter? The main concern of this thesis is to identify in what ways televised queer content conventions impact both the queer subculture represented on screen and the viewers themselves. As I investigate elements of the production and reception of *Drag Race*, I turn to Postman's definition of ecology. The author delineates the concept in relation to "how media of communication affect human perception, understanding, feeling, and value" (p. 161). As such, ecology is a central theme to this study as it refers to the impact of mediatized environments on people (p. 161). Postman reveals how media,

including television, has an influence on reception, which both challenges the passivity of viewers and shapes personal comprehension, definition, and even appreciation of screened content. I mobilize Postman's definition within my study of the impact of representing drag on screen. The perception of the art form is affected because *Drag Race* homogenizes its screen representation and viewers have a tendency to associate drag with what the show depicts. As *Drag Race* favors the illusion of femaleness, it ignores the complexities of the art form and might redefine drag for viewers. Feelings and values are also manipulated through how the show exploits its competitors for entertainment value and profit. Ecology is thus a major theme of this work on account of how television influences viewers and shapes drag art off and onscreen.

At the most obvious level, and as is standard for reality television, the non-contextual editing of each episode paints the competitors in favorable or unfavorable ways in order to create empathy and apathy for the viewers. These manipulations participate in creating dramatic moments throughout the season, which consequently drive interest in the program. The Vixen (one of the contestants), and as will be explored in greater detail later, was a victim of editing abuse, and was painted as being aggressive, initiating conflicts, and being rude to her competitors throughout the season. The editing strategies in place, which villainized The Vixen in the pursuit of entertainment for the success of the show, are also apparent in the interactions between the competitors.[3]

Beyond this drive for narrative, *Drag Race*'s tenth season alters various ecologies through establishing a governing aesthetic. The fourteen drag queens who entered the competition, and especially the finalists, present the illusion of beautiful, well-proportioned, and graceful womanhood. This aesthetic dominates each episode as the judges' criticisms and rewards promote

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[3] Season 9 was deemed to be not interesting enough because of the lack of conflicts and villains, for example, which made it a lackluster season.

the pursuit of the female appearance. This aesthetic, however, does not encompass the full spectrum of what drag is, but rather a certain type of performer and performance. Additionally, the search for *Drag Race*'s model is also reflected throughout the season. The competitor who best coalesces the aesthetic coveted by the producers and the networks, while simultaneously embodying a marketable product of drag, is ultimately crowned.[4]

Grasping the roots of the art form is essential to the analysis of its adaptation in these ways for screen. Recalling the origins of the word drag, as discussed in the introduction of this thesis, the art form is tightly bound to discussions of gender performance. Pioneer gender-studies scholar Judith Butler (1990) explains that, "gender is culturally constructed" (p. 6). With that understanding, Butler differentiates gender and bodies as independent from one another since "gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice" (p. 6). Gender is considered a social performance built from a coherence between identity and behaviors while not being attached to genitalia (p. 17). This philosophical concern about the relationship between gender and bodies in Butler's work pertains to day-to-day, permanent gender identity. Drag complicates these definitions as the performance of gender is ephemeral. Birthed in Greek and English theatre, as explained by Niall Brennan (2017), drag "brings into play biological sex, gender identity, and the gender-performed identity" and rests on providing an illusion of gender (p. 31). The construction of gender in drag is thus associated with a staged, short-term spectacle of femininity or masculinity, rather than a lived identity (Senelick, 2000, p. 100-1). I am interested here in analyzing the fluidity of gender performance through drag as defined by Butler. Based on social indicators of femininity, drag

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[4] This is especially apparent since the winner of season 10 admitted to being inspired to start a career in this industry from watching the first season of *Drag Race* at a young age.

performers on the tenth season of *Drag Race* acquire femaleness through their behaviors and appearance in drag while still identifying as male-bodied in each episode.[5]

Historically, drag has been a vehicle for gender performance on stage when, as Joge Sandoval (2018) writes, "other possibilities for expression were not socially acceptable" (p. 100). In addition, as a social and political performance, drag queens utilize this avenue to manage experiences of marginalization (Berkowtiz & Belgrave, 2010, p. 167). Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor (2003) claim that drag functions as "a transgressive attempt to deconstruct gender and sexuality systems" (p. 216). However, the show's representation of the art form, for Sandoval, "raises the concern of drag transforming from a traditional strategy for resistance into a trivialized and depoliticized representation of gender" (p. 100). In my chapters, I analyze how the roots of drag are sanitized for the pursuit of mainstream appeal and financial success. I identify the following elements in the process: the depreciation of drag, the exploitation of a performer's labour, and the subsequent transformations of the subculture itself.

How performers are evaluated, including by the viewers, is impacted when the art form is televised. Providing the illusion of gender requires skill, time, and money (Brian Brown, 2001, p. 41; Wesling, 2012, p. 115; Berkowtiz & Belgrave, 2010, p. 179). Therefore, drag constitutes what David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker (2009) define as a form of creative labour as it demands skills and entertains masses (p. 2). The work is defined as personally rewarding and satisfactory, which, according to both authors, propels the labourer to work beyond emotional and physical limitations (p. 6). As working for the entertainment industry, here television, provides opportunities for fame, recognition, and appreciation from the public while demanding physical

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[5] In recent seasons, *Drag Race* has opened the doors to transwomen who also perform femininity in drag while identifying as female out of drag. However, I am analyzing the performance of gender rather than gender identity.

and emotional labour, Hesmondhalgh and Baker argue that the rewards of creative labour "become the basis of exploitation" (p. 7). Since the labour is poorly remunerated, its fulfilling and flexible aspects lead workers to risk exploitation on and off screen. Postman claims that the reception of drag through television impacts the perception of the art form and the personal values – affection and esteem - attributed by the viewer. As *Drag Race* exploits drag queens on television, the exposure challenges definitions and appreciations of the art form. The following two chapters specifically address these concerns through a discussion of labour exploitation in capitalist industries. By considering drag a form of creative labour, I analyze the ways in which televising marginalized subcultures generates profit for media conglomerates.

The influence of *Drag Race* is felt in the streets via the popularity of *Drag Race*'s alumni. For example, many finalists in the competition have toured numerous metropoles to sold-out houses, visited local nightclubs to the idolization of fans, and have garnered popularity on social media. This latter quality has bolstered the prospects of favorites such as Adore Delano, Manila Luzon, Aquaria, and most recently Plastique Tiara. According to Claire Alexander (2017), popularity on digital platforms has "partly replaced the learning and networking that was traditionally done at the clubs" (p. 260). Indeed, the author claims that some drag queens are inspired by the alumni of the show in the search for their aesthetic (p. 264). Additionally, the show imposes a level of performance that drag queens now have to abide by, partially because the popularity of the program brings new audiences with new expectations to their shows.

In order to fully investigate the leverage of the show in the streets, I analyze podcasts hosted by *Drag Race* alumni, Katya and Craig's *Whimsically Volatile* (2018-) and Alaska and Willam's *Race Chaser* (2016-). The study of these hour-long conversations between the hosts and alumni ground the thesis with tangible evidence from past competitors. These reveal the production

circumstances of the program, the labour conditions, and behind-the-scenes secrets from the length of taping, the influence of the producers, and the treatment of the contestants off air. These elements are essential for highlighting certain aspects neglected in academia that reinforce the arguments of this thesis. These non-typical sources provide key information that remains unexplored in academic texts yet is vital to the development of this work.

I am interested in positioning my work in relation to similar concerns as I am conducting interviews with local drag performers and enthusiasts. Including their answers in my work addresses the influence of the show on the audience make-up, their expectations, and their involvement in concrete ways. Similarly, the interviews also provide insights into the hidden processes of drag performance, such as financial and time investments. These elements impact how the art form is being perceived on screen, which challenges the viewer's understanding and the value attributed. Going back to Postman's definition of ecology, I dismantle the mechanisms of televising drag on mainstream screens and, in particular, examine its influences. The distance that is created through this process is fascinating as street identities are faced with having to converge with screen identities to receive a similar mainstream appeal. Through a discussion of exploitation of labour and commodification, I will examine how the depiction of drag directly impacts personal understanding, feelings, and values for viewers as posited by Postman's notion of ecology.

Representation: The mechanisms of depicting queerness in television

Does the depiction of drag in *Drag Race*'s tenth season influence what viewers and fans associate with the art form? In thinking about *Drag Race* as a platform that screens a subculture of queerness, it is essential to understand where the show is situated in terms of representing queer cultures.

Prior to *Drag Race*, drama and comedy shows like *Ellen* (1994-1998), *Will and Grace* (1998-),

Queer as Folk (2000-2005) and *The L World* (2004-2009) included queer characters, whether out

or not, in their story-telling, either in explicit or attenuated ways. Beyond the very fact of these

presences, the representation of queerness can also be measured through a discourse of accuracy

and authenticity. In analyzing queer-themed television shows, Robert B. Bateman (2005) writes

that queer culture "must not be reduced to a mere aesthetic form or a highly anesthetized mode of

existence, but must involve an evaluation of real bodies, real desire, and real sex acts" (p. 12). A

failure in this endeavor constitutes a betrayal to the queer communities represented on screen (p.

12-3). Bateman introduces a level of responsibility to accurately depict queerness on screen.

Indeed, offering a mainstream spot to represent a queer subculture does not always imply its

celebration.[6] In addition, Kylo-Patrick R. Hart (2003) argues that the depiction of queer characters

on screen "has undoubtedly influenced the way the American public thinks about and responds,

both socially and politically" to said culture (p. 598). Television thus shapes the minds of the

viewers, which echoes Postman's definition of ecology.

In this project, I discuss the theme of representation in relation to both Bateman and Hart's

arguments. The second and third chapter denounce *Drag Race*'s lack of inclusivity as well as its

impact on viewers. I utilize the studies conducted by both authors to examine the producers'

responsibility to represent the complete spectrum of drag, considering that viewers may be

unaware of its complexities off screen.

Melanie Kohnen (2015) claims that "visibility exists in the tension between presence and

perception" (p. 14), which reinforces the lack of inclusivity in screened representations of

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[6] In this article, Bateman also discusses how networks and producers capitalize on the depiction of queerness for a straight audience and engage in brand sponsorship and other activities to generate revenues from their representation of queer culture.

queerness. She introduces the concept of 'closet-as-screen' which refers to a strict regulation as to what types of queer identities the media displays (p. 12). To my mind as well as Kohnen's, television fails to provide a diverse representation of queer identities (p. 151). Drawing from Kohnen's analysis, I pursue television's limited and limiting representation of queer identities in reference to drag. The following chapters conduct a close analysis of how *Drag Race*'s tenth season epitomizes a lack of drag diversity. This season, arguably the most mainstreamed and award-winning rendition of the program, features fourteen drag queens presenting similar illusions of beautiful femaleness. The homogenized sample of drag queens questions whether *Drag Race*'s goal is to celebrate the art form or favor an aesthetic that guarantees a particular type of entertainment and financial revenue.

The discussion of a homogenized representation of drag is a recurring theme throughout this thesis. *Drag Race* exemplifies how, according to Gregory Woods (2017), "assimilation was going to exact a price" (p. 119). I argue that this price deliberately neglects the representation of the complete spectrum of the art form for the pursuit of mainstream appeal and profit, as explained by Woods:

> Queerness has to be normalized if it is to be popular. Where it might become subversive, it must be shown to be compliant. Where it is perverse, it must be shown to be laughable. Wanting to be seen on television was always going to raise similar problems as wanting to be represented in parliament. Concessions would be only granted in response to subcultural compromise. (p. 119)

This negotiation is at the heart of this thesis. Is *Drag Race*'s only goal to represent the type of drag that appeals the most? Does this disregard for the diversity of the art form hinder drag globally? Instead of providing opportunities to celebrate drag, is *Drag Race* minimizing both the

worth and the identities of other drag artists outside of their model? In the following chapters, I attempt to respond to these queries and weigh up the influence of the screen phenomenon in the streets. Conducting interviews with local drag queens and drag enthusiasts specifically addresses the concerns raised by myself and the authors above.

The depiction of queer identities on *Drag Race* is even more compromised by the fact that the competition program belongs to the reality television genre. As the show provides (allegedly) unscripted situations, its popularity also stems from the subjugated realism of usually inaccessible aspects of drag culture (Retzinger, 2010, p. 442). Elfriede Fürsich (2003) associates the success of reality television with the globalization of the medium because the "increased supply of channels [has] boosted the demand for programming of any kind" (p. 141). Cheaper to produce and as successful as drama or comedy shows, spectacles of daily lives have generated both entertainment value and profit (Fürsich, 2003, p. 142; McCarthy, 2005, p. 98). That said, reality television disavows its premise of representing reality. Internal authorities, such as producers and networks, have an influence in the production process as they carefully cast competitors as well as tamper with footage for the pursuit of entertainment value (Rose & Wood, 2005, p. 293). This manipulation is not always obvious because the genre implies that it offers the illusion of reality. I utilize these observations in an attempt to respond to some of the questions that I previously posed. Based on the premise that *Drag Race* offers an accurate depiction of drag, the lack of diversity and the influence of producers affect understandings and definitions of the art form.

The discrepancies between screened and street realities are especially important considering that *Drag Race* also represents labour. The creative economy, which includes the entertainment industry, according to Laikwan Pang (2009), "relies on but also dismisses the materiality of creative labour" (p. 55). Drawing an analogy between the creative economy and

television studies, when displaying creative work in *Drag Race*, the physical labour similarly disappears from our screens. As I will soon elaborate, by reducing costs and erasing certain types of labour, reality television becomes a genre culpable of exploitative practices— both of contestants and crew members.[7] I chose to focus on this particular form of exploitation because this thesis examines its political repercussions on the representation of drag on screen. The ways in which reality television erases labour appear contradictory. This thesis relies on reality television's promise to showcase realism and labour. However, through an editing process that aims to generate entertainment value from screened sequences, the genre ends up showcasing an unrealistic and unfavorable depiction of said labour.

In its annual search for America's Next Drag Superstar, *Drag Race* features competitors at work (e.g., rehearing choreographies, sewing, writing an acting script, etc.). While this work is evaluated through an elimination process, the requirements for each task are laborious (Hendershot, 2009, p. 245). Echoing an argument proposed by Hesmondhalgh and Baker, labour thus becomes a spectacle that holds entertainment value. However, Heather Hendershot (2009) claims that "reality shows offer up a striking […] picture of labour [that is a] carefully fabricated representation of reality" (p. 246). Therefore, while reality television promises a depiction of realness, the ways in which labour is represented on screen lacks authenticity. The next chapter, which focuses on exactly these issues, examines how these mechanisms lead to the exploitation of the participants.

My second chapter explores the first instance in which labour disappears, something that occurs in the editing process. Jean Retzinger (2010) explains how the "simple brevity of each

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[7] That said, under current capitalist systems, all forms of labour, whether creative or not, exploit workers in one way or another.

segment or episode conspire against […] empathy for laborers" (p. 457). This examination of editing grounds my analysis of *Drag Race* as each episode features specific portions of labour performed by the competitors. The majority of each episode features the contestants working on a given week's main challenge and transforming male-appearing bodies into female-appearing ones. Noticeably, the editing techniques utilized favor the pursuit of entertainment value, focusing on the competitors' struggles to complete a challenge rather than their successes. For example, in "Pharmarusical", the competitors are separated into two teams led by The Vixen and Asia O'Hara. During The Vixen's team rehearsal process, some members are seen struggling to grasp the choreography, which creates tensions between the contestants. Even though The Vixen's team won the challenge, key footage is assembled in a way that undervalues her competence as a leader and the group's work ethic; no sequence features the team cooperating and succeeding in learning the complex choreography. In addition, the brevity of the sequences participates in misrepresenting the work of the competitors. As *Drag Race* promises to give insight into the labour conditions of drag culture, my second chapter precisely analyzes how the manipulation of the sequences thus erases portions of work in the pursuit of entertainment value.[8]

Secondly, Chapter 2 observes that *Drag Race* functions as a criticism and reward model and, accordingly, it is crucial to evaluate the literature dedicated to televisual narratives of this order. While the journey to victory is televised and rewarded, Hendershot argues that the product delivered by the competitors in reality television shows is highly criticized by a judging panel (p. 245-7). In addition, for Gabriel Winant (2014), the judges, unable to access labour conditions and

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[8] Manipulation here refers to more than the standard practice within reality television that edit down hours of footage. On *Drag Race*, I argue that the labour of drag is unbeknownst by many audience members. Representing it on reality television, with its implied editing and the value added on preferred sequences in the pursuit of entertainment, thus does a disservice to the art form as only selected footage appears that intend to degrade competitors and satisfy viewers.

personal struggles, devalue the effort and work of a competitor, which, at times, results in humiliation as they offer criticism (p. 70). Combining both Hendershot's and Winant's claims, my second chapter argues that *Drag Race* showcases particular variants of labour exploitation as the competitor are harshly judged and belittled for the purpose of entertainment value.

Consumerism: Capitalist modes of consumption, commodification, and homogenization

Here we confront how representation and visibility are connected with patterns of consumption. Wendy Peters (2011) claims that entering mainstream culture, although a significant political goal in itself for marginalized communities, "marks a moment of commodification: identities have the potential to create profits for large media conglomerates" (p. 194). While networks may be genuinely celebrating queer minorities on screen, they also improve their ratings, viewership, and engagements by programming queer content. By appealing to "economically 'valuable' demographics" (Peters, 2011, p. 194), such platforms capitalize on these programs. The decisions to depict a queer subculture on screen also create a new set of understandings and values. Thus, have we become accustomed to a level of expectations of drag on screen? This thesis specifically analyzes the outcomes of treating drag as a new form of economy, which results in the commodification and homogenization of the art form.

Max H. Kirsch (2000) associates queerness with capitalist modes of production and consumption in the wake of media conglomerates discovering the financial potential of catering to the queer community (p. 16-7). I draw a parallel between Kirsch's work and my own as I ground my third chapter in an understanding of the economic benefits of scheduling drag on mainstream television. *Drag Race*, through its renewals, award nominations and wins, channel upgrades, and set renovations, has proven to be entertaining and financially successful. However, again,

according to Sandoval (2018), the show's mission is to represent drag as a product made for consumption (p. 103). Media platforms, thus, find financial potential in representing queerness on screen, and capitalize and invest in it to maximize revenue (Miller, 2005, p. 112; Velázquez Vargas, 2010, p. 27, 57). The consideration of television as a profit-oriented industry therefore becomes a central theme (Retzinger, 2010). By targeting queer and straight viewers, scheduling queer content becomes marketable and profitable for networks as television shows are paced in order to display advertisements (Joyrich, 2004, p. 134; Retzinger, 2010, p. 443; Hendershot, 2009, p. 255). In the next section, and as a gateway to the more in-depth investigations of the following two chapters, I investigate the association of queerness with a capitalist mode of production propelled by a cheap labour force and in search of financial gains (Retzinger, 2010, p. 458).

Televising labour ends up benefiting production companies more than the contestants (Hendershot, 2009, p.256). While not unique to *Drag Race*, this represents the most obvious form of exploitation, especially considering that the art form is still a marginalized and unprofitable professions for many drag performers not featured on the show. Retzinger summarize these claims, writing that these conditions contribute to the transformation of the work of the competitors into free labour that produces entertainment value and satisfies viewers' expectations (p. 453; p. 458). My second chapter thus builds from these observations and investigates the conditions on *Drag Race*'s set. Continuing onwards with these themes, my third chapter associates the exploitation of labour with a normalization of representation. As the labour of the competitors of *Drag Race* is exploited, media conglomerates seize the potential to generate profit from representing drag on screen. This profit-oriented strategy dictates the type of drag aesthetics that sells, which, I argue, contributes to the homogenization of the art form on screen.

Drag Race's proclaimed mission is to celebrate drag, its roots, and its future. It pushes the art form into the mainstream and provides both recognition and working opportunities for artists outside of nightlife venues. However, as a television program that generates revenue, *Drag Race* treats the art form as a marketable product. To chart this move, I apply Lesley A. Sharp's (2000) explication of Marcel Mauss' (1967) understanding of commodification. Commodification is a mechanism that turns an immaterial entity into a commodity, but which also attributes a sociopolitical framework to a product. For Sharp, this process can challenge definitions and understandings of the entity-turned-commodity for receivers (p. 291). Sharp's interpretation is essential to my research as I argue that commodifying drag on screen alters its meaning for viewers. As will become more and more apparent throughout Chapter 3, *Drag Race* showcases a homogenized and marketable model under the title of drag and thus associates a highly tailored and limited representation with the art form. With that in mind, my work develops Randall L. Rose and Stacy L. Wood's (2005) understanding that "television contributes significantly to the construction of social reality" (p. 295). As *Drag Race* sets new levels of performance for drag artists and high expectations for audience members (China Dethcrash, 2017), my last chapter specifically addresses the mechanisms by which what we see on screen affects what we want to see in the streets.[9]

In these ways, the commodification of the queer subculture brings us back to questions of visibility and representation. Wendy Peters (2011) terms this 'narrowcasting,' a regulation through which "marginalized cultures will gain representation and, more specifically, [a mechanism by] which 'valuable' segments of a marginalized group will be flattered and courted by the network"

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[9] From "Stop Using RuPaul's Drag Race to Judge Local Drag" by China Dethcrash, 06/04/2017, *HISKIND Magazine*. Accessed November 2019. https://hiskind.com/stop-using-rupauls-drag-race-to-judge-local-drag/

(p. 197).[10] Bringing visibility only to selected queer groups in the pursuit of profit homogenizes, or what I call corporatizes, the aesthetic of drag on screen. As *Drag Race* showcases one small portion of the art form's spectrum, it ignores its complexities and associates it with a limited depiction (Brennan, 2017, p. 42; Darnell & Tabatabai, 2017, p. 92; Etir-Ann Edgar, 2011, p. 137; Sandoval, 2018, p. 105). *Drag Race* thus normalizes aesthetics in the form of passing femininity.[11] My forthcoming close analysis of the tenth season addresses this narrow representation that participates in shaping the art form into a new form of economy in order to create revenue.[12] Consequently, as drag also infiltrates other media platforms, the Drag Race Model (passing femininity and dynamic performances) dominates mainstream screens.

Querying the streets: Ethnographic studies, interviews, and ethical concerns

As I have already explained, investigating the relation between ecology, representation, and consumerism requires grounding this thesis not only in textual and close analysis. Considering my engagement with sociological concerns centers on the impact of moving images on viewers' lives and environments, this thesis provides the opportunity to evaluate the repercussions of televising drag on artists, their performances, and audience members through the inclusion of interviews. In ethnographic studies that question local performers on the state of drag (Brian Brown, 2000; Rupp & Taylor, 2003; Berkowitz et al., 2007 & 2010; Sarid, 2010; Alexander, 2017), the method used

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[10] Peters also discusses how media platforms affect viewers through this "narrowcasting," claiming that *Queer as Folks* shapes communities by associating queerness with "white, middle-class, men folk." (201-6)

[11] For example, one competitors of season 1, Jade, was unable to provide the full illusion of womanhood, for which she received negative criticisms: "Jade's failure in performing female-ness is purportedly overcome through the reification of her manhood." (Edgar, p. 144)

[12] Indeed, as an art form that remunerates its artists, drag as always been considered an economy. However, as the *Drag Race* model impacts the professions of drag artists, it establishes different considerations where drag is modelled as a marketable product that both generates benefit for non-drag artists and imposes conventions and levels of performance from the screens into the streets.

to access data is conducting interviews. In this section, I evaluate this methodology, past studies that have inspired my work, and the ethical concerns this type of research raises.

Interviews are a qualitative method that aims to gather data from asking questions to a pool of consenting participants. In the field of film studies, interviews were used historically in reception studies in order to, for Christine Cornea (2008), "prove a point about the actual reception of a film, in combination with and in light of the critical reception apparent in surrounding media discourse" (p. 118). That said, the credibility of the method was questioned as it suggests the loss of critical distance and an othering between researcher and the participants (p. 118). Interviews might predicate a certain confirmation bias and a lack of academic legitimacy as well as a subjectivity (Lamont & Swidler, 2014, p. 2-10; Mills, 2008, p. 152). However, Michèle Lamont and Ann Swilder (2014) write that "interviews can reveal emotional dimensions of social experience that are not often evident in behavior" (p. 7). Interviews thus provide access to undeniably essential data for a study, specifically, in this case, one that investigates the influence of *Drag Race* on both its target audience and community on screen. Using this methodology is a meaningful and fundamental aspect of the research.

While considering these limitations, I ground my thesis in the belief that only interviews can comprehensively grant access to conscious or unconscious thinking and behavioral patterns (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014, p. 187 & p. 196). Colin Jerolmack and Shamus Khan favor thinking patterns, self-narration, and justification as the main data to gather from interviews (p. 201), which are elements that will also give shape in this project, particularly its final chapter. In my case, the aim of using this method is to uncover how drag performers and fans feel media has impacted their culture and community.

To speak more particularly about techniques for amassing these materials, I have been guided by how Mario Luis Small (2009) has laid out the techniques of "sampling for range" and the "snow-ball sampling" to reach out to willing participants and collect data. The former implies a selection of a focused category of participants as framework for the research (p. 13). The latter, as each participant is able to suggest other potential interested parties, increases the number of interviewees considerably while also building a bias network of related participants, which could homogenize answers (p. 14).[13] My research follows the "sampling for range" technique as I carefully select a narrow group of participants, which brings about a diversity of voices, level of proficiency in the art form, and level of enthusiasm, in the hope of answering the thesis' main queries. That said, as an active member of the drag community, I am faced with ethical concerns that need to be addressed.

Firstly, it is mandatary to discuss my positionality within this work. I am the author of this thesis and the conductor and analyst of the interviews. I am also a member of the drag community in that I have become a drag fan since first watching the show four years ago.[14] I thus have a personal relationship with *Drag Race* because it introduced me to a new form of live and screen entertainment. As I began attending regular drag shows, I have forged relationships with many drag queens and other drag fans – some of whom I decided to interview in this project because of their perspective on the show and their role in the community. While I positioned myself as a researcher in academia when conducting the interviews and kept the implied demeanor, the interviewees also knew me. I believe my double positionality did not impact the impartiality of my data as my questions were very specific and oriented towards a discussion of *Drag Race*. In

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[13] As Small argues, the risk exists in both techniques.
[14] My mother took me to my first drag show when I was eight, so I always knew the art form existed.

fact, my status might even have created more trust between the participants and myself, which potentially made it easier for them to share their impressions with me.

Secondly, I am a drag artist. I started practicing makeup shortly after watching *Drag Race Season Eight* and began performing in September 2019. As a peer of half of my participants, I carefully distanced myself when transcribing and interpreting their answers in order to not be clouded by my own judgements. In fact, during my interviews, my own work was never brought up as I wanted to separate my personal and professional activities. I also attempted to remain emotionally distant throughout the entire thesis. Nonetheless, I do believe that my positions as a drag artist is extremely valuable for this kind of work. I do not discuss an art form represented on screen and its impact in the drag community from a distant perspective as I belong to the same community and have witnessed first-hand some of the show's influences. I believe that this kind of proximity is rare in this field of study.

Christine Cornea (2008) also advises researchers to fully explain the focus of the study to the participants and the readers (p. 120-1), which I believe I have done. This thesis functions as a sort of autoethnography which, according to Laura L. Elingson (1998), eliminates the distance between researcher and participants (p. 510). Consequently, while the author argues that this process creates empathy (p. 497), it is essential to remain impartial and to avoid directing the conversation when sharing personal thoughts and experiences (p. 496). Lamont and Swilder insist that interviews are subjective, thus critically incorporating the answers with appropriate accreditation and recognizing their empirical nature is fundamental to the writing process (p. 6). The most productive and ethical technique thus seems to favor the transcription of selected segments word-for-word and avoiding paraphrasing. Finally, as these interviews involve discussing labour exploitation and profit-oriented strategies, I must remember that the participants

are unpaid and volunteering their impressions on drag. They should feel comfortable in offering insights as well as retracting information.

While taking into consideration these methods and ethical concerns, I still hold that interviews have proven extremely valuable for analyzing social behavior, as well as the impact of the media on certain communities. Several ethnographic studies that utilize interviews have been conducted on drag culture, its roots, and the ways in which it has been adapted for screen. Conclusions from these highlight that drag, as an art form, takes time, effort, and skill (J. Brian Brown, 2001, p. 41; Berkowtiz and Belgrave, 2010, p. 179; Sarid, 2014, p. 133). Additionally, these studies provide valuable insights into the marginalization of drag performers within society. For example, Dana Berkowitz et al. (2017) observe that "discrimination within the gay community is still pervasive and the gay community sees simply being a drag queen as stigmatizing" (p. 29). Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor (2003) also specifically analyze drag queens in relation to social and political movements. As the art form transgresses gender conventions concerning masculinity and femininity, performers become social and political advocates in the community (p. 216). These propositions are confirmed by Eden Sarid's (2014) work, which is localized in the Israeli drag scene. Sarid inquired about the participants' motivations for doing drag and observed that it ranges from desire, to achieving a level of fame, to being politically engaged. Digressing from my own focal points, Sarid's work is more concerned with the lack of intellectual property within the drag community, in terms of conceptual numbers, choreography, lip-synch styles, etc. (p. 133).[15] Nonetheless, I utilize all these findings to build my own research. Each of these studies brings forth captivating claims about the origins of the art form and its vestiges in today's practices,

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[15] These results are also echoed in Berkowitz and Belgrave's most recent study which explored the "the rewards of drag performance, including the allure of the transformation, situational power, celebrity status, and income" (p.167), all the while considering that drag, according to the same research, does not permit performers to earn stable income.

which feed into my exploration of the ever-growing impact of televised media as a means of understanding and discussing drag.

These prior studies, for the most part, fail to investigate the ramifications of this translation to screen on its community. One exception is Claire Alexander's 2017 work, which precisely "explore[s] concepts of hybridity and essentialism, using the perspectives of local queens to discuss shifting public conceptions of drag as a result of [*Drag Race*]" (p. 247). By conducting interviews and penetrating the Perth queer community, Alexander observed how the popularity of *Drag Race* alumni on social media dismantled hierarchical order and power dynamics within drag's "family" structures (p. 256 & 268). I am following on in the same vein as Alexander by conducting similar place-based work in Montreal in order to investigate whether, in the search of America's Next Drag Superstar, *Drag Race* establishes conventions and levels of performance for the art form that audience members unintentionally seek and that drag artists have to obey.

The method of utilizing interviews in an academic research project permits me to tackle this question while allowing the voices of drag performers to resonate, since, according to Berkowitz et al. (2007), mere observations lacking a performer's personal insights are somewhat trivial (p. 17). I am inspired by the method of these ethnographers in their use of guided interviews and open-ended questionnaires, which provide organic and focused conversation and data potentially neglected by researchers, all the while considering the personal boundaries of participants (p. 18). My goal in conducting these interviews is to balance textual, comparative, and audio-visual analysis with tangible and concrete evidence from artists living through the impacts of *Drag Race* on their art and livelihood. Incorporating interviews also localizes my research and provides opportunities for artists and fans to directly interact with this work and share the positive and negative consequences resulting from the *Drag Race* phenomenon.

Conclusion

The academic texts introduced in this chapter establish the groundwork on labour, exploitation and queer representation required for my arguments to come. Similarly, the notion of ecology established above allows me to investigate how screened practices impact performances. As I analyze consumerism, and how queer cultures appear on screen, I identify a pattern in presenting a particular aesthetic in the pursuit of profit. This homogenized depiction loops back to the theme of ecology because it consequently affects performers and performances. However, while the existing studies I have examined in this chapter provide a sturdy basis for my project, they fail to address a lacuna in academia upon which this thesis specifically focuses: how does what we see on screen affect what we want to see in the streets; or, in other words, what are some of the repercussions of representing queer subcultures on screen? By fueling this work with interviews conducted with local drag queens and drag enthusiasts, this thesis offers an insight into the practice, and, more precisely, the impacts of representing drag on a mainstream reality television show like *Drag Race*'s season ten.

Chapter 2:

It's a *Drag*: The Televisual Exploitation of Labour in *RuPaul's Drag Rac*e

Running Out of Time

Donald O'Connor, the American actor who starred with Marilyn Monroe in *There's No Business Like Showbusiness* (1955, dir. Walter Lang), told Larry King in 2001 that Marilyn "was late on a set, but, at the same time, she was getting ready for Marilyn to be on the screen. She wanted her to be perfect at all times."[16] This quote about the notoriously tardy actress indicates that becoming Marilyn - a figure constructed by public and private expectations and enforced by norms of sexuality and femininity - was both physically and emotionally draining as well as time-consuming. The icon is considered by Lisa A. Cohen (1998) to be "a stock figure of drag performance; and her critics have referred to her as a female impersonator herself" (p. 281). Her legendary lateness, therefore, was a response to the time it took to put on the character of Marilyn. This anecdote reveals not only that time management is an extremely valuable skill in the entertainment industry, but also that gender performance itself takes time. In the context of reality television shows such as *The Amazing Race* (CBS, CTV; 2001-), *America's Next Top Model* (VH1, 2003-), and *Project Runway* (Bravo, 2004-), the performance of the contestants is strictly timed. *Drag Race* chooses not to time their contestants outright. Instead, comments made on the episodes or on *Untucked* (2010-) suggest that time management is a crucial aspect of the competition.[17] On the second episode of *Untucked*: *Season 8*, Bob The Drag Queen complains about the limited time

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[16] King, Larry (Producer). (2001). *Larry King Live*. [Television Broadcast]. Los Angeles, CA: Cable News Network. Find the segments of the interview https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FJD-ZvmpUs

[17] *Untucked* is a mini-series that, ever since 2018, has aired on VH1 right after the episode. Unstructured and unscripted, the series features the competitors in a waiting area for the duration of the judges' deliberation. It happens after the critiques are given and before the winner and bottom two of the week are revealed.

between challenge and runway. Coco Montrese, on the stage of *All Stars 2,* admitted to running out of time in her attempt to apply a 1950s-movie illusion to her arms, which made her aesthetic look incomplete. On the fifth episode of *All Stars 4*, Valentina came on stage for the main challenge without her eye-make up completed as she had also run out of time. Do these mishaps speak of the queens' unprofessionalism? Or do they open up a larger discussion on televised labour?

As a competitive reality television program, *Drag Race* asks the competitors to perform creative tasks, such as sewing, dancing, and lip-synching. It is essential to recognize that the work showcased on screen is a form of creative labour as per David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker's (2011) definition outlined in the previous chapter. Certainly, drag's value is also cultural: a daytime and nightlife activity in gay villages and urban quarters that celebrates the heritage of queer culture as well as reinforcing historical social and political activism (Wesling, 2012, p. 122-3). Notwithstanding, drag, as a creative art form, concurrently aims to entertain audiences who, in return, show their appreciation by cheering and tipping the artists. Therefore, according to Hesmondhalgh and Baker's definition, drag arts can be considered as creative labour which "entertain[s], inform[s], and even enlighten[s]" (p. 2). Both authors warn about the exploitative conditions of creative labour as the work is low pay but redefined as personally fulfilling and flexible while encouraging pushing beyond one's "physical and emotional endurance" (p. 6-7). The rewards from creative labour, such as fame, self-appreciation, and social recognition, in creative industries thus engender a fundamental form of exploitation (p. 7). When drag labour is televised, the art form takes on certain characteristics of the creative economy which, according to Laikwan Pang (2009), "relies on but also dismisses the materiality of creative labour" (p. 55). As this chapter will demonstrate, on *Drag Race*, aspects of physical labour disappear from the screen. Reality television at large is culpable of exploiting both its contestants and crew members who

suffer through time-consuming work, lack of accreditation, and instability of employment, often in the name of reducing production costs (Hendershot, 2009, p. 257).[18] Furthermore, *Drag Race* capitalizes on the depiction of labour on screen by setting up conditions where the valorization of the artistry of the competitors gets compromised for the sake of entertainment. I wonder what the consequences of imposing strict timelines and demands are for drag artists? Is the show reformulating how drag is defined or simply abiding by reality television's production codes? Should drag be televised in this manner considering the roots and demands of the art form? This chapter focuses on how the strictly timed production schedule, editing practices, and pursuit of entertainment value constitute an environment where the labour of the competitors is scrutinized, harshly evaluated, and exploited.

It should be stressed from the onset that the exploitation of drag on *Drag Race* is not an exceptional situation within a profit-driven television industry. Because *Drag Race*'s success rests on the representation of labour and significantly influences the art form on and off screen, analysis of its placement within the competition program format is worthy of academic investigation. This chapter focuses precisely on the representation of the labour of drag in *Drag Race*'s tenth season. The dynamics of commercialization employed on season ten, more visible than on earlier seasons, provides a moment of tension where *Drag Race* seems less preoccupied with celebrating the art form and instead fosters situations where the labour of drag is undermined in the pursuit of entertainment and financial value. As a panel of judges criticizes and rewards a performer only based on limited interactions, I argue that screening labour in reality television participates in the exploitation of its competitors. Disregarding financial and personal struggles as well as the production's influence on the sequences screened, the competitors are examined through a reward

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[18] Hendershot is working on reality television shows *Project Runway* (2004-, Bravo) and *The Simple Life* (2003-7, E!). However, her observations of the representation of labour are relevant to this study.

and criticism model that can devalue their work and the image they wish to project. Consequently, considering Neil Postman's (1970) definition of ecology as the impact media images on consumers (p. 161), the ways in which labour is depicted influences how viewers receive and appreciate the competitor and their artistry.

Drag Value

In the pursuit of the annual title of America's Next Drag Superstar, *Drag Race* offers an insight into aspects of drag usually inaccessible to a nightclub's audience. As such, for Jean Retzinger (2010), reality television "promise[s] to offer viewers access to otherwise hidden processes of commodity production, revealing the conditions of labour, and delivering that information directly into our living rooms" (p. 442). [19] In that understanding, *Drag Race* lives up to its promises, as it features drag queens in and out of drag socializing, preparing for challenges, and performing numbers on stage. While the award-winning show celebrates and propels the art form to mainstream screens, as a televised program that dramatizes storylines for entertainment value, for Retzinger, television's "postmodernist tendencies exhibit a fascination with and contentment in displaying only the thin surface of experience rather than probing for greater depth" (p. 450). Each episode fails to represent the multiple elements necessary to provide the illusion of gender in its fullness. As only small facets of drag labour are included in the final version of the episodes, *Drag Race* undermines the value of the performance derived from such considerable work.

The value of drag, therefore, cannot be appropriately represented in a reality television context where the performer's ability to perform is being strictly measured and evaluated. As each

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[19] While Retzinger studies the labour of farmers and factory workers on reality television shows about food production, the argument that the genre utilizes strategies, such as humour, to transform the work into a form of free-labour and spectacle is essential in the study of *Drag Race*.

competitor on *Drag Race* is judged on how they complete a challenge successfully and present an aesthetic that is pleasing to the judges and the viewers, many aspects of the queer performance are manipulated in the final product. These elements include the level of artistry required of season ten, the limited time allocated to prepare for a challenge and complete the illusion of womanhood, the financial resources needed to present quality outfits on the runway, as well as the actual labour asked of the queens in each episode.[20] Skill, time management, and money thus constitute the value of drag that the show aims to celebrate but, by abiding to production codes and the pursuit particular entertainment values, these are often utilized to undermine the competitor.

The type of drag showcased on *Drag Race* transforms male-presenting bodies into female illusions. J. Brian Brown (2000) explains, "emphasized femininity also has its constraints and achieving it requires effort" (p. 41). The effort in question comes from shaping a male body and face to provide the illusion of femininity. As the field notes by ethnographers Dana Berkowitz and Linda Liska Belgrave (2010) indicate, the transformation requires makeup skills and proportion adjustments (p. 176). This includes applying foundation, eye-shadow, eye-lashes, and corsetry to reproduce female facial features and body proportions. The level of proficiency that *Drag Race* imposes is very high. The fourteen candidates on the tenth season present a passing femininity, which is expected to be maintained throughout the season. Kameron Michaels, who identifies as muscular, explains on the sixth episode that getting into drag forces the performer to add dimensions to hips and breasts to recreate the proportions of a woman. The Vixen, on the runway of the fifth episode, was advised to alter the shape of her dress in order to achieve the hourglass

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[20] The level of artistry on season ten seems higher than earlier season. Up until season six, the judges seemed forgiving about execution as they praised conceptual and original creations as well as the personality of the competitor. This is illustrated in Raja's win on the "Face, Face, Face of Cakes" design challenge in season three and Adore's journey on season 6. Since season 7, it could be argued that the show began to target a polished, editorial aesthetic, especially with the crowning of Violet Chachki. While season 8 crowned Bob The Drag Queen who favored performance over look, the criticisms provided on season ten are aimed to cater to visual finesse.

figure coveted by the judges as it resembles a woman's body. Therefore, part of the labour of drag

is the necessary tools and knowledge required for gender performance, and in the case of *Drag*

Race, the flawless illusion of femaleness.

To reference the introduction of this chapter, time management is an important skill that

applies when performing drag. As explored in many ethnographic studies, drag takes anywhere

from one and a half to three hours (Brian Brown, 2000; Berkowitz & Liska Belgrave, 2010). When

transposed from the streets to the screens, the contestants on *Drag Race* are subjected to tight

deadlines, time crunches, and production codes that dictate their routine. A Reddit User (Four Eyed

Lemon) revealed that the queens have about an hour to get ready, and between thirty to forty-five

minutes between the main challenge and the runway portions of the competition.[21] In an art form

where every minute counts, this makes for very stressful makeup sessions.[22] Season ten contestant

Monique Heart confessed on the reunion episode, "Queens Reunited", that she did not have the

time to complete her runway outfit and learn the words to Carly Ray Jepsen's "Cut to the Feeling".

As such, Heart failed to perform to the best of her ability during the lip-sync and was eliminated.

Time is also manipulated as *Drag Race* suggests that each challenge is separated weekly.

Judges and contestants use terms such as 'last week' when referencing an earlier challenge.

However, Willam Belli and Alaska repeatedly explain on their podcast, *Race Chaser* (2016-) that

a week on *Drag Race* represents only a couple of days. While this distorts the realism that the

show aspires to, it also uncovers how cramped filming sessions are. Keeping in mind that each

challenge requires the achievement of impeccable performance of femininity, the competitors are

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[21] The fact that this is spoken about only on Reddit speaks of a lacuna in academia in analyzing production codes on *Drag Race*. Here is the thread that express this idea:
https://www.reddit.com/r/rupaulsdragrace/comments/62uqvi/how_much_time_do_queens_have/
[22] This is all the more frustrating knowing that RuPaul is allowed six hours for someone else to put them in drag.

placed in a stressful atmosphere deprived of the perception of time passing, as their personal cellphones and working clocks have been contractually removed.

As skillfulness and time management may be obvious talents to own when entering the competition, the necessity of money in order to perform well is not always as apparent. For one drag queen I interviewed, Bambi Dextrous, "drag is expensive." [23] The Montreal performer shares an old saying – "it takes a lot of money to look this cheap" – and confirms its veracity. In an industry that is expensive and historically non-lucrative (Berkowitz & Liska Belgrave, 2010, p. 178), financial resources are a rare commodity. Montreal drag queen Lana Dalida explains that "people are seeing on TV drag queens who have a lot of money, [or at least] look like [they] have money."[24] For instance, the runway of the tenth season of *Drag Race* expects quality and made-to-measure outfits. The Vixen confesses making most of her outfits herself in part due to lack of money, which was highly criticized by the panel of judges. For example, her mermaid dress on episode seven, "Snatch Game", was judged harshly for being ill-fitting and masculine as The Vixen showed bare torso. In reality, as illustrated by Lana and another drag artist, local artists do not have enough money to invest in their art and have side jobs to afford their lifestyle and drag material. While I am not arguing that a tailored dress guarantees high placement in the competition, having the ability to purchase expensive looking garments can help avoid elimination. For example, on "Drag Con Panel Extravaganza", Miz Cracker was saved from the bottom two thanks only to her impressive runway presentation.

The contestants on the show thus enter on the understanding that, in order to rank high in the competition, they must also bring with them impressive outfits. Consequently, most competitors apply for loans in order to afford their presence on the show. A drag artist who prefers

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[23] Personal interview, July 18th, 2019
[24] Personal interview, July 18th 2019

to remain anonymous confirms this fact and explains that "*Drag Race* has created [a] fantasy" that is unrealistic in the real world in relation to how much drag artists spend on their artistry before getting on the show.[25] Montreal drag fan Becca elucidates this sentiment further and claims that "there's an unreal expectation set up on looks […] and they do talk about it on the show [where competitors] have to take all this loans, max out all of their cards, to be able to afford just to compete on the show, on the promise that they're going to have enough work to pay it all back."[26] On the seventh episode of *Untucked: Season Ten*, Miz Cracker and Kameron Michaels have an intimate conversation about the expenditure they both put themselves through as they prepared to get on *Drag Race*. Cracker confessed to requesting a loan from the bank in order to purchase garments, wigs, and makeup, while Michaels admitted spending more on her *Drag Race* gear than on her house's down-payment.[27]

Performing gender requires skill, time, and money. In addition, drag is recognized as "ritualized, disciplined, and highly invested forms of labor" (Wesling, 2012, p. 108). The competitive format of *Drag Race* evaluates drag queens based on the performance of said labour as they are judged on sewing, acting, dancing, hosting, and lip-synching abilities as well as their efficiency. On the first episode of the tenth season, "10s Across the Board", Dusty Ray Bottoms was criticized for creating an outfit evoking two discordant aesthetics. The following week, Eureka O'Hara grazed elimination for not remembering the words of the "Pharamarusical" lip-synch. On the same week, Yuhua Hamasaki was taken to task for not bringing her finest outfit for the runway theme, 'Very Best Drag'. As RuPaul continuously associates *Drag Race* with the Olympics of drag, the judges and the viewers are expecting the contestants to compete to the best of their ability

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[25] Personal interview, October 16th, 2019
[26] Personal interview, November 13th, 2019
[27] While these claims remain undocumented, it does speak of the role money takes when preparing to compete on *Drag Race*.

in every single episode. Considering that the show is filmed on average for eleven to twelve hours a day (Louise-Smith, 2018), this makes for exhausting working conditions.[28] The competitors are not only judged on their performance and aesthetic, but also their ability to deliver both aspects under time constraining conditions.

In addition to these considerations (skill, money, and time), Meg Wesling (2012) identifies gender performance as a form of affective labour that goes beyond rudimentary needs in the search of emanating comfort and desire (p. 108). This is exemplified in the sixth episode of the tenth season, "Drag Con Panel Extravaganza", where the competitors were challenged to mimic panels presented at Drag Con. On top of being judged on how well they performed on the panel, an audience made up of drag enthusiasts were asked to select their favorite queen based on her personality. The episodes displayed the importance of continued positive interactions with fans, which contribute to the popularity of the performer in nightclub venues. As an artistry that requires many forms of labour, Wesling argues that drag "[accrues] both material and affective value" (p. 108). Skill, money, time-management, polished-ness, and charisma thus comprise the value of drag. Not in the sense of moral or ethical value, but in the understanding that drag arts involves considerable amounts of work and cultivation that should be appropriately represented and celebrated on screen. While *Drag Race* does acclaim performers by validating their art and their position on mainstream television, tactics utilized in the search of entertainment and commercial appeal, at times, jeopardize this commendable mission.

In the context of its genre, *Drag Race*, for one of my interviewees, "is a competition so everybody is going to be on their A-game". The show thus projects a version of accomplished drag for competitors who are tirelessly working to impress their judges, their peers, and the viewers.

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[28] Louise-Smith article was featured on *Popbuzz.com*. Again, the lack of "legitimate" academic sources speaks of the neglected consideration of time as constraining the full expression of drag artistry.

The art form is understood as an artistry that requires money, skill, and hard work. "It's kind of like sports", explains Montreal drag fan Kayleigh who enjoys seeing the competitors at this level, but admits the show is "extremely physical and mental and you have to be the best at what you do."[29] *Drag Race* depicts the art form at its highest level, which, while it isn't an absolute representation of drag, still illustrates the requirements and many concessions it takes to sell the illusion of femininity. Bambi confesses that "people [think] that fully formed drag queens fall from the sky and end up on TV" without taking into consideration the means to practice this art form, which, for the drag queen, includes wigs, makeup, costume, tailored-made outfits, and so forth. The performer mentions her personal experience where only one year after returning to the art form is Bambi seeing a return on her investment. Therefore, in terms of material and skills, a show like *Drag Race*, while offering a polished version of the art form, raises issues about how much time, work, and money goes into gender-performance.

Expanding beyond these commitments, Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor (2003), in an ethnographic study at a local drag bar, explain that the queer subculture "should be understood not only as a commercial performance but as political event in which identity is used to contest conventional thinking about gender and sexuality" (p. 2). *Drag Race* has examined this aspect of drag in the form of a political debate challenge on an earlier season where the competitors voiced their political concerns and hopes. Season four's "Frock the Vote!" mimics a presidential debate, and season eight's "Shady Politics" asks the contestants to create political video campaigns. However, season ten seemed less preoccupied with this mission, instead celebrating mainstream pop culture. Challenges included parodying pharmaceutical ads, dating applications, daytime talk shows, and celebrity-inspired musicals. Moreover, the makeover challenge involved transforming

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[29] Personal interview, July 22nd, 2019

hired social media celebrities into drag queens, which testifies to the show's popularity across platforms. When drag is televised on a mainstream screen, therefore, its political militancy seems to urge less attention than before.

Chicago-based The Vixen entered season ten correlating their performances with a political and social agenda; however, the season was not able to let The Vixen's activism shine through in its episodes. Not only did the season chose not to include an episode centred on the politicism of drag culture, The Vixen was villainized for holding strong sociopolitical stances. On the third episode, a fight between The Vixen and Aquaria erupted after the latter criticized The Vixen's drag aesthetic. The Chicago performer was captured viciously glaring at Aquaria and appearing to be the instigator of disputes. On the fourth *Untucked* episode, for Connor Garel (2018), Eureka's derogation of The Vixen's drag aesthetic as "crafty" initiated a severe altercation between the two competitors.[30] The Vixen emerged as violent and vulgar, rather than as expressing social and political opinions as the season, thus, appeared to opt for fostering turmoil rather than praising militancy.

The screen portrayal of any competitors on a reality television show has a direct impact on their reception by viewers. The third episode of *Untucked* addressed the fight between The Vixen and Aquaria. As the other competitors agreed with The Vixen's position, Aquaria, faced with her own flaws, broke down crying. However, The Vixen insinuated that this interaction would appear as a race issue for the viewer where "an angry black woman […] has scared off the little white girl", an exchange that then generated threats from the fandom on social media after the episode aired (Garel, 2018).[30] The ways in which The Vixen was painted had an impact on how the

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[30] From "RuPaul Perpetuates The Myth That Black Progress Is Tied To White Acceptance" by Connor Garel in 2018 In *BuzzFeed,News*.
https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/connorgarel/rupauls-drag-race-the-vixen-eureka-respectability-politics

competitor appeared on and off camera, which confirms Postman claims that mediated images have an influence on viewers' perceptions (p. 27). *Drag Race*, by eliminating challenges meant to address social and political discourses and by condemning a competitor's personal militancy, offers a sanitized and highly controlled depiction of drag that distances the value of the art form on the streets from screen representations because voicing activism is discouraged.

The value of drag is thus affective, social, and political, as well as relational in this new economy. With the rise of digital platforms, drag queens now have to entertain relationships with fans online, which impact the performer's popularity, marketable potential, and the regularity of employment. From having to transform one's body to keep up with social media tendencies, drag in the streets and on the screens requires a lot of effort. However, when televised, significant aspects of the work the drag queens competing for the title of America's Next Drag Superstar undertake is disregarded and, at times, reduced for the purpose of making good television as many other case studies on reality television suggest (Retzinger, 2010, p. 442). Considering that drag is an art form that was birthed in the streets free from conventions, its screen adaptation notably reveals how the production of realities, the treatment of labour, and its exploitation on screen influences the reception of the art form.

Reality Television's Realness

Drag Race, in filming its competitors preparing for each challenge, rehearsing a routine, or anxiously completing outfits, follows in the footsteps of *American Next Top Model* (2003-), *Project Runway* (2004-), as well as televised beauty pageants such as *Miss Universe* (1952-). In addition, each final challenge and runway is evaluated by a panel of judges who will determine which competitors will win and which bottom-two queens will have to compete in a lip-sync to

stay in the competition. As such, *Drag Race* belongs to the category of reality television and competition programs. The basis of the genre implies a depiction of reality. However, many external factors complicate this promise and distance screen representations from reality. Indeed, Bambi Dextrous hopes that "people can make the distinction between [drag artists] competing on a reality show versus [those] who find drag and allow it to be an outlet for something that they need and fulfills them in some way." As the realism of the genre is subjugated, reality television also configures hierarchical power structures that simulate working relationships.

The premise of reality television is firstly questionable due to the intervention of internal authorities in many processes of production. According to Randall L. Rose and Stacy L. Wood (2005), the influence of the producers in the final version of a reality television episode is felt in their "beneficent ability to add entertainment value through management of the casting process, editing the video facsimile of the players' behavior, and by choosing inherently interesting contexts and problems" (p. 293). These manipulations are justified for the pursuit of entertainment value. However, as these mechanisms are at times perceivable on screen, *Drag Race* lacks the realism it appears to covet. Earlier seasons of the program disclosed the non-contextual reactions of the competitors in the hope of creating humour and tension, thus guiding viewers towards particular perspectives. For example, on the sixth episode of the third season of *Drag Race*, contestant Shangela doubts her competitor Stacy Layne Matthews' ability to confidently impersonate a celebrity for the main challenge. However, in the solo interview sequence, Shangela mentions this sentiment wearing two different outfits underscored by one uninterrupted commentary. The interview was clearly filmed on two separate occasions and made to appear united in the final edit. This non-continuous sequence implies two different contexts tampered with to suggest Shangela's negative impression of one of her competitors. Since then, recent seasons

have asked the competitors to wear the same outfit for interviews in order to eliminate the obviousness of the deception. These manipulations beg the questions of whether they minimize the credibility of the artists captured on screen and the purity of the genre. For a television show that survives on showcasing competitors completing tasks, does this lack of realism affect the representation of labour?

Labour is firstly capitalized on behind-the-scenes. According to Elfriede Fürsich (2003), the success of reality television is due to the globalization of the industry itself. Consequently, as more channel spots became available, the television industry has "boosted the demand for programming of any kind" (p. 141). Handily, the genre is relatively cheap and faster to produce while remaining as successful as drama or comedy shows. Anna McCarthy (2005) claims that the reduction of cost is largely due to "the absence of writers, directors, and actors [which allows reality television] to bypass the powerful labour guilds, minimizing up-front investment while maximizing short-term revenues from advertising" (p.98). In short, the genre generates profit through casting and employment strategies. The competitors on the tenth season of *Drag Race* are not unionized actors but professional drag queens performing regularly in the United States. While some might be famous through their social media presence (Aquaria) or drag-pageant runs (Asia O'Hara), the contestants are working drag queens devoted to their artistry. For example, on "The Last Ball on Earth", Aquaria confessed working multiple events late on a Saturday before hosting another party on Sunday morning. Within the drag industry, these sorts of labour, which constitute a strong performance (rehearsing, selecting a song, coming up with a choreography, learning a lip-synch, and hosting) are part of an economy that lacks labour rights, their recognition and protections (Sarid, 2014, p. 133). *Drag Race* thus manages to generate profit from avoiding

collective labour provisions, which these performers are already unlikely to expect from their prior working lives.

Reality television also simulates a workplace environment, which poses its own set of complications. According to Toby Miller, in the reality television show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-7), "the male body is up for grabs as sexual icon, commodity consumer, and worker" (p. 112). By associating the male bodies with laborers, whom Miller implies that viewers become consumers of a product, the participants and influencers in *Queer Eye* become employees of the network and producers (p. 113). Miller claims that the show encourages a capitalist consumption model in order for participants to attain the status of an "efficient middle-class labour force" (p. 112-3). Gabriel Winant (2014) develops this association of reality television with working environments. The author claims that "the material process of making reality shows mirrors the dependent and precarious conditions of the work worlds it dramatizes and distorts" (p. 70). Therefore, according to both authors, reality television replicates working environments and settings in their reproduction of laborious tasks on screen. Consequently, reality television also reflects the power dynamics of employee and supervisor between the contestants and the show runners (host, judges, and producers).

As *Drag Race* showcases sequences of labour instructed by its host and evaluated by a panel of judges, it reproduces hierarchical power relations where the contestants are subjugated to the demands of the competition. Because the show is branded around RuPaul Charles - who also serves as executive producer - the positive interactions between the host and the competitors (in addition to the rewards offered) participate in providing the semblance of safe and fair working relationships and conditions. Rather, RuPaul, placed at the top of the empire, along with the producers and the network, benefiting considerably from the labour of their contestants

(Hendershot, 2009, p.256). As such, this negates the semblance of equity these warm interactions suggest. Understandably, the goal of reality television shows is to maximize revenue, as I explore in the final section of this essay, but the simulations of working conditions on *Drag Race* emphasize the potential for exploitation on screen. Winant claims that "reality television stages, and reifies into commodity form, a utopia of work: a long-lost place in which capital has the qualities of labour, workers are invisible, bosses are heroes" (p. 69). That said, the contestants on the show are not made invisible according to the drag artist who chose to remain anonymous. As drag queens occupy most of the episode, for the drag queen, "it helped people see behind drag queens [and] how relatable they are." The artist thinks that showing the work that it takes to do drag humanized the competitors. However, while this claim is valid, because of the format of a reality television show, *Drag Race* erases certain aspects of the competitors' work, all the while establishing hierarchical power dynamics in the following ways.

Firstly, the set of the tenth season of *Drag Race* was newly redecorated with vibrant fabric, flashy lights, and large portraits of RuPaul, which prevent a camera from capturing an angle without the host's image in the background. This renovation, on top of testifying to the show's financial resources, constantly reminds viewers and contestants alike of the host's position as show runner. Secondly, RuPaul is introduced in every episode appearing unpredictably from a higher position. A door adjacent to a four-steps podium reinforces the host's status as RuPaul looks down on the contestants. Thirdly, towards the middle of each episode, RuPaul walks down the runaway in a low angle shot, which frames the drag queen as superior. The exclamations and applause from the panel further emphasize RuPaul's significance. Moreover, RuPaul's one-on-one interactions with the competitors imply a search for acceptance and legitimacy from each contender, thus solidifying this hierarchical dynamic. Finally, RuPaul's constant shameless self-promotion

exemplifies how the show also serves as an advertisement for the drag queen's body of work, which indicates the host's omnipresence in each episode. For example, RuPaul's "Lady Cowboy" sonically underscores the beginning of the second episode of season ten, which makes the mini-challenge an ad placement for RuPaul's music.

Drag Race thus underlines that RuPaul dominates the program. The final episode of the season also demonstrates this sentiment as the drag queen is received with applause and adorations from the fans and alumni present at the crowning. As such, Drag Race mirrors a working environment where, as explained by Winant, "the show's protagonist and subject is capital; the workers are props" (2014, p. 67). [31] In the case of Drag Race, the protagonist is RuPaul, the subject drag, and the workers the contestants. While constituting the success of the show, the contestants are employed at low cost for the perpetuity of the show's financial gain and popularity. Reality television ultimately achieves success and profit by transforming passion work into revenue (Winant, 2014, p. 70). Understandably, the contestants appearing on Drag Race are paid per episode, gain social media notoriety, increase booking fees, and receive national and international contracts that allow them to earn stable incomes.[32] However, the show's dedication to generating profits from the unrecognized and depreciated labour of contestants in the pursuit of entertainment value stands as the fundamental form of exploitation. While this is also the case in many reality television shows, the study of Drag Race merits engagement considering both the roots of the art form and the influences of its screen depictions on queer performances and performers.

In sum, reality television as a genre rejects its promise to depict reality, generates further revenue by bypassing labour protections, and recapitulates unjust working relationships. The manipulation of screened spectacles of daily lives impacts the ways in which labour is represented

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[31] The quote and conjugation of "be" is as in the original.
[32] Source say that queens can make between 5 and 10 thousand dollars per booking.

since, as Heather Hendershot (2009) indicates, the genre "is obsessively focused on labor" (p.244). While reality television simulates working conditions and interactions, the representation of labour is distanced from reality (p. 246). I interpret Hendershot's claims while considering both Miller and Winant's observations as I argue that this simulation of working conditions is partial because only carefully selected aspects of drag labour air. *Drag Race*, I will continue to demonstrate in my next section, displays a specifically designed representation of labour not only through its editing, but also because the show's criticism and reward model alters the perception of said labour.

Reality Television and Labour (Exploitation)

The chasm between televisual and lived identities is especially significant since *Drag Race* relies on depicting the labour of its competitors on screen. As previously explained, the art form of drag gains value from its social and political agenda, the fact that it requires time and skill, and the consideration that it is not a lucrative and sustainable profession for the majority of drag artists. Let me remind us also that, while most reality television shows generate profit from the labour of competitors, *Drag Race* is noteworthy since producers generate revenue from exploiting labour of already marginalized and ill-paid artists. Kayleigh claims that "queerness has to be exploited in order to get equality." Indeed, she asserts that viewers are looking for entertainment primarily and avoid conversations about social justice issues. This, as I have shown, is illustrated by season ten's lack of political challenges where the competitors could have voiced their stances on the state of drag and its acceptance. As I will continue to elaborate, *Drag Race* capitalizes upon its pursuit of pleasure instead of addressing sociopolitical concerns.

Instead, according to Hendershot, a successful journey on a reality television show like *Drag Race* is arduous as the requirements of a competitive program are significant (p. 245). Accordingly,

the queens compete in a series of difficult challenges in the pursuit of the crown. For instance, "The Last Ball on Earth" demands the presentation of three outfits, one of which must be an original creation. The tenth season of *Drag Race* uniquely scheduled this challenge on the fourth week, to the surprise of the competitors and viewers alike used to seeing the ball as the second to last challenge before crowning. This strategic decision reveals which competitors have the resources – skill, financial, time management - to wear the crown. However, this challenge also disadvantages some who may not be as strong in sewing but who would have continued further should the ball have occurred later in the season. The challenges are thus designed to eliminate competitors who are not able to embody *Drag Race*'s model. By establishing laborious conditions for devoted artists, *Drag Race* seems to profit from the work of the contestants by attributing it a passion-work label.

1. Passion work for entertainment value

The relationship between a competitor and their labour draws on dimensions of passion work that are pervasive across reality television shows more generally. As competition shows demand a creation from the contestants, each production gains unique and personal value (Hendershot, 2009, p. 51). As such, the competitors hope to market themselves, win challenges, and the hearts of viewers through these creations that reflect who they are and their artistry. For example, after Mayhem Miller won the first challenge of the season, the competitor admitted lacking recognition for her artistry in the Los Angeles drag scene. Therefore, her win was extremely meaningful and emotional as it legitimized her worth in and out of the competition. While the show promotes and jumpstarts the careers of its competitors, the working conditions and the demands are so considerable to the point that *Drag Race* profits from contestants' enthusiasm to be represented on screen. In fact, many alumni, such as BenDeLaCreme on the fourteenth episode of season six,

denounce the long hours of shooting, tight deadlines, the short amount of days between challenges, and the lack of rest. Therefore, to return to my earlier example: is Monique Heart choosing to complete an outfit in place of learning the lyrics "Cut to the Feeling" considered a drag failure? Or rather does this outcome reveal exhaustive conditions on set? The metrics of reality television impact the ways in which the labour of the competitors is perceived on screen as, according to Retzinger, it is transformed into a spectacle that offers amusement and pleasure (2010, p. 442).

The exploitation of labour is thus partly justified to offer viewers quality material that meets their expectations, which, for Retzinger, includes transforming the effort of the competitors "into free labour and spectacle for viewers' pleasure" (p. 453). For example, on the fifth episode of the tenth season, Monique Heart was praised for her improvisational skills on the "The Bossy Rossy Show." On the runway, however, she was humorously criticized for her choice of pattern that disagreed with the week's theme and mocked for misunderstanding her giraffe print fabric as cow-inspired. Her now legendary spontaneous response against these criticisms – "brown cow, stunning!" – provided entertainment value as competitors, judges, and viewers found pleasure in Heart's defense. The criticism functioned as a way to unveil intentions but also produce joy. In the hope of keeping ratings and escalating viewership, the goal of reality television is, for Winant, to "stimulate the viewers' interest in the labour process" (2014, p. 14), appearing in both the usually inaccessible practices and pleasurable judgements. As the competition prioritizes scenes of labour and critique, the queens are either seen failing to complete a challenge or even ridiculed with criticisms. Winant argues that implicating the viewers in these comical interactions is "a particularly hideous form of exploitation" (p.70). The success of *Drag Race,* thus, comes from accessing the behind-the-scenes aspects of drag culture. However, the pursuit of entertainment value leads to forms of exploitation as the labour of the contestants is not being appropriately

celebrated on screen. In order for the depiction of labour to generate entertainment value, it is also manipulated during the editing process of each episode. Above, I have already scrutinized how editing creates bias. In the following subsection, I understand how this is maintained by homing in on competitors' labour.

2. Editing out aspects of labour

As a reality television show that mainly features competitors performing difficult labour, the amount of screen time allocated impacts the appreciation of their work from an audience perspective. Postman's use of ecology to analyze a holistic context of production and reception allows for a more precise grasp of how the way labour is depicted on screen impacts viewers' attributions of value and appreciation of the laborers. Similarly, Retzinger indicates that, on a reality television episode, "the simple brevity of each segment or episode conspires against […] empathy for laborers" (2010, p. 457). On *Drag Race*, the portions of labour that air usually paint the competitor in unfavorable ways. In episode eight titled "Unauthorized Rusical", Eureka O'Hara was showcased struggling with singing and dancing all the while having a bratty attitude – which provoked hostility from her competitors. The episode did not focus on her accomplishments and overall growth, which would have presented the competitor in a more favorable light. This editing choice adds entertainment value by depicting conflicts between competitors instead of successes and affirmations. In the "American" episode, Todrick Hall and RuPaul's music producers belittle Aquaria's vocals while, in her interview, the competitor claims that Hall appreciated her singing. Juxtaposing these two disparate opinions makes Aquaria appear delusional and overly confident.

The misrepresentation of labour, which most times is non-beneficial to the competitor's success on and off screen, in turn, influences the reception of the competitors for the viewers, as

Jean Retzinger and Neil Postman argue. *Drag Race*, through these deliberate editing decisions, dictates how the competitors will appear on screen. Considering that the art form is both time consuming and arduous, reducing screened drag to shorter and disadvantageous segments, in many ways, contributes to the manipulation of labour on screen. *Drag Race* thus exploits its participants by abusing editing techniques and somewhat failing to appropriately uphold their promise to accurately unveil drag practices. While this context prevails on many reality television sets, *Drag Race* is particularly significant because of the impact it has on audience members and its popularity beyond the television industry. The program accumulates mainstream awards, is continuously renewed, receives international renditions, and launches public events at convention centers (Drag Con LA & NYC). Because of the show's impact in imposing branded definitions of the art form and a new economy of consumption for drag culture, these exploitative practices require attention. Perhaps no more so than in how it foregrounds a criticism and reward model.

3. Criticism and Reward Model

As I have explained in earlier sections, *Drag Race* rewards and eliminates contestants by evaluating their performance on any given week's challenge and runway. Asia O'Hara, on episode six, insists that the runway portion of the competition could save or lead a competitor to an elimination. This is exemplified with Miz Cracker's multiple evasions of being placed in the bottom two thanks to her runway presentations and Monet X Change's inability to win a challenge because of her outfit selections. The episodes' narratives hinge on the judges' attributions of merit (Hendershot, 2009, p. 247). However, these judges lack access to labour practices, as the only interactions they share with the competitors are during the runway and critique portions of the episode. For example, on "Tap that App", Mayhem Miller was criticized for not standing out in the acting challenge. The drag queen, in response, blamed the team leader for reducing her role in

the scene. While this reasoning did not prevent Mayhem from being placed in the bottom two, it demonstrates that criticisms are offered out of context. As a distance is created between judges and contestants, the time, effort, and work put into each performance and presentation are thus discounted during these later segments of each episode. Considering that the show is produced months before it airs, which thus negates viewers' input, *Drag Race* favors a very specific type of drag evaluated by a strict panel of distant judges. Consequently, the show encourages viewers to concentrate on these criticisms and powerlessly accept the panel's decisions. The contestants' labour, contrary to the scenes leading up to these moments, then becomes effaced for those who matter as the panel's criticisms affect their placement in the competition – which is especially frustrating when the criticisms are produced predominantly in the pursuit of entertainment value.

Viewers may witness the competitors responding to their criticisms. That said, Hendershot insists that an interaction like this is usually comical, "but also disturbing, as it points to the minimal rewards that will actually come from all of this frenzied unpaid labour" (p.250). Monique Heart's defense regarding the disagreement of her choice of pattern on episode five was a direct, but also humorous, attack on Michelle Visage's critique. Heart's defense, with Hendershot's observation in mind, came from a place of frustration, as her effort was not appreciated by the panel. This type of interaction, for Hendershot, marks a moment of exploitation for underpaid work under harsh conditions. *Drag Race* thereby erodes the labour it takes to complete each challenge and runway. In that understanding, labour in reality television is paradoxically depicted. On the one hand, a show like *Drag Race* rests on depicting labour on screen, taking up the majority of an episode. On the other, because of the selection of labour depicted and the lack of consideration of these efforts in a criticism and reward model, drag labour is undermined in the pursuit of entertainment value, but more importantly financial benefit.

4. Exploitation of Labour in Search of Economic Reward

The pursuit of entertainment value, under exploitative conditions, leads to capitalist growth as the popularity of the show raises interest from audiences. Retzinger warns:

> Television's conversion of productive labor into free labor, whether intended to amuse, entertain or inform, becomes yet another form of exploitation, another means of extracting surplus value from an already ill-paid workforce, while viewers are encouraged to embrace the more passive role of consumers, hungry spectators to the creation of commodities and social divisions. (p.458)

Here Retzinger associates the pursuit of entertainment value with a form of exploitation through how networks and producers profit from the labour of the competitors. In addition, the author denounces the impact these processes have on viewers who witness the simulation of work environments and their power dynamics, as well as the commercialization of screened content.

As noted above, *Drag Race* capitalizes on the incomplete and unfavorable representation of the labour of its competitors, even though a loss still benefits the competitor as the media exposure assists in developing their career (Hendershot, 2009, p. 245). Season ten's Vanessa Vanji Matteo proudly claimed on "Queens Reunited" that, ever since the cast was revealed, she sought out and accepted as many bookings as possible in order to take advantage of the momentum. Unbeknownst to her, it was her early and memorable exit that made her a social media phenomenon and granted her a spot in season eleven. However, providing visibility to a subculture on screen participates in transforming the artistry into a particular kind commodity, where, according to Wendy Peters (2011), "identities have the potential to create profits for large media conglomerates" (p. 194). The revenues generated by screening drag benefit the producers, network, and RuPaul more than the laborers who constitute the appeal of each season. Hendershot

asserts that "though the show pictures the possibility of rewards for hard work, the commodity being created is one whose exchange value outstrips its use value by about a million to one" (p. 256). This constitutes the most fundamental form of exploitation as the reality television show maximizes revenue from depicting the emotional labour of its contestants where, for Winant, "sentiment is turned into cash" (p. 70). The celebration of drag is thus converted into an award winning and multi-national empire through profit-oriented strategies.

The financial gain is testified through *Drag Race*'s departure from the niche network Logo, which is geared towards producing shows that are friendly to the LGBTQA+ community. In fact, it is considered to be the channel for queer Americans (Edgar, 2011, p. 134). *Drag Race* now runs on VH1 since the premiere of season nine in 2017, a high definition cable channel that used to be home to *The RuPaul Show* (1996-8). VH1 is also arguably considered a more mainstream and desirable spot, which demonstrates the program's popularity and its financial potential. Additionally, each episode of the tenth season runs for sixty minutes instead of the forty minutes of earlier seasons. This new length makes for more advertisement spaces that profit the *Drag Race* brand. Lastly, as season ten premiered, *Untucked* (2010-) received an airtime spot following each episode also on VH1 instead of only being available online the following day. The award-winning mini-series has thus proven to be popular amongst the fans and marketable. Its recent change in programming confirms the desire to generate profit from the work of the competitors at any stages during their time on the show.

The financial success of the show is also put on display in the upgrades of the set on season ten. For nine previous years, the competitors worked on an outfit, a group challenge, or their make-up in what is called the 'Werkroom'. Furnished with pink high tables, clothing racks, and stage mirrors, the room allowed the cameras to capture every candid moment of the competitors getting

ready for the mainstage. In the wake of season ten, the room - as well as the mainstage - saw major transformations that testify to the show's acquired success and fortune, as any lodging upgrades on reality television do.[33] The space was extended, its furniture upgraded, and the walls were painted bright pink. The architectural improvements distance viewers from the origins of the show, which were once a celebration of the art form's precarity, now becoming a vehicle demonstrating financial success as well as mainstream appeal.

Conclusion

Drag is an art form that takes diligence and discipline. In addition to requiring skill, time, and money, the political, social, and emotional value of the art form are elements that constitute a strong, successful drag performance. However, I have explained that, when transposed on screen, the context of a reality television set is not allowing these elements to shine. In fact, at times, they are used against the competitor in the pursuit of entertainment value. The commercial appeal of *Drag Race* thus participates in misrepresenting the labour and value of drag, which in turns contributes to the emotional and financial exploitation of the competitors.[34] As reality television operates through specific profit-oriented strategies, does the commodification of drag on the show disservice the art form? Does considering drag as marketable product normalize dominant drag aesthetic? In turn, what are the consequences of this homogenization of drag artists? As the labour of the competitors is exploited on *Drag Race*, which propels media conglomerates to seize the potential and generate profit from representing drag on screen, only a specific type of drag aesthetic

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[33] Consider *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (2007-) and the many houses the cast have inhabited, which become a demonstration of the family's fortune.

[34] For Winant, these exploitative practices are also present in the workplace off screen (p.70). In drag venues, audience members will judge ill-paid drag artists.

guarantees entertainment value and profit growth. The following chapter examines how this profit-

oriented strategy contributes to the homogenization of the artform on screen.

Chapter 3:

The Drag Race Model: Tensions between Representation, Homogenization, and Corporatization

A Star is Born?

In 2018, Lady Gaga – also considered to be a female impersonator and camp icon (Horn, 2010; Huller, 2016) - starred in *A Star Is Born* (dir. Bradley Cooper). In her introductory scene, as Ally, she serenades Cooper's Jackson at a local queer bar populated by some of Ally's closest friends, drag queens played by none other than *Drag Race*'s alumni Willam Belli (season four) and Shangela (season two, three, and *All Stars 3*). As the movie unfolds, Ally experiences a moment of doubt which propels her to reconnect with her past. In a sequence that features Ally receiving support and encouragement from her friends through video chatting, the drag queens are seen wearing the same wigs, make-up, and outfits as they were in the initial bar scene. On top of relying on stereotypical behaviors and snappy comments in both sequences, this costuming choice implies a lack of consideration of the dynamics of the art form. By not letting the performers change appearance, *A Star is Born* underplays the fluidity of gender impersonation by cataloguing it as uniform and static. Furthermore, the negligence suggests a desire to augment productivity and profitability by filming both sequences in a row. Had the Hollywood movie represented the mutability of the art form more fully, *A Star is Born* would have better welcomed drag into mainstream cinema. While Willam and Shangela were granted considerable screen time for a mainstream movie - also revealing *Drag Race*'s leverage in furthering the careers of favored alumni in the global entertainment industry - *A Star is Born* exemplifies the reduction of drag for entertainment value and convenience.

This chapter thus addresses the themes of representation, homogenization, and capitalization. Before the premiere of *Drag Race* in 2009, queer characters had been increasingly represented on television since the nineties. Shows like *Ellen* (1994-1998), *Friends* (1994-2004), *Will and Grace* (1998-), *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005) and T*he L World* (2004-2009) incorporated queer stories about the lifestyles of gay and lesbian individuals, whether they were proudly out or not. However, the same examples also relied on stereotypical depictions of queerness for entertainment value, hinging on gimmicks as well as lacking realism and the exploration of characters' depth. Robert B. Bateman asserts that queer culture "must not be reduced to a mere aesthetic form or a highly anesthetized mode of existence, but must involve an evaluation of real bodies, real desire, and real sex acts" (p. 12). Bateman entrusts television with the task of respectfully telling queer stories as he believes that their simplification is a betrayal to queer communities (p. 12-3). This consideration of normativity and responsibility introduced in Bateman's work resonates with my own. I argue that reducing queer storytelling to stereotypical depictions mischaracterizes queer experiences, homogenizes them, or renders them superficial.

Is *Drag Race*, by relying on a narrow representation of drag, fully celebrating drag culture? Alternatively, is it the show's responsibility to feature the complexities of the art form? Bambi Dextrous expresses that "something like *Drag Race* exists in a vacuum [that can] initiate people to drag, but it's not the be-all and end-all of drag."[35] For her, there is a lack of visibility of the diversity of the art form in *Drag Race*. This chapter introduces the Drag Race Model in order to analyze what type of drag appears to be the most pleasing to audiences and the producers of the show. The drag queens who fit this view are the ones invited to compete, favored during the criticisms, and ultimately rewarded with the crown. The dominating aesthetic is an archetype of

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[35] Personal interview, July 18th, 2019.

commercial, appealing expression that all too often rests on the illusion of flawless femininity (Sandoval, 2018, p. 105). While inspirations and style can vary – as showcased by the diverse group of winners throughout the seasons – the model is overwhelmingly restricted to the perfected presentation of accentuated femininity by cis-gender male bodies. In what ways does establishing standards of aesthetics and performance through *Drag Race* normalize drag? I observe that the show is tailored to this limiting model where, consequently, drag is homogenized. By utilizing Queer Theory, I suggest that the Drag Race Model prevails because of its profitability for the show's producers and network. This chapter questions the choice to limit the scope of the art form on mainstream television in relation to the show's declared agendas of both in terms providing visibility to a historically marginalized art form and guaranteeing financial and popular successes. By conducting an analysis of capitalist modes of representation and production, this chapter argues that the lack of drag diversity on *Drag Race* positions drag as a product available for consumption.

Lack of Diversity in the Drag Race Model

Since its inception, *Drag Race* has crowned sixteen winners, including five *All Stars* champions. Paying attention to each season's finalist, a certain aesthetic seems to be praised and rewarded by RuPaul and the judges. While competitors like Raja (season three) and Sharon Needles (season four) seem to be providing an unconventional aesthetic for the average viewer, for Amy L. Darnell and Ahoo Tabatabai (2017), "the vast majority of winners and finalists have followed the norm of traditional female body shapes and beauty" (p. 94). *Drag Race* thus lacks diversity with regards to the drag aesthetic they choose to project. Admittedly, the show celebrates, praises, and rewards artists of colour in all of its seasons, which, in the television industry, is a noteworthy contribution. By utilizing the term "diversity", I am referring to the whole spectrum of drag expressions that the

show ignores, instead favoring passing femininity (Sandoval, 2018, p. 105). In this section, I analyze exactly what constitutes the Drag Race Model.

As introduced in the first chapter of this project, drag, as an art form, strives for the celebration of masculinity, femininity, and non-binary expressions free from conventions set by sociopolitical contexts. By contrast, *Drag Race* endorses the illusion of female bodies from cis-gendered male bodies.[36] For example, all fourteen contestants on season ten present an elevated female performance, with coiffed wigs, flawless makeup, (exaggerated) female body proportions, and high heels. The aesthetic, for Etir-Ann Edgar (2011), is "merely a reassertion of stereotypical gender performance that prescribes the shape and form of the Queens' appearances and behaviors" (p. 143). For Patrick, a drag fan from Montreal, "what we see in mainstream media and in [*Drag Race*] is a very privileged, wealthy, and very curated aesthetic."[37] Patrick argues that the producers cast each season with the goal of representing a flashy depiction of the art form because the show has a television audience of millions of viewers, which thus necessitates a version of drag "on Botox." While style and inspirations may differ - from the pageantry circuit to club scene - each contestant utilizes the "she" pronoun in, and at times out of, drag. The casting of this season thus ignores drag expressions from different bodies. The show dictates what kind of performers are deemed successful enough to represent the art form on mainstream television and gain from this exposure. According to Uma Gahd, a Montreal drag queen voted number one in Montreal and Canada, the politics of *Drag Race* states that "transwomen should not be doing drag, even though they are the people who created drag." [38][39] Uma adds that the same goes for drag kings as well as

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[36] With a few exceptions on later seasons, such as season nine (Peppermint) and *All Stars: Four* (Gia Gunn).
[37] Personal interview, November 13th, 2019.
[38] Uma Gahd was voted number one drag queen in Montreal from the publication *Cult MTL* and Queen of Canada in Werrrkdotcom.
[39] Personal interview, December 4, 2019.

women who are not accorded visibility in the show.[40] *Drag Race* thus rejects other forms of expression, such as drag kings, gender-diverse artistry, hairy performers, and many more. The Drag Race Model is also shaped by the criticisms offered by the judges throughout the seasons as well as some of the challenges designed specifically to emphasize this model.

The markers utilized in the criticism provided on *Drag Race* thus participate in limiting the spectrum of drag expression. According to Darnell and Tabatabai, on *Drag Race*, "the idealized female form is still the aspirational goal for judges and contestants alike" (2017, p. 92). Season ten's competitors Dusty Ray Bottoms and The Vixen were criticized by Michelle Visage for failing to provide the illusion of femininity coveted by the show. On the first episode of the season, Dusty was condemned for her unconventional signature makeup, which consists of drawing dots on her face, while The Vixen was castigated for showing her bare torso on episode seven, which consequently interfered with the presentation of a female body. For Edgar, the criticism-and-reward model imposes an environment where the competitors "are eliminated or normalized through discourses of natural beauty and stereotypical depictions of womanhood" (2011, p. 137). *Drag Race*, by restricting the expression of drag identities, thus confines their model to limited contingencies.

It is worth mentioning the recent crowning of Yvie Oddly on season eleven in this discussion. The competitor was awarded the title all the while staying faithful to her drag aesthetic. Oddly subverted gender expectations by utilizing unconventional material, rejecting pageantry standards, and expanding her expressions beyond the conventions of femininity. For example, she

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[40] Women can participate in the art form of drag just as legitimately as men and in different ways. A drag king implies a female identifying body impersonating masculinity; a hyper queen (or bio queen, although this term is no longer appropriate in the community) is a female identifying body, which includes cis-gendered women and transwomen, performing heightened femininity; gender-non conforming is any type of body projecting genderbending aesthetics. There are also more, such as freaky drag and drag monsters, who do not reflect masculinity, femininity, or gender non-conformity.

was praised for choosing to portray a dinosaur on episode five and wore an unusual and unflattering caftan on episode ten. While her outfits and inspirations are in themselves refreshing for the *Drag Race* stage, I believe that it is important to recognize that from the perspective of the judges, Oddly became a real contender for the crown only after the seventh episode, "From Farm to Runway." Until then, Oddly's drag expression was appreciated, but also somewhat rejected as they wondered whether she could present glamour. It wasn't until episode seven that Oddly convinced *Drag Race* that she could wear the crown after she showed a conventionally feminine and beautiful outfit. The judges raved about her subtle makeup, her well-constructed and fitting garment, and her sublime presentation of woman-ness. Therefore, while I do admit that Oddly represents a departure from the Drag Race Model in some ways, the judges from her season are still ultimately prone to rewarding conventional displays of femininity.

In addition to the critiques from recurrent and guest judges, the challenges are designed to polish the Drag Race Model. As lip synch, comedy, dancing, and acting skills are tested throughout the season, competitors have to excel in these domains in order to be successful in the challenges.[41] The construction of the Drag Race Model has to do partially with the evaluation of the queens' aptitude for representing the brand outside of the competition on mainstream platforms. Wit, humour, grace, and overall aesthetic will thus be major elements tested throughout the season. While most seasons of *Drag Race* satirize mainstream culture, season ten included challenges that highlight the show's concern to preserve its commercially appealing status. Earlier seasons were prone to celebrating the subversive roots of drag culture with challenges calling for creativity, political messages, and artfully conceptualized performances. Conversely, season ten features

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[41] On another note, the role of social media is also made important in this construction as most of the competing queens are already well-known in the drag world and on social media. For example, Aquaria admitted having to validate her digital reputation in the first episode.

challenges that push the consumption of drag as a mainstream economy. For Patrick, the challenges cater to the Drag Race Model as they aim to push the queens towards being successful in popular culture and, as such, being appealing to mainstream audiences. For instance, I believe that the lack of any political main challenges prevents competitors from voicing stances on drag in today's sociopolitical climate. The majority of the episodes reinforce the program's desire to choose a winner who will best represent the brand. As such, season ten affirms the position of *Drag Race* as a mainstream program that offers entertainment value rather than presenting a radical tone.

For example, "Tap that App" on episode three invokes the widespread presence of dating applications in contemporary culture, thus placing the show within modern conversations about queer lifestyles. The episode suggests the show's multiple positionality across platforms, notably personal cellphones. Episode five's "The Bossy Rossy Show" mimics daytime talk shows. The episode almost evaluates how the competitors would interact on other televisual stages. By including such a challenge, I here argue that *Drag Race* controls the image conveyed by the finalists after their time on the show.[42] "Drag Con Panel Extravaganza" functions as an advertisement for the convention event itself, utilizing the season to promote *Drag Race*'s future projects. Lastly, the makeover challenge, a staple across every season, "Social Media Kings Into Queens", on the tenth episode, testifies to the show's popular success across industries and its financial success. Compared to earlier seasons, which usually invited common people or family members, this time around social media personalities were hired to be part of the competition.

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[42] As a note, Monét X Change, season ten contestant and *All Stars 4* winner, now hosts an internet series shared on YouTube and produced by WOWPresent entitled *The X Change Rate* since November 2018 where she receives guests such Matteo Lane, Anthony Rapp, and, of course, RuPaul. While she did poorly in the talk show challenge on season ten, the same producers of *Drag Race* offered Monét this opportunity after her run on her original season and *All Stars 4*.

While all of these examples illustrate how *Drag Race* became conscious of its position within mainstream media, "The Last Ball on Earth" marks this shift dramatically. Since season three, the ball challenge appeared on the second to last episode before the crowning. Inspired by the ball culture of New York in the nineties, the episodes run a themed runway where the competitors have to compete in three categories. This challenge evaluates the queens' taste levels, adaptability to restrictive themes, and sewing skills. As mentioned in the previous chapter, season ten uniquely featured this challenge on the fourth episode, which was a surprise to both the audience and the competitors. During a solo interview, Aquaria claimed that some competitors might have been shaken to see this challenge so early in the competition. While doing poorly on this challenge does not prevent one from acquiring the crown, as exemplified by previous winners Jinx Monsoon and Bob The Drag Queen, this challenge filters out competitors who do not have the alleged necessary skills, leaving those who fit with the show's vision of commercially successful drag. By including this challenge earlier, *Drag Race* and viewers thus assessed the competence of season ten's cast, gauged the strongest competitors, and eliminated one who might have done better in the competition had the challenge been scheduled later. By evaluating competitors based on severe criteria, *Drag Race* thus perpetuates a narrow depiction of drag performance. Any deviation from the norm hinders the progression of the contestants on the show, which will eventually affect their future careers.

Season's ten winner Aquaria embodies these notions and became the ambassador of the Drag Race Model after a successful run on a season preoccupied with upholding the show's long-held standards. While Aquaria was already popular on social media before her time on *Drag Race*, she also won the most challenges, being praised for a broad range of performing styles and her fashion taste. She was also portrayed in the beginning as cocky, distant, and overconfident, but

managed throughout the season to become relatable, helpful to others, and vulnerable. Compared to previous seasons and winners, Aquaria is considered the most well-rounded and marketable holder of the crown from the perspective of the producers and the *Drag Race* brand. To the show's merit, her past in the club scene[43] also positions Aquaria as a good representation of the art of drag (Montero, 2018).[44] She thus personifies the coveted Drag Race Model because she is an aesthetically appealing, charismatic, dynamic, and empathetic winner.

There are, though, boundaries regarding Aquaria's likability as compared to other favorites, such as Trixie Mattel, Alyssa Edwards, and Adore Delano. Even if Aquaria's arc humanized her, viewers were, and still are, often put off by her personality. While her season attempted to make her universally liked, which is integral to the Drag Race Model, I believe that Aquaria remains inaccessible to many fans. Through her win, she solidified her legitimacy. However, because of her marketability, her notoriety, and collaborations with established brands and personalities within the drag culture (Susanne Bartsch and Amanda Lepore), a distance is created between her and the fans. Nevertheless, Aquaria is a product of the Drag Race Model that surely generates profits for the brand and participates in normalizing representations of drag on screen.

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[43] The club scene, or club kid scene, is a movement birthed in New York City at the end of the '80s and beginning of the '90s in part in response to the AIDS crisis. While two core members have received criminal charges, for Sheila Flynn (2017), club kids were composed of individuals that played the role of influencers at nightclub venues, presented gender-fluid appearances, promoted certain clubs, and became a form of entertainment in themselves. From "Where are the New-York's Club Kids of the '80s '90s now?". September 4, 2017. In *dailymail.co.uk*. Accessed January 2020. Retrieved from https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4851054/Where-New-York-s-Club-Kids-80s-90s-now.html. Today, the club kid's legacy continues to be a big aspect of New York City's lifetime scene through the influence of the likes of Amanda Lepore and Susanne Bartsch whose drag and gender non-conformity are celebrated (minus the drug abuse and criminality) in parties such as Ladyfag.

[44] From "Meet Aquaria: The New York City Club Kid Turned America's Next Drag Superstar" by Roytel Montero,. June 29 2018. In *Forbes.com*. Accessed January 2020. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/roytelmontero/2018/06/29/meet-aquaria-the-new-york-city-clubkid-turned-americas-next-drag-superstar/#10f6a55720e8

On another level, the construction of the Drag Race Model also occurs through the competitors' personal sociopolitical activism. Considering how the show treats some competitors who are outspoken versus ones who conform, it appears that vocalizing strong stances is penalized. The Vixen was cast in season ten for her dynamism, honesty, and creativity. However, her strong political stances made her the target of unfavorable editing and led to her being villainized by the camera. As explicated in the previous chapter, The Vixen was involved in multiple disagreements with her competitors, which included Aquaria and Eureka O'Hara. On the seventh episode of *Untucked* (2010-), the competitor was confronted by her peers in regard to her alleged aggressive demeanor while The Vixen continued to claim that her responses were only justified because of the attacks she received from people like Eureka. In episode eight, she sat down with Asia O'Hara who, while she said she understood The Vixen's reactions, condemned the performer for a lack of maturity in controlling her political perspectives. The season thus sabotages The Vixen's effort in being a strong voice in the community and associated her interventions with combative intentions. This attitude is even more deplorable considering the importance of The Vixen's contribution to the drag arts.[45]

From all of the above, it emerges that the Drag Race Model is established through the casting of each competitor, the criticism-and-reward model to which they are subjected, the type of challenges they must face, and their ranking throughout a season. In what follows, I continue to argue that the popularization of this model homogenizes the portrayal of the art form on mainstream screens.

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[45] Her work includes political activism online and in Chicago where she hosts the monthly show *Black Girl Magic* with other *Drag Race* alumni (Blanton, 2018) https://www.bustle.com/p/after-rupauls-drag-race-the-vixen-says-her-activism-is-only-just-beginning-9063777.

The homogenization of drag, but at what cost?

A Star is Born (2018) illustrates that the success of *Drag Race* leads to unique work opportunities which, in turn, may be altering the representation of the art form in popular culture. Confronting this situation, Uma Gahd claims that "in the media, drag is generally as diverse as in real life." However, Canada's number one drag queen insists that one needs to look harder for these lesser-known instances because "in the mainstream media, [*Drag Race*] is the biggest one most people know [and] is representative of a very particular kind of drag." Certainly, shows such as *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula* (2016, OutTV) and New Zealand's *House of Drag* (2018, OutTV) include diverse drag expressions. Yet the popularity of *Drag Race* works to normalize the representation of drag which is, for Uma, "still very palatable, still very pretty, [and] still very commercial." *Drag Race* has homogenized a kind of drag that is accessible to the masses because, for an interviewee who prefers to remain anonymous, it is "visually impactful" which lets audience members take a passive admiring stance. For the anonymous drag artist, "[*Drag Race*], in its structure, has made it okay for drag queens to do nothing." Doing nothing refers to the idea that the drag artists are not pushing any boundaries, sending any political messages, but rather are working to entertain an audience and make them feel good, which is extremely valuable and important.

The Drag Race Model assures popular and financial success. *Drag Race*, by favoring this model, continues to define this particular drag aesthetic as the one dominating mainstream platforms, which consequently homogenizes the representation of the art form. The show coincides with what mainstream audience members and viewers desire. For Uma, "they want to see a pretty person, dressed up in pretty clothes, doing a popular song, walking left right on the stage [...] because people do want to forget about their trouble in the world." It also happens to be, for the drag queen, "the easiest thing people can take in and digest." *Drag Race*, through its challenges

and criticism-and-reward model, features and rewards the coalescence of these ideals and values, which centre on a marketable illusion of femininity and, in turn, confuses drag with the Drag Race Model.

The establishment of queer representational norms like these impact how drag will be perceived by viewers. Kohnen (2015) notes that "visibility exists in the tension between presence and perception" (p. 14), while developing the concept of "closet-as-screen," which determines the queer identities that will be given airtime (p. 12). In addition, for Wendy Peters (2011), networks favor identities that guarantee financial and mainstream success (p. 197). Peters refers to the process of representing marginalized groups in order to maximize profit and success as "narrowcasting" (p. 197). The concepts of closet-as-screen and narrowcasting propose a tension between visibility and financial gain.

The representation of queerness is not only limited, but also highly negotiated, seeking out what is appealing and what drives profit. For Uma, "the best way to achieve [commercial success] is to please the most people possible all at once without making anyone feel upset about anything." Mainstream drag, as popularized by *Drag Race*, becomes a depoliticized representation of the art form whose main goal is to entertain and delight the masses.[46] To Kohnen's mind, this deeply reduces "the possibilities for representing a variety of queer identities and textual forms on television" (p. 151). The author reiterates that this lack of inclusivity on screen is "a limited and limiting conceptualization of a spectrum that includes a broader group of people, places, and ways of life" (p. 3). By choosing to favor a specific and commercial drag aesthetic, *Drag Race* regularly fails to branch out from the prevailing and clichéd perspectives on gender performance. The show

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[46] That said, Uma argues that not only are the media encouraging this depiction, but also the drag artists themselves because they are similarly motivated to generate revenue, receive many contracts in popular venues, gain social media notoriety, and sell merchandise.

exemplifies what Gregory Woods (2008) discusses as necessary sacrifices in order to gain popularity in the media (p. 119). For Woods, "Queerness has to be normalized if it is to be popular. Where it might become subversive, it must be shown to be compliant. Where it is perverse, it must be shown to be laughable" (p.119). The concessions made in order to achieve mainstream status and financial success ignore the multiple facets of the art form and closes their doors on diverse gender expressions.

In addition, considering that the show is extremely successful, receives coveted award nominations and wins, and appeals to bigger and more diverse audiences, the lack of inclusivity in *Drag Race* thus balances providing visibility and working opportunities to historically marginalized artists with preventing artists who don't fit within the show's categories from receiving the same attention. As an anonymous participant to my interviews observes, unconventional drag artists aren't booked in popular venues on weekends, which are populated by mainstream, suburban audience members. Favoring one specific aesthetic in the pursuit of commercial and financial appeal, while a practice of exclusion, is understandable in itself. Where *Drag Race* fails, in my opinion, is in its association of the term "drag" with this narrow representation. As such, the show, driven by profit-making strategies, regulates and corporatizes the consumption of mainstream drag, which transforms the art form into a finite, standardized, and marketable product. Katherine Watson (2005), in her discussion of Queer Theory, questions, "Has 'queer' become a brand name or a commodity and thus inevitably linked to patterns of consumption? Does the mainstreaming of queer mean the normalization of queer?" (p. 77). In the pursuit of popular and financial success, *Drag Race* not only exposes drag to the mainstream scene, but is also responsible for limiting its scope all the while generating profit.

Capitalizing on the *Drag Race* Model

Drag Race, as an object of queer culture, is not unique in complying with networks' profit-driven strategies. The incorporation of LGBTQA+ content into television, while genuinely celebrating queerness and providing visibility to artists that were neither celebrated nor recognized on screen before *Drag Race*'s first season, also generates profit for networks, brands, and producers, thus impacting which subcultures are made visible on screen (Joyrich, 2014, p. 134; Madger, 2004, p. 138). In *Drag Race*'s genre, Gabriel Winant (2014) argues that, "the ersatz social realism of reality television […] aestheticizes labor, polishing its appearance into a smooth and marketable commodity" (p. 71). As noted above, the reality television show transforms the art form into a marketable product that guarantees a return on investment, so, moving on, it is crucial to investigate how and why this happens.[47]

From the perspective of the networks and producers within the television industry, the goal of televising queer content, and thus providing visibility to subcultures, is largely economic. Jean Retzinger (2010) reminds us that "television, after all, remains a profit-oriented business" (p. 443). In an analysis of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-7), Yarma Velázquez Vargas (2010) observed that media industries, such as television, are motivated by neoliberal strategies in order to secure capital growth for networks and featured brands (p. 57). As such, Vargas argues that *Queer Eye* "capitalizes on the representation of queer and also makes it a product available for consumption" (p. 27). Investing in queer content on screen not only provides visibility to a marginalized subculture but is also a profitable act. This strategy is problematic when evaluating a show like *Drag Race*. As the show is constantly renewed, finds new generations of *Drag Race*

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[47] Which is small considering that the competitors are not paid and that the show profits from a lot of product placement and sponsorships.

enthusiasts, and burgeons in Thailand, England, Canada and Australia, are the show's celebration of drag and the maximization of profit mutually exclusive?

Before answering this question, I want first to describe the relationship between queerness and capitalization. I borrow Elizabeth Whitney's (2006) definition of the term. In her study focused on the economic gains of "heterosexist" media agents through the representation of queerness on screen (p. 37), Whitney writes that "[as] camp and 'gayness' become marketing tropes, both are reduced to simple advertising pitches aimed at mainstream consumers" (p. 39). Whitney observes a sanitization of queerness on screen for the pursuit of entertainment value. The reduction of drag's complexities on *Drag Race* follows a similar pattern introduced by Whitney. Camp, associated with queer culture and drag, "provides capitalist entertainment" (p. 43). The television industry, which includes networks, producers, and channels, profit from depicting marginalized culture on screen since, for Whitney, they typically target new audiences (p. 41). Patrick confirms what their expectations might be, positing that "for drag to be acceptable on TV, it has to be this pretty, opulent version of [the art form] for people to appreciate it [because] if it was scrappy, people will disconnect." Accordingly, I question whether the efforts to capitalize on queerness correlates with its reduced formulation because of audiences' potential rejections of any variations from the Drag Race Model. In other words, is the illusion of femininity the drag aesthetic that secures financial profitability?

In an attempt to answer this question, I turn to an economic interpretation of Queer Theory. Max H. Kirsch (2000) associates the field of study with capitalism as he claims that the discipline "follows the development of current capitals relations of productions, where the self-contained individual is central to the economic goal of creating profit through production and its by-product, consumerism" (p. 17). The celebration of queer identities is thus correlated with neoliberal

assumptions in the way that "[temporary] recognition and rights are granted when they produce profit, championed by those who understand the possibility of enhanced capitalist growth" (p. 16). Kirsch's association of queerness with profit-driven strategies is essential to my discussion of *Drag Race* as the popularization of the program has proven to be financially successful across countries and generations. The pursuit of financial gain, consequently, prompts *Drag Race* to adapt its content and format accordingly. The first seasons invited a wider range of drag aesthetics and were forgiving about the completion of female illusion.[48] In later seasons, competitors who did not adhere to the show's desired model were either eliminated or highly criticized for their aesthetic. For example, Milk on season six was regularly disregarded by the judges and her fellow competitors for her conceptual and avant-gardist inspirations.[49]

   Drag Race likewise follows capitalist modes of production when it comes to casting competitors who fit within their model and who, because of their personality and expertise in female impersonation, guarantee entertainment value and the continuation of the show's popular success. Moreover, for E. Alex Jung (2019), the search for profit has also been shared by the competitors who "were not just competing for a crown but introducing themselves to a market" (p. 50). *Drag Race* can therefore be regarded as financially fruitful from both angles as, according to Jung, the show turns the art form into "an open buffet for consumption" (p. 50). Some alumni of *Drag Race* were able to gain revenue and popularity via their time on the show while still ranking low on their season. Season ten's contestant Vanessa Vanjie Matteo, who was first to be eliminated, thrived from her memorable exit which became a social media phenomenon after she

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[48] The competitors wore beards and pants on two occasions. Similarly, on season one, Ongina and Nina Flowers both flirted with androgyny and Tammie Brown offered camp and theatrical aesthetics. Season four crowned alternative drag performer, Sharon Needles, who was inspired by a horror drag aesthetic. Season five's Jinx Monsoon won the hearts of viewers by being categorized as an underdog inspired by vaudeville and theatre.

[49] That said, some of Milk's outfits inspired future challenges, such as the bearded runway on season seven and the pants runway on *All Stars 2*.

walked off the stage echoing her name, Miss Vanjie. Social media platforms, such as Reddit, Instagram, and Twitter, grabbed her statement, created memes (humorous images, short videos, or text that are widespread on the internet), and distributed online re-enactments that were well received by internet users. While the popularity of "Miss Vanjie" online and on television was out of Matteo's control, her ability to recognize the situation as profitable allowed her to keep momentum from her run and earn a spot on the following season.

Similarly, the humorous dispute between Monique Heart and Michelle Visage over her choice of patterns grew into an income source on season ten's fifth episode. Visage refuted the competitor's identification of her choice of fabric. After both bickered over giraffe or brown cow patterns, Heart landed a record deal, inspired a fashion trend, and created a signature tagline based on this interaction. In addition to her bubbly personality, Heart was invited back to *All Stars 4* where, inevitably, her now catchphrase, "Brown Cow Stunning" (her original off-the-cuff response to Visage), became part of her identity. Finally, one of Heart's and Matteo's opponents for the crown, Blair St-Clair, was also able to capitalize on her time on *Drag Race*. Offering a pleasing aesthetic, St-Clair was well received by the audience, which led to her recording an album and appearing in many *Drag Race* related events, such as the finale of season eleven and, as it is rumored, *All Stars 5*.

Competitors are often able to work the machine in their favor and also profit from their time on the show. That said, there is a certain rejection from the fandom of these marketing objectives as, for Kayleigh, they are becoming too obvious. She claims that most competitors are trying to "[find] their tag-line and milk it so hard" instead of "[letting] the world tell you what funny is."[50] With this observation, Kayleigh identifies an economically-driven plan to build an

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[50] Personal interview, July 22nd, 2019.

financial empire in recent seasons of *Drag Race*. Queer Theory and Kirsch's explanation allows me to associate the representation of queerness with capitalist strategies. However, I am still wondering about the link between profitability and limited aesthetic in relation to the networks' conservative proposition of the illusion of femininity and whether it confines the representation of drag in order to ensure capital gain.

In Watson's application of Queer Theory, the author recognizes queer identities, positioned through social and historical evidences, as "fragile constructs, constantly relying on the successful performance of gender" (p. 67-8). Therefore, I combine both Kirsch and Watson's arguments as I maintain that, in order for queerness to be profitable, the identities presented must conform to approachable aesthetics. In other words, the queerness offered must be appealing to a mainstream audience, which explains why *Drag Race* limits its representation of drag to a restrictive model. My interviews with local drag queens and drag fans also reinforce this argument. For example, Kayleigh maintains that "what we see on television is always a very curated type of drag [as] even the marginal types of drag are made to be consumed for the general public." The capitalist strategies presented on *Drag Race* are thus associated with mainstream consumption patterns.

I believe that the representation of drag on mainstream screens goes beyond the network's conservative views and the viewers' inability to tolerate drag diversity to incorporate active choices by the show itself to prioritize female performance from male bodies. Kayleigh observes the lack of diversity in *Drag Race,* echoing Uma's previous comments on casting, in how the show does not feature drag kings and, as of now, has only showcased one transwoman who has had breast implants (in the fourth season of *All Stars*). In this refusal to include female drag artists as kings or hyper queens, Kayleigh condemns the show for its misogyny. She explains that, because the aesthetic on *Drag Race* is a celebration of femininity that rejects female performers while

benefiting from their glamourous representation, the show remains a "boy's club" uncomfortable with "raw femininity." The drag fan gives the example of how Manila Luzon's plan to wear a dress celebrating women's menstrual cycles on the stage of *All Stars 4* was blocked because the producers judged it to be distasteful. Kayleigh condemns this "old school mentality" as a means of mainstreaming the art form.

 Drag Race achieves this narrowing down in search of profit not only in its casting, then, but also inside each episode individually. Indeed, the show is now inundated with elements constantly calling attention to the economically driven enterprise it has become. Season ten is a prime example of this manoeuvre. Capital in the television industry is generated primarily through advertisements (Hendershot, 2009, p. 255). As I observed in the previous chapter, the episodes on season ten are twenty minutes longer than they were in earlier seasons. Running now for an hour and a half, the new episode length offers more opportunity for advertisement breaks and product placements.[51] While this economic strategy, alongside RuPaul's shameless self-promotion, were always part of past seasons, season ten pushes the consumption of drag much further. For Whitney, representing queer cultures on screen is interconnected with targeting a queer audience (p. 41). It is reasonable that *Drag Race* includes advertisements in the episodes. However, those on season ten overwhelm its viewers with the constant promotion of products geared towards queer lifestyles and the consumption of culture. For example, in addition to *Drag Race* main sponsor Anastasia Beverly Hills cosmetics, this season included: Fierce Drag Jewels; Rockstar Wigs; Cirque du Soleil; vacationing in Fire Island; Jane Doe Latex; Klein, Epstein, and Parker; Rounderbum Undergarment; Objects Furnishing; and, of course, Drag Con. The long list of endorsements

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[51] Because I reside in Canada, I have never been able to see *Drag Race* on VH1 with the commercial breaks. Therefore, I am unable to conduct an analysis of these commercials.

represents the type of audience to which *Drag Race* advertises: the queer capitalist consumer, drag artists, and enthusiasts who wish to access the culture off screen, as well as straight viewers.

Joge Sandoval (2018) explains the show "is product-placement-driven, which dilutes drag expressions for social resistance into a theatricalized gesture of the everyday" (p. 102-2). *Drag Race*'s economic strategy backfires as the gains from sponsorships are jarring to the point that the depiction of drag is sanitized. While it could be argued that *Drag Race* is poking fun at the many product placements as Reddit user Esperantisto256 argues, these overwhelming instances point out the multiple sponsors from which *Drag Race* benefits.[52] The celebration of drag is mitigated by the desire to maximize profit and inundating the show with advertisements further corporatizes the mission of the show, designed to guarantee a return on minimal investment. In addition, the proliferation of the model in and off-screen confirms the claim that the limited aesthetic favored on the show contributes to the perpetuity of the Drag Race Model's mainstream domination. For example, this is illustrated by the appearance of two *Drag Race* alumni in *A Star is Born*, the successful touring shows of *Drag Race* (either solo performances or groups), and the aspiration of off-screen drag queens to embrace the show's governing aesthetic.

As drag is transformed into a product that can be consumed at home, a parallel can be drawn between the screened art form and other products available for online consumption. Online marketplaces encourage reactions and ratings from consumers in order to promote their product. In a way, similar behaviours take place in relation to *Drag Race*. Bambi Dextrous claims that going on the show functions as "a form of publicity" as the competitors prepare in advance with wig and outfit designers, which is not a realistic depiction of the art form. *Drag Race*, by imposing the Drag Race Model, which relies on a glamourous illusion of femininity, restricts the representation of

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[52] See more of the thread:
https://www.reddit.com/r/rupaulsdragrace/comments/91xki3/product_placement_on_drag_race/

drag to a materialistic, polished, and extravagant version. Indeed, one of my participants believes that the show sets trends. *Drag Race* thus offers commercial and marketable identities made for consumption.[53] Harron Walker (2019) writes that competitors on *Drag Race*'s recent season are also more aware of viewership and social media's endorsement in the development of their careers as the fandom determine their success. Walker quotes *All Stars 3* winner Trixie Mattel to confirm this claim as the drag artist once said, "the real *Race* is when the show's over."[54]

Through these gestures of normalization and commercialization, *Drag Race* turns drag culture into a new form of economy via its popularity and primetime spot on a mainstream channel. Drag on the street was always an economy, given that the art form is professionalized. However, *Drag Race* formulates new expansions that continue to adapt. Earlier seasons favored showcasing actual labour, original creations, and drag's political and social elements. However, season ten, in opposition, and as I have pointed out, sanitizes the representation of drag in order to guarantee profit gain. Indeed, Jung claims that "*Drag Race* can no longer claim outsider status" (p. 50) as the show has now become part of the profit-driven mainstream scene. For Lynne Joyrich (2004), the risk associated with such success is the loss of queer essence. Joyrich wonders, "when LGBT folks 'make it' on television, streamed into the dominant currents within televisual flow, are they no longer quite queer, that 'mainstreaming' undoing the force of disruption and negativity that makes 'queerness' to begin with?" (p. 134). *Drag Race*'s new economy departs from the socio-politically driven roots of the art form, opting for a depiction of accessible and commercially successful drag identities. For example, as previously noted, the challenges of season ten were not prone to feature political exercises which would have given an opportunity for the competitors to

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[53] Personal interview, October 16th, 2019
[54] From "How the audience is *Drag Race*'s harshest, invisible judge" by Harron Walker, January 5, 2019, *Out Magazine*. Accessed November 2019. https://www.out.com/entertainment/2019/1/05/katya-vixen-drag-races-most-influential-judge-audience

voice concerns. Instead, as season ten features mainly challenges meant to satirize pop culture or reflect on today's digital economy, *Drag Race* thus polices gender expressions as compliant and harmonious in order to offer a universally agreeable aesthetic to viewers, which distances it from the art form's convention-free origins.

This search for a commercially appealing, profit-generating, and restricted aesthetic is likewise noticeable in the season's architectural and design elements, conspicuous from the very start. The season opens with a pan of the newly renovated set and a dynamic editing and flashy lighting effects. The space, which will be the set for the season, is pristine, sterile, and cold pink. These renovations further distance the representation of drag from its historical roots in grungy nightlife venues. Additionally, the large portraits of RuPaul, instead of furnishing the space with colors and iconized images, becomes reminiscent of a "Big Brother" scenario where the competitors are being scrutinized at every moment. Each portrait, which captures the drag queen's torso and close-ups of her face, emphasizes her eyes. These images thus communicate that RuPaul, who is facing the camera in the various poses, is constantly surveying the contestants, similarly to the cameras in another reality TV show, *Big Brother* (2000-). While the competitors are filmed by cameras for long hours, the illusion should remain indiscernible. However, the numerous portraits of the host make the constant observation forthright.

Inasmuch as the renovated set participates in the commercialization of drag as a marketable product, the mainstage also establishes conventions that put the contestants in constant search for approval. Half of the episode happens on the mainstage.[55] This space, because of the way it is built, implies power relations between judges and contestants. While its long runaway offers ample

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[55] On this space, towards the middle of each episode, RuPaul introduces the permanent and guest judges, the theme of the runway, and the winner(s) and two losers of a given week's challenge. On the same stage, the competitors will perform a challenge, showcase their runway outfits, and battle in an ultimate lip-synch competition.

opportunities for the contestants to showcase their labour, the panel of judges is placed on a higher platform concealing half of their bodies. The floating torsos, looking down on the competitors, establish an inferiority complex for the competitors while they are evaluated. In addition, on screen, the panel appears to be facing the runway, emphasizing the constant perusing of the contestants.[56] While scrutiny and power dynamic shifts are central to a competition show, the types of criticisms that are offered only reinforce the established Drag Race Model and disapproval of deviations.[57] The show capitalizes on emphasizing their model and, as I have argued, concomitantly turns the art form into a product. Consequently, through this process of commodification, viewers, unaware of the art form's complexities off screen associate their understanding of the art form with what is depicted on it.

Conclusion

The profit-oriented Drag Race Model has the potential to benefit the show's brand as well as its performers. However, not every contestant advances their career since competing on a reality television program is not always a solid investment in their future. In addition, those who do not fit the homogenized model, who are not able to excel in all of the requirements of the show, and who are not able to foster a connection with the viewers will be undermined in favor of other contestants. That said, the show still provides an opportunity to celebrate and expand the reach of a facet of drag because, since its inception in 2009, many countries have premiered their own version of *Drag Race* with similar intentions. However, across seasons, the types of aesthetic and

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[56] Only discrete and infrequent indicators show that the judges are in fact to the right of the runway due to camera-placement necessities.
[57] Even considering Yvie Oddly's win.

performances seem to converge towards the archetype of docile female impersonation.[58] While it could be argued that the crowning of Yvie Oddly on season eleven functions as a departure from this direction, this recent detour, while hopefully guiding future seasons, is not strong enough to invalidate the argument of this chapter. The perpetuity of the Drag Race Model makes for a sanitized marketable representation of the art form.

In this chapter, I questioned whether *Drag Race* can fully represent the diversity of drag while remaining profitable. While it remains impossible to answer this query, I am arguing that after eleven regular seasons, four *All Stars*, a version in the United Kingdom, as well as three more seasons announced (season twelve, thirteen, and *All Stars* 5), the machine continues to produce this limited representation of drag, which is motivated by financial profit through capitalist strategies that have proven to be effective. *Drag Race* is not showing efforts in trying to diverge from the normalization of drag they have been representing for the past ten years. Admittedly, this does not necessarily imply that the narrow depiction of drag is what audiences want. However, as Bambi claims, "what will lead people to appreciate drag queens the most is if they are at least comparable to the level of polish that they see on television." With all this in mind, the following chapter argues that the Drag Race Model is what certain audience members unacquainted with the art form before the show seek. The show has established norms and expectations according to what it takes to be 'America's Next Drag Superstar', which reverberate through the communities the franchise means to represent.

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[58] Docile in terms of being politically and socially silent on the show. This distinction is key considering that Bob the Drag Queen and Sasha Velour have both been vocal politically (and even against RuPaul) after the crowning on season 8 and 9 respectively.

Chapter 4:

Corporate Screen versus Democratic Streets: The Gap Between Screen and Street Drag Identities

The *New York* Magazine Controversy

In June 2019, season seven and *All Stars 2* alumna Yekaterina Petrovna Zamolodchikova (but you can call her Katya) graced the cover of *New York*. Offering up a coveted space during American pride month, the magazine made drag the centrefold in a now controversial portfolio by Martin Schoeller entitled, 'America Has a New National Pastime'. Social media posts from the photographed *Drag Race* alumni indicated that they were not aware that the magazine would rank the past competitors in a top twenty. According to Matthew Schneier (2019), "what was once a glittery camp subculture on the edge of gay culture has become one of humanity's pop preoccupations, with its own hierarchy of stars and story lines for fans to get behind" (p. 38). There subsequently devolved a rating system based on likability and relatability among the show's consumers because of the popularity of the program. This phenomenon speaks to the influence of the fandom on the careers of drag artists in and out of the competition. The previous chapter argued that, among these 140 *Drag Race* alumni, little to no drag diversity is exposed. The scope of drag is further reduced because of the ranking system since only some of these alumni enjoy popularity off screen, which impacts the representation of drag generally. Therefore, a paradox emerges. On the one hand, being cast on the program can propel one's career further and provide many working opportunities (Schneier, 2019, p. 38). On the other hand, for E. Alex Jung (2019), "*Drag Race* has Disneyfied drag, creating an industry standard" (p. 50). Making drag available for consumption in

such a homogenized way has consequences for both the art form and its viewers. These will be the main focus of this final chapter.

A certain loss of the essence of the art form is observed by Jung in their work as the author believes that *mainstreaming* a once queer counterculture dissipates feelings of ownership and intention over the practice (p. 50). In Jung's words, "[the] unsettling, subversive, and tawdry aspects of drag have become sublimated for TV" (p. 50). While I am disconcerted by this remark, the sentiment might result from something that Tiffany, a Montreal drag enthusiast, observes. She thinks that, because drag, which historically was underground, is "becoming mainstream, [it] is fitting into the mainstream that already exists."[59] I have already argued that assimilating into the popular scene implies reproducing a more universally appealing aesthetic, which both reduces the expansion of the drag spectrum and impedes working opportunities and media attention for artists outside of the Drag Race Model. This chapter investigates how the made-for-television aesthetic impacts queer performers off screen.

I rely here on an ethnographic methodology to analyse exactly the impact of drag representation on drag performers, performances, and fans. For Yin-Kun Chang (2005), "[the] ethnographer is not concerned to describe the behavior of the members of the group, but rather to understand the culture of that group through direct engagement with its own agents and relationships" (p. 179). Part of this work, according to the author, involves conducting interviews with the community in order to access elements of their routines (p. 184). Interviewing drag artists and fans is the most obvious way to understand how screen representations affect non-televised performances.

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[59] Personal interview, November 6th, 2019

For this investigation, I am introducing two terms that make the distinction between on and off screen drag performances so as to anchor them academically. I will be using the terms *democratic streets* and *corporate screens* in order to discuss the impact of *Drag Race* on drag artists and drag enthusiasts. *Democratic street* refers to a space where performers can explore their femininity and masculinity unrestrictedly. This term is associated with a convention-free art form that is more closely in line with drag's origins. A democratic street performance does not correspond to the model of drag performance prevailing on mainstream screens. Democratic street performers embrace the complexities of the art form and its diverse expressions, such as those of bearded drag queens, drag kings, hyper-queens (cis-gendered or trans-women doing drag), and also the Drag Race Model. A *corporate screen* aesthetic, in opposition, refers only to the perfected illusion of femininity and marketable drag aesthetic that governs mainstream screens. It is the type of drag (explored in depth in Chapter 3) that is tailored in order to generate revenue from the labour and the exposition of drag artists. A corporate screen performance is universalized and homogenized. While valid and falling under the spectrum of drag, it fails to fully represent the complexities of the art form. I use corporate screen drag interchangeably with the Drag Race Model.

As the articles by both Schneier and Jung on the *New York* magazine issue suggest, the proliferation of drag artists who were birthed from *Drag Race* shape how the art form is represented on corporate screen. I have argued at length that the governing depiction of drag is now a homogenized, capitalized upon, and made-for-consumption aesthetic, profiting both drag artists and television producers via the distribution of the hyper-feminine drag model. I also believe that the success of the show has a significant impact on drag artists and viewers. In fact, the democratic streets are greatly influenced by the program in positive and negative ways. In this

chapter, I discuss the commodification of queerness and its reception, arguing that *Drag Race* establishes standards of queer performance that are also projected onto street drag artists. In turn, this impacts work opportunities, how audience members interact with performers, as well as the development of the art form in an era when drag is accepted and welcomed in queer and non-queer spaces. In sum, this chapter discusses the tensions between corporate screens and democratic streets and, as season eight's alumni Kim Chi once tweeted, between Drag Fans and Drag Race Fans.[60]

Commodifying the Drag Race Model

As this thesis has illustrated throughout, *Drag Race* corporatizes drag and turns the art form into a homogenized product available for the consumption of viewers and drag enthusiasts. According to Jean Retzinger (2010), the television industry's exploitation of the labour of reality television competitors with the goal of providing entertainment value encourages viewers' passivity in their reception of commodities on screen (p. 458). This chapter aims to assess the validity of such a claim.

Furthermore, Michael Lovelock (2019) argues that "reality shows, and formats with competition structures in particular, commodify performances of supposedly authentic selfhood in ways that construct selfhood itself as commercial resource" (p. 160). The author associates the ways in which the competitor on any reality television show profits from the - at times calculated – representation of their identity. Similarly, Sandoval proposes that *Drag Race*'s "main goal seems

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[60] @KimChi_Chic, Nov 5, 2017, "If you can name every single drag race queen but can't name ten local queens in your hometown, you're a drag race fan, not a drag fan." *Twitter.com*, https://twitter.com/kimchi_chic/status/927278583571128320?lang=en

to be to sell an image as a product" (p. 103). I further these claims and argue that the creation of commodified identity has impacts beyond capitalizing from a run on a reality television set.

In order to do so, I draw on the process of commodification Marcel Mauss (2002) conceptualizes as a direct correlation with the way society is constructed. The author claims that exchanges, which include exchanges of commodities, influence how members of society are situated in relation to their behaviours (p. 101-2).[61] These tensions between commodities and societal considerations are relevant in my analysis of the direct impact of the Drag Race Model on viewers and their constructions of reality.

Lesley A. Sharp (2000) explicates Mauss' understanding of commodification and writes that, "exchange goods are frequently entangled in a host of meanings framed by sociopolitical concerns, and thus they are symbolically charged by their sociality as well as by their links to hierarchy and power" (p. 291). As an entity is turned into a product, a set of sociopolitical considerations automatically arises. This interpretation is relevant to my work as I inquire into the influences of screen images on viewers. According to Postman, for audiences, viewing images shapes personal understandings and definitions of the product being commodified. Postman affirms that the media and the images distributed on screen directly influence how, in this case, practices like drag are perceived, including the viewers' judgement and behaviour in relation to the product consumed (p. 161). The process by which commodities are created thus has an impact on viewers who digest a televised product in relation to a capitalist framework. In other words, with the example of *Drag Race*, I have been questioning whether the distribution of drag from

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[61] Mauss first wrote these ideas in French in 1950. His book was translated into English in 1954 and published by Routledge in 1990. I am referring to the version published by Taylor & Francis e-Library in 2002.

corporate screens as a finite and limiting representation reduces definitions of the art form for viewers.

I also wonder about the passivity of viewers with regard to their consumption of commodified screen content. Retzinger believes that the reality television industry, because of its inherent exploitation of labour, reinforces the lethargy of viewers. Therefore, are viewers of *Drag Race* submissive to their narrow depiction of drag and thus trimming their appreciation of the art form? Uma Gahd, the aforementioned award-winning drag queen, believes that *Drag Race* does not change what constitutes the art form in and of itself, but thinks there is an impact in terms of the ways in which the show represents it. While the drag queen holds that the program's decision to prioritize the Drag Race Model isn't troubling per se, "the problem is that [*Drag Race*] has the biggest platform and there are people who are going to consume and not know any different."[62] The passivity of *some* viewers is raised in this case because, for Randall L. Rose & Stacy L. Wood (2005), the mechanism by which products are screened on reality television influences viewers' "construction of social reality" (p. 295). Uma provides the examples of underaged *Drag Race* fans who are not old enough to go to queer venues and are thus only exposed to the art form on the show or on Instagram. Consequently, the only kind of drag they are accustomed to, for Uma, is "highly polished, mostly photoshopped, and probably with a filter." The Montreal drag queen expresses that these types of consumers accept this representation of the art form as the norm and, in turn, might not expand what Uma feels to be "limited point of view."

Considering that the depiction of queerness on screen affects the reception of the art form by viewers (Hart, 2003, p. 598), I argue that *Drag Race*'s lack of diversity influences political and social constructions of drag for viewers unaware of its vibrant past, present, and future who might

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[62] Personal interview, December 4, 2019.

even associate the model presented on screen with its definition in near totality. Commodifying drag on mainstream television thus affects viewers' personal constructions of the art form. Not only are personal definitions impacted, so too are the behaviours of viewers-turned-live audience members. In interview, Becca admitted that the TV show opens up the curiosity of certain viewers interested in exploring drag live. She explains that some of her friends who are now audience members at live shows "have been excited and blown away" by seeing local queens on stage.[63] *Drag Race* thus invites viewers into queer spaces where they can consume drag live, which is in itself a good thing. However, by only selectively representing the type of drag that guarantees mainstream appeal and financial revenue, the TV show, in some ways, misguides what comes to be expected on stage. Indeed, as drag is generally consumed in live shows, the way it is represented on television might associate screen drag with street drag too closely. Bambi Dextrous shares this sentiment as the performer claims that "[if] people's first contact with drag is through a hit reality show like *Drag Race*, that will definitely affect their perception, rather than if their first-time experiencing drag is live in a bar."[64] Accordingly, Jung argues that "[there] are new rules of this particular performance of gender" (p. 50). Based on this, *Drag Race* has created a certain bar for drag professionalism that contributes to a biased consumption of the art form because its standards are subsequently levelled upon drag queens working in democratic street spaces.

Constructions of Standards

As *Drag Race* continues to rise in popularity internationally and across platforms, it creates a level of expectation in terms of aesthetic and performance. For Jung, "[drag queens] can't look messy, even though, in some deep way, messiness is part of drag" (p. 50). Here, the author argues that the

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[63] Personal interview, November 13th, 2019.
[64] Personal interview, July 18th, 2019.

aesthetic that dominates the show is something of a departure from the roots of the art form. As I have demonstrated, *Drag Race* predominantly features drag queens that perform an illusion of femininity, who excel at sewing, singing, acting, dancing, and lip-synching based on the format of the show. However, Bambi asserts that "[there] are amazing drag queens who don't dance, amazing drag queens who don't sew, so now the expectation is that if you're going to be on *Drag Race,* you have to have this amazing wardrobe, and you have to be able to do these kinds of things." The show implicitly suggests that a professional drag queen should perform well in line with all of these requirements. According to Jung, "[to] become a successful drag queen on the show requires adhering to certain principles: a budget and an eye for high fashion, a dexterity with stan culture, a broad sense of humour, telegenic timing, and an embrace of RuPaul's self-gospel" (p. 50).[65] In fact, these expectations are made to fit into a competition format. China Dethcrash (2017), a drag performer, writes, "like all other television shows, [*Drag Race*] represents a glossed-over, pretty much unattainable vision of what drag is."[66] By assessing the competitors by these benchmarks, *Drag Race* establishes confining standards of what professionalized drag resembles on screen.

For Bambi, this mechanism is enforced when viewers are initially introduced to the art form by the show. The performer claims "the level of polish that we see on something like *Drag Race*, for the most part, might create a certain expectation for people who are otherwise uninitiated to drag." From the perspective of showrunners as well as viewers, a certain level of drag professionalism seems to prevail on corporate screens. Prospective competitors whose goal is to

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[65] 'Stan', for Meg Mulgahy (2018), refers to a "fandom evolving into a culture of intense social media following, idolisation and even protectionism"; it is a clipping, or combination, of 'stalker' and 'fan'. From "What Is 'Stan' Culture And How Did It Help Ariana Grande's 'Thank u, next'?", November 29, 2018, *gcn.ie*, https://gcn.ie/stan-culture-ariana-grandes/

[66] From "Stop Using RuPaul's Drag Race to Judge Local Drag" by China Dethcrash, 06/04/2017, *HISKIND Magazine*. Accessed November 2019. https://hiskind.com/stop-using-rupauls-drag-race-to-judge-local-drag/

appear on the show are expected to uphold to these standards. "If you are going to be on *Drag Race*," says Bambi, "you are ready to clear a certain bar of professionalism or polish." Part of these expectations are generated because of the type of drag the show caters to. Becca tell us that, on the program, "[there] is a pressure put on [a] hyper-fem look." In other words, as I have pointed out, the show, during its casting and criticism portions, seems to recognize and reward the illusion of femininity as the governing and singular aesthetic. Becca reminds us that "every drag fan knows that if you do man-drag [on the show, it's] a problem [and] Michelle will always, ask for the waist to be cinched to get that hourglass figure." Becca's comments bring to mind The Vixen's critique on the runway of episode five when Michelle told the Chicago drag queen that her figure would have been more appealing should she have provided the coveted shapely figure. The level of drag proficiency imposed by the show relies on, in Becca's words, "very stereotypical female beauty standards", which, according to the drag fan, not only distances the art form from its gender-bending traditions, but also imposes a single option for a successful drag performance. Becca's sentiment and tone imply that some viewers, counting herself, are mindful of the show's limitations that I explored in my previous chapter. While I am not arguing that every viewer is able to differentiate from screen to street aesthetics, a realization of *Drag Race*'s narrow representation of the art form is at times forcefully recapitulated.

By prioritizing a homogenized corporate aesthetic and rejecting any divergences, *Drag Race* proposes a narrow depiction of drag that is projected onto street performers. For Kayleigh, viewers-turned-audience members who attend live drag shows with performers exposing body hair might be surprised because this proposition isn't displayed on *Drag Race*. Additionally, she fears that, if the performer "is not a fantastic dancer, lip-syncher, actor, with a three-thousand-dollar dress," audience members might disagree with their style and think that "they're not doing drag

properly."[67] I believe that this might occur due to such a limited version of drag that transpires on the show. That said, not every viewer and fan are deceived in this way.

All the same, Uma reveals that her "drag closet is bursting with clothes because [she feels] bad wearing an outfit more than three times." Never appearing with similar outfits more than twice has become another element that drag artists need to negotiate since the popularity of the show. The drag queen shares that "we're supposed to be beautiful, glamourous, and always different every time you see us, and that's problematic and that's something that comes from Drag Race." There is a misconception of what drag looks like off-screen because of what *Drag Race* represents in terms of aesthetic as the responses for Montreal drag queens and fans demonstrate. However, it appears that the type of performances drag queens produce are also highly influenced by the show. Uma believes that *Drag Race* "has set a high standard for aesthetic and a low standard for performance." The show asks its competitors to compete in a lip-synch challenge on a square stage when they are doing poorly in the competition. "You see someone lip-synching when they're at their worst on *Drag Race*" Uma continues, as "they're stressing out [and] scared." Therefore, in a way, this has simplified what staged drag performances look like. Uma believes that "[audience members] expect you to show up and only do a left-right performance, [which is] when you walk from one side of the stage to another, because, again, on *Drag Race*, that's all they can do." Not only has the show homogenized appearances of drag queens and set an aesthetic bar, but it has also normalized successful drag performances to low standards. While I personally witness this phenomenon in the local drag scene, I also believe that, in some instances, paradoxically, *Drag Race* has raised the expectations of the art form generally in terms of dancing abilities and humour. On the show, prowess with regards to choreography is rewarded with applause during lip-synch

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[67] Personal interview, July 22nd, 2019.

battles while comedic timing is tested on numerous challenges, such as during the Snatch Game, RuPaul's Roast, the stand-up routine, and acting challenges.[68]

In sum, the show imposes these standards onto queens who are not on *Drag Race* and who are still subjugated to similar principles. Dethcrash insists that "the criteria for beauty and success on the T.V. show are not universal markers."[69] According to the author, the constructions of standards of the art form occur on the corporate screen and are subsequently embraced by audience members who are unaware of the history and complexities of drag which, considering the mainstream position of *Drag Race*, represent a large number of people. For Uma,

> The show has brought in bigger audience in some aspects, but as soon as [drag queens] do something that isn't quite so glamorous [it's] a struggle to get people to stick around for your show because you don't look like these girls who spent thousands of dollars on wardrobe because we can't afford it and people don't feel quite so invested in us.

Drag Race's standards of performance are thus inflicted onto local drag queens. In itself, the fact that it chooses to feature this limited depiction of the art form isn't problematic, but the legitimization of drag as a career that occurs thanks the show bears implications for professional drag performers globally in relation to their livelihood.

Corporate Screen versus Democratic Street

The creation of the expectation levels on *Drag Race* suggests any future contestants need to equal or surpass this in their daily professions as working drag queens. Jung claims of alumni of the

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[68] The Snatch Game is a recurrent challenge and parody of the competition show the Match Game where the *Drag Race* competitors have to impersonate celebrities and match their answers with two actual celebrity guests.
[69] From "Stop Using RuPaul's Drag Race to Judge Local Drag" by China Dethcrash, 06/04/2017, *HISKIND Magazine*. Accessed November 2019. https://hiskind.com/stop-using-rupauls-drag-race-to-judge-local-drag/

show that "many queens are constantly feeding the machine, and it's difficult to imagine a viable career path independent of the show" (p. 50). While I think that some drag queens were able to distance themselves from it and still have a successful career, for example Phi Phi O'Hara, most alumni continue their professions in tandem with the show and the level of expectation it has created. For example, as the portfolio in *New York* implies, the top twenty drag powerhouses of America are part of the show's legacy and are aligning with its corporate aesthetic. And, as the careers of *Drag Race*'s alumni are propelled by the show, commodifying drag results in both the rise and lack of opportunities for drag artists off-screen.

   Drag Race's narrow depictions, according to Niall Brennan (2017), reduce opportunities for audiences to discover a diversified drag aesthetic outside of mainstream screens (p. 42). Bambi strongly believes that the show is a great way to find opportunities as people want to include drag more in their events or workplaces. However, she still thinks "it does a disservice to drag in the fact that it homogenizes the idea of what an accomplished drag queen is supposed to be." This phenomenon is partially caused by the fact that viewers of the TV show are prone to attending live drag shows that feature similar aesthetics. Lana Dalida believes that "people want to see what the popular girls from [*Drag Race*] do. […] people want to see drag stars now" who embody being versatile in many aspects, such as singing, acting, and fashion.[70] As such, Lana asserts that "people expect drag queens to be good at everything now." Street drag performances are compared with those represented on screen, which, according to Lana, spurs local drag artists to model their aesthetic and style to those of *Drag Race* favorites. The corporatized drag thus starts to metaphorically infiltrate the streets of gay neighborhoods in the form of comparison with the

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[70] Personal interview, July 18th, 2019.

show's alumni and a conspicuous effort to align drag aesthetics with the program as it becomes more and more successful.

A tension between corporate screen and democratic street drag arises. Uma Gahd explains that, in the media, there is a separation between the types of drag that receive mainstream success. Shows like *Drag Race* receive the most attention whereas others like *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula* (2016-) and *House of Drag* (2018-) remain on niche networks and suffer limited distribution. Uma, though, suggests this hierarchy of drag also exists in the streets because mainstream drag venues, which are the most populated in local gay districts, feature prominently "accessible" drag because of the bar's business model. A mainstream drag aesthetic, which resembles the Drag Race Model, will guarantee traffic in such venues and, therefore, revenue for the bar and the artists on stage. That said, other venues, which are mainly outside these neighbourhoods, feature underground, shocking, trash, or theatrical approaches of the art form. For Uma, "[the streets] are reflective in the sense that in real life there is a stratification of kinds a drag, a hierarchy that happens [which] is the same thing that happens on TV." In both, *Drag Race* remains a way of gatekeeping that ultimately impacts the streets by precluding certain performers from receiving bookings and the same popular attention.

Hugh Montgomery (2019) investigates this situation by interviewing professional drag artist Amrou Al-Kadhi who was impacted by the arrival of the British version of the American television show. According to Montgomery, Al-Kadhi worries that "*Drag Race UK* could create a two-tier economy."[71] Montgomery quotes the performer, who claims that "[there] are a lot of people who make their money through doing drag, and unfortunately, the queens who [may] get all the jobs are the ones who've been on the show. And what does that do to all the other drag

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[71] From "Is RuPaul's Drag Race good for drag?". By Hugh Montgomery, October 2nd, 2019, *bbc.com*. Accessed November 2019. http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20191002-is-rupauls-drag-race-a-good-thing-for-drag

queens?" Al-Kadhi fears that the diversity of the England drag scene, which they believe is not represented on *Drag Race UK*'s first season, might divide drag artists in similar ways to what has happened in the United States. A San Francisco performer that was also interviewed in Montgomery's piece explains that, since *Drag Race* gained in popularity, local queens who used to be legends in their hometown and who used to be able to sell out shows have loss in their popularity because now *Drag Race* alumni are favored by most audience members.[71] Local queens consequently lose income, which creates the two-tier system Al-Kadhi dreads.

The success of *Drag Race* seems to provide, in the main, work opportunities for its alumni and those who conform with the show's limited model, which I believe segregates drag performers. Moreover, for Patrick, the show has actually "carved out what a professional drag queen is and what somebody who does drag is."[72] Therefore, *Drag Race* also creates a divide between professional artists who fit with the Drag Race Model and those who can't for personal, financial, or political reasons. For Uma, the show is "a blessing and a curse at the same time" because, while *Drag Race* legitimizes her career, her employers and audiences "expect [her] to look like [she] spent thousands of dollars on an outfit, and then pay [her] $150" which is unreasonable. In turn, this state of affairs impacts the careers of those who will see a rise in their popularity or an exclusion from audience members and the community.

The show has motivated gender-performing artists to adapt their drag to its standard. For instance, Becca believes that "queens now are trying to do a look, have their own identity visually." As the favored alumni from the show are branded through their makeup styles or extravagant outfits, they become married to an image that is later on marketed to audiences. Aquaria, for example, became known for her flawless makeup skills, impressive outfits, professionally styled

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[72] Personal interview, November 13th, 2019

wigs, and dynamic performances since her run on season ten. Tiffany similarly thinks "local drag queens might look at [*Drag Race*] [and] try to be more like that, more fashion-y." Indeed, she believes that the attention placed on fashion by the show applies pressure to local queens because, in Tiffany's words, "now the public is looking at you, so you're going to express yourself how people want you to express yourself." Therefore, there is a strain put on drag queens in relation to the types of performances they will compose, venues where they will perform, and an aesthetic they will work towards in order to reach the expectations set up by the show. Becca explains that when she first went to clubs, drag queens were performing impersonations, for example of Mariah Carey and Cher, whereas now drag performers put more effort into their look and subsequent branding, which are independent from their song choices.

Patrick observes that now queens "are taking over […as] pop icons" and "are trying to have their own nights where all the attentions is on that queen and their guests." On top of adjusting their aesthetic to fit with the model, drag queens have changed their performances in order to abide by what audience members are becoming used to. He thinks that this might be due to the touring shows of *Drag Race* that have gathered thousands of people to go see a spectacular drag event. Patrick believes that the small percentage of audiences of these types of shows who became curious enough to explore drag in local queer venues will be expecting a spectacle at the same level. As a result, the style of performance has been altered to meet audiences' expectations as shaped also by *Drag Race*'s touring shows. Some streets of the Village in Montreal are becoming corporatized as the mark of *Drag Race* is being felt in democratic venues. I observe that, when I attend *Drag Race*-related events such as viewing parties and those featuring touring drag queens, I see certain audiences that I do not see on any other nights when only local queens are performing. This

discrepancy in terms of audience makeup is telling in the ways in which *Drag Race* impacts local professional drag queens.

The difference between Drag Fans and Drag Race Fans becomes marked. Uma shares Kim Chi's remark as the Montreal drag queen explains the difference between the two. She claims that "[drag queens] are blessed that it's opened up a lot of people to our art, but we are also a bit stuck because people don't realize that there is a difference, and how that plays out in their choices." A Drag Race Fan will take the Drag Race Model at face-value and expect the level of onscreen proficiency and finances on local drag, while a Drag Fan will understand the gap between corporate and democratic aesthetics and appreciate the diversity of the art form. This impacts the careers of the drag artists who are suffering from the distinction. For example, Uma hosts *Drag Race* viewing parties at a local drag club. She claims that there are hundreds of audience members who experience "a beautiful moment in the community when we all get together and share this," an event that is comparable to straight audiences enjoying sports together. That said, Uma observes that "immediately when the credits start rolling, everyone gets up and walks out even though there is a show featuring the local drag immediately afterwards that they didn't have to pay to see, that they could be giving their money for people who aspire to be on the show." *Drag Race* thus brings people into venues, but the same crowd won't necessarily want to consume local drag even in the most convenient scenarios. "It hurts as an artist", confesses Uma, "to see these people getting up and say, 'I love drag but I am not going to stick around for your show.'" The difference between the kinds of drag fans is palpable in the streets and impacts the professions of working local drag queens.

On the other hand, there are some positive impacts from the popularization of drag from the show. Kayleigh thinks that now more people are becoming interested in and intrigued by the

art form to the point where drag is invited to occupy spaces other than queer venues. The fact that drag queens now infiltrate daytime television shows, such as *The View* or CBC, is positive for Kayleigh because "for people that are not versed in drag, gender identity, or queer art at all, it's nice when those lines are starting to blur." Incorporating a queer art form into mainstream platforms, therefore, participates in sending messages of acceptance. Kayleigh indicates that young audiences are also becoming more interested in drag, and, as a result, drag performers find work opportunities outside of the nightlife scene. This includes drag brunches, children's Storytime sessions, and corporate events. "The content will be changing based on the audiences" says Kayleigh, but the drag fan also believes that it will provide drag artists with "opportunities […] to be an activist politically." The show opens doors for drag artists to voice political concerns and reduce the stigma surrounding queer art.

To illustrate this sentiment, I turn to season six and season nine. Courtney Act of season six was vocal about the representation of queerness and drag on screen. For example, she was amongst the alumni of the show who condemned RuPaul for the transphobic catchphrase used on every episode since its first season. After vocalizing this concern online, the show changed RuPaul's introductory announcements to 'she done already done had herses.' By the time of season nine, Peppermint, alongside Act and others, also publicly castigated RuPaul for their transphobic exclusion of transwomen who had gone through breast enhancement surgery from competing on *Drag Race*. Peppermint's position was applauded by many people from the queer community, including Drag Race Fans who also opposed the host's narrow and restrictive views. RuPaul has since apologized for this comment and Gia Gunn, a transwoman, was invited to compete on *All Stars 4* (2018-). Finally, season nine's winner, Sasha Velour has been one of the most outspoken and articulate competitors who celebrates queer art in all of its forms. In their 'Meet the Queens'

interview, Velour expresses that "drag is an art form of the queer imagination; it's all about beauty that goes beyond gender."[73] The winner now hosts a drag show, *Nightgowns*, in Brooklyn where they showcase a vast variety of drag expressions, including performances by drag queens, kings, hyper queens, and gender nonconforming performers.[74] According to Velour, the show is "beautiful, funny, and politically charged"; at the end of the night, the performer delivers a queer sermon to their audience.[75] These examples demonstrate how politically-driven contestants are awarded mainstream platforms and attention thanks to their run on *Drag Race*.

The show also functions as an aspiration and inspiration for many drag queens. For Uma, as she was starting drag, "[*Drag Race*] gave me something to aspire to, something I could work towards." The performer also thinks that, as the show showcases a diversity of styles and influences within the boundaries of the Drag Race Model, it becomes a "mood board for drag [and] exposes us to ideas to we may have never had because every local drag scene is different." As such, the show also reveals the drag market in many different cities. Uma confessed discovering the impressive Chicago drag scene thanks to following alumni from the city. "It's thanks to *Drag Race* that we see that", says Uma, "so it's going to change the way that we perform drag [in Montreal] because we've got these new inspirations." Uma made these remarks as we were discussing the recent inclusion of a Canadian chapter of *Drag Race*, but the performer acknowledged feeling inspired by and exposed to a diversity of drag thanks to the show. Ultimately, though, while *Drag Race* boosts traffic for drag in and out of nightlife venues for

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[73] From "Meet the Queens: Sasha Velour" February 2, 2017. *logotv.com* (0:59) http://www.logotv.com/video-clips/isctg7/rupauls-drag-race-meet-the-queens-sasha-velour

[74] See more about the show on Velour's website: https://www.sashavelour.com/nightgowns

[75] From "It's Gay Pride Weekend: Dress the Part" by Erik Piepunburk. June 23, 2016. *The New York Times*. Accessed December 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/24/arts/gay-pride-new-york-all-drag-weekend.html

viewers wishing to experience the art form live and provides inspiration for artists, it also selectively dictates which type of performer will benefit from mainstream visibility.

The Impact of Mainstream Drag on Audiences

Daniel Welsh (2019) has interviewed many drag queens in the British scene about their interactions with fans and writes that "for those whose interest in the art form begins and ends with the reality series, they have a rather limited view of what constitutes drag."[76] The Drag Race Model, as I hypothesized, does limit the expansion of drag, since audience members are surprised to encounter aesthetics and performances diverging from those on *Drag Race*. Lucy Fur, a drag queen who Welsh interviewed, explains that she doesn't particularly like the show because any divergences from the onscreen conventions are no longer considered to be drag.[76] For example, Lucy does not lip sync during her numbers, a preference that offends audience members as, for them, this constitutes a drag failure. Bambi shares this feeling as the performer expresses the disarray that "the people who were first acquainted to drag via television […] end up going to bars [and] are expecting drag at the television level […] may not understand or be as appreciative of what they see actually in front of them." These interactions with viewers-turned-audience-members reveal the impact of the popularization of the Drag Race Model on performers in terms of their interactions with drag fans, the transition from screen to street, and the introduction of queer culture to straight audiences.

In many ways, *Drag Race* turns some audience members into under-educated critics of drag. Bambi shares this feeling: "it's a little funny now because a lot of people seem entitled to

[76] From "Dividing And Redefining: How RuPaul's Drag Race Has Changed The Face Of British Drag" By Daniel Welsh, October 29th, 2019. *Huffpost*. Accessed November 2019.

judge drag, and that audience has now become much larger than whoever shows up at a bar." One of my interviewees who prefers to stay anonymous claims that audience members "can look down on your drag because everybody now is a drag expert in their heads because they've seen the show, they have seen all the critiques, and [think they] know drag now."[77] Finally, Uma shares that, because her signature makeup that does not fall under the illusion of female facial features, she is often confronted by audience members who do not understand her inspiration. The popularity of *Drag Race* appears to be authorizing drag fans to impose their expectations and knowledge of drag onto local queens. *Drag Race* viewers, according to the Dethcrash, feel educated enough to actively volunteer feedback based on what is gathered "by the standards of one televised beauty pageant."[78] Because *Drag Race* has fifteen seasons, each promoting criticism and ranking strategies, the show normalizes behaviours where audience members are entitled to provide their own projection of what drag is onto drag artists at local queer venues.

Using Postman and Sharp's logic, the standards viewers are utilizing to make these decisions are based on subjective constructions of realities emanating from the commodification of drag on screen. Kareem Elarab (2019) writes that "[the] toxic part of the fandom comes from people convincing themselves they know everything about drag because of the television show."[79] The author explains that this is partially due to the confluence of audience members with the premise of reality television, which promises to represent real situations. For example, audience members are fooled by the villanization of competitors, which has resulted in online harassment. Since season ten, The Vixen received numerous death threats and attacks on social media from

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[77] Personal interview, October 16th, 2019
[78] From "Stop Using RuPaul's Drag Race to Judge Local Drag" by China Dethcrash, 06/04/2017, *HISKIND Magazine*. Accessed November 2019. https://hiskind.com/stop-using-rupauls-drag-race-to-judge-local-drag/
[79] From "The Toxicity of Fandoms: '*RuPaul's Drag Race*'", by Kareem Elarab, May 15 2019. *Odyssey*. Accessed November 2019. https://www.theodysseyonline.com/toxicity-fandom-rupauls-drag-race

fans of the show (Garel, 2018).[30] Elarab argues that these interactions, which monitored "the contestants every move, criticizing queen's skills, shaming unnecessarily, shifted expectations for the show […] [have] completely impacted the general public's perception of drag."[79] *Drag Race* encourages fans to actively engage with drag off screen, which, at times, occurs in aggressive ways outside of the show's control. I believe, thanks to what Bambi and Lucy have shared, that this happens because the level of understanding of drag the program offers is deemed sufficient to share judgements on professional performers.

These allegedly educated criticisms are rejected by drag artists who are faced with these kinds of behaviours from Drag Race Fans who candidly vocalized their opinions. Elarab writes that "[fans] bombard queens on social media with criticisms and hate to show their legitimacy of being fan of 'drag', but instead it's received as unethical and ignorant."[79] Part of the construction of sociopolitical frameworks, as a result of the commodification of drag on screen, includes the desire to engage with the art form, which may result in negative confrontations between audience members and drag artists who don't conform to the model upheld on screen. These interactions can quickly become unacceptable as the pretence of knowledge gained through *Drag Race*'s narrow representation of drag, in addition to the environment of criticism prevailing in each episode, encourages viewers to operate through subjective lenses off screen. However, as argued here, these grounds by which viewers make their criticisms are weakened by the fact that the show is only reproducing a limiting and selective depiction of drag.

Something must be said about how viewing practices have evolved since *Drag Race* was first popularized on television. Since its original scheduling on the channel Logo, the show now runs on VH1 as well as, from 2018 onwards, Netflix. The fact that *Drag Race* is now part of the streaming platform's catalogue also impacts how viewers consume drag. Watching *Drag Race* on

Netflix can also discourage audience members from attending drag shows in local queer venues. For Kayleigh, "going to see a sweaty drag show at a queer bar is not mainstream." "Many people can watch it on Netflix in the comfort of their home," she continues, "but they're not going to get out and get uncomfortable." In that understanding, *Drag Race* challenges how drag is consumed, and most importantly, what kind of drag is sought after. For example, venues which headline drag outside of the Drag Race Model are less populated in comparison to bars in the centre of gay villages. Often, they either close down or are not equipped with appropriate stage requirements (lights, sound system, backstage, etc.). Café Cleopatra on boulevard Saint-Laurent in Montreal no longer offers regular drag shows. On the other hand, Cabaret Mado is full on weekends, which are the nights when, I observed, performers who most fit with the Drag Race Model entertain a mostly straight audience. I have noted that shows that are the most populated by both a queer and straight audience are *Drag Race* viewing parties. These events cater to a specific audience that does not attend local drag shows - aside from those related to the American competition program.

The audience makeup discussed here relates to what Patrick noticed. *Drag Race*'s touring shows often stop in Montreal to sold out houses. However, these venues are not what local nightclubs look like. While most are still in Montreal's gay village, they are mainstream theatres that have larger seat capacity. The stage is much further from the audiences who are now sitting in comfortable seats without bar services watching performers out of reach on a large, beautiful platform that supports extravagances, such as back up dancers, projections, etc. The show thus completely alters the way the art form is consumed if we compare the mainstream theatres of touring shows to a local bar club. As such, this turnaround also puts the artists performing on these bigger stages on a pedestal and removes audience members from street queer politics.

On another level, Kayleigh discusses the safety of watching the art form on screen because it creates a distance from the struggles drag artists go through in real life. She explains that accessing personal projects from *Drag Race* alumni, such as Katya's podcast *Whimsically Volatile*, provides insights into the precarious past of some contestants, which include sex-work, struggles with gender identity, the lack of financial resources, substance abuse within nightly lifestyles, and the travails of being a young queer artist. These struggles, according to the drag fan, are not very present on the show as "[*Drag Race*] makes queerness and drag more palatable to the everyday person." There is thus a denial of the aspects of the art form that is a result of the way the show exposes drag to viewers. Patrick shares that the success of the show allows for conversations where he finds himself having "to defend or pinpoint certain things" about the art form that escape viewers who are only familiar with the show. Patrick provides the example of his mother's friends who love the show but are offended during live drag performances as they believe it pokes fun at women. Patrick wonders about the difference between televisual and "live, raw, and edgy" drag. *Drag Race* offers a sanitized representation of drag that is meant to be accessible to a mainstream audience and that denies certain elements about the art form's past. In that way, the show does provide visibility to the art form, which in itself is a positive thing, but with narrow lenses as the complexities and the diversity of drag experiences are ignored.

For one of the drag queen I interviewed, the schism between corporate and democratic drag might be due to the fact that viewers-turned-audience-members "don't get to know [drag artists] as people, so maybe they're not attached to [them]." The TV show features interviews with the competitors that grant access to their personal lives, which, according to the drag artist, furthers likability. She asserts that local queens are just as open to being talked to, but the proximity that *Drag Race* fosters through the confessional portions of the episode are not replicated in the streets,

which creates a distance between viewers and local drag artists unlike the semblance of a relationship they have with screen idols.

While the impact of *Drag Race* presented in this chapter has been mostly negative, there are positive outcomes as a result of the celebration of the art form, as narrow as they may be, on mainstream television. Giovanni Porfido (2009) argues:

> This representational shift is of vital importance for all the new generations of queer viewers who should have by now a more positive visual playground to negotiate subjectivity, and for straight audiences to get to know better the existence of queer people (p. 175).

Drag Race sheds light on the queer art form that allows performers to see themselves represented on television, but also non-queer audience members to discover a practice that might have been unbeknownst to them prior. According to one drag queen I interviewed, the show provides references that bond the community of drag queens and drag fans in "quotable and relatable" ways. Chris Riotta (2018) writes that the popularity of the show encourages drag venues to organize viewing parties and events that bring together both LGBTQA+ and straight audiences.[80] *Drag Race*, by encouraging non-queer folks to visit such venues has offered opportunities for audiences to learn about LGBTQA+ culture and for drag artists to perform. Indeed, for Becca, "just the fact it's bringing bodies to the shows is a good thing." Riotta writes that "the environment is one which allows for wide-ranging conversations to take place, and for straight people to ask questions to LGBT viewers about queer culture." There is thus a positive impact in terms of bringing audiences

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[80] From "How RuPaul's Drag Race is Teaching Straight People about Queer Culture" by Chris Riotta, May 25, 2018. *Huffpost*. Accessed November 2019. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-rupauls-drag-race-is-teaching-straight-people_b_5b059828e4b0b22f55b90f19

together and sharing queer culture in a warm, safe environment – as long as their behaviours coincide with the clubs' policies and support each drag performer's personal preferences.

Weighing up the situation, Becca believes that the "commercialization of [drag], which as an art form, can be disheartening, but […] when things starts to homogenize and get monetized […] you do have a rebellion that happens, which is also very exciting." Becca asserts that *Drag Race* divides drag performers into two categories: the ones who fit the market and wish to appeal to Drag Race Fans and those who are rebelling against this model. Consequently, she explains, "there has been more discussion about types of drag, which ten years ago wouldn't have been happening." Ironically, by promoting a carefully selected aesthetic on screen, *Drag Race* also unwittingly allows for drag outside of this model to be recognized. I agree that some audience members who found interest in the art form have been introduced to a myriad of other drag aesthetics. This is exemplified in the inclusion of Haus of Black, a drag troupe that take inspiration from horror and gothic aesthetic, in this year's Los Angeles Drag Con. In fact, two of the members have competed on *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula* (2016-), a competition reality television series that features a drag aesthetic that showcases glamour, horror, and filth. Therefore, while *Drag Race* predominantly foregrounds the illusion of femininity as a confined notion of drag, this limitation also encourages some viewers to discover the rest of the spectrum on their own.

Conclusion

Drag Race has impacted drag artists beyond the show's immediate parameters in terms of access to working opportunities, interactions with drag fans, and the introduction and discouragements of queer and non-queer audiences to attend local drag shows. While drag performers and drag fans believe the show homogenizes the representation of drag, all of my interviewees were able to tell

me about the other types of drag that are not featured on the show. This means that a certain recognition of *Drag Race*'s boundaries is acknowledged by drag fans who are aware of the complexities of the art form. There is thus reason to be optimistic because certain Drag Race Fans are intrigued enough by drag to consume all it has to offer. As Kayleigh puts it, "Drag is super fun, it's a fantasy which we love. People want fantasy, want that outlet [where] you get pop culture, pretty colours, fashion, comedy […] It being, or becoming more mainstream, is also very exciting because the world sucks right now, and if we can comment on it, in a more colourful fun positive way, it makes it seem a little less dark." *Drag Race*'s narrow depiction of the art form is felt in many ways on the streets from drag artists and drag fans, but, thanks to the proliferation of drag on social media, online streaming platforms, and underground shows garnering ever greater following, it appears that audience members are willing to look beyond the Drag Race Model and consume its rebellious extremes.

Conclusion:

Corporatization for the Crown: A Race of its Own?

Season ten ended on June 28th, 2018 with the predictable crowning of Aquaria. After weeks of competition, Asia O'Hara, Eureka O'Hara, Kameron Michaels and Aquaria battled it out during three lip-syncs for the crown. Aquaria found herself victorious after a strong run throughout the season. Notably, the performer also encompasses the ideals that *Drag Race* strives for. As a dynamic, stylish, and feminine drag artist, season's ten winner supports the show's agenda of representing and rewarding a palatable and commercial version of the art form. Watching the lip-syncs and the subsequent crowning was a somewhat underwhelming experience as the ultimate result was not only highly foreseeable, but also uninteresting. Aquaria's winning wasn't engaging from my point of view because *Drag Race* is fascinating when the contestants and winners are pushing the art form forward rather than replicating marketable and immaculate female impersonations. That said, Aquaria's club kid past differentiates her from her competitors and functions as a proposition for an unexplored facet of the art form on mainstream screens. However, the winner did not really feature this aesthetic on season ten. Since her win, on social media, the content Aquaria shares is closely aligned with a genderbending and non-conforming aesthetic. A similar observation can be made of season nine's winner Sasha Velour who also, through their work since their crowning, has not been married to the illusion of femaleness as their dominant aesthetic. Velour also exposes audience members to a diversity of drag expressions in the monthly production *Nightgowns*.

These observations beg to wonder whether the contestants on *Drag Race* deny aspects of their drag identities in order to secure a win and popularity before returning to their roots once said

success is achieved? Is every contestant playing the *Drag Race* game? What does the game entail? Season seven and *All Stars 4*'s contestant Jasmine Masters admitted in a personal video shared on YouTube that she decided to apply to *Drag Race* because of the financial predicament she was in and because a spot on a season would guarantee an increase in her booking fee.[81] *Drag Race* propels the careers of its competitors who, consciously or not, because of the Drag Race Model's dominance, alter their aesthetic in order to enjoy popularity, touring opportunities, and full-time employment. As my interviews have demonstrated, the show sets a certain bar of professionalism and proficiency at high and, often, unattainable levels, and, consequently, contestants and prospective contestants have to abide by these standards to receive success on and off screen. The onscreen expectations infiltrate the streets of gay villages, as I observed that successful drag venues and drag artists correlate with the Drag Race Model, keeping in mind obvious small variations.

Despite Aquaria and Sasha Velour's later digressions, does playing the game model one's aesthetic after *Drag Race* in order to be considered successful by audience members and viewers? The proliferation of online makeup tutorials from *Drag Race* alumni and the popularity of some favorites on social media confirms this hypothesis.[82] My interviews with local drag queens and fans also seem to corroborate this claim as they collectively observed that *Drag Race* imposes the art form's customs, which end up impacting drag performers and enthusiasts. Therefore, season ten's crowning presents a dichotomy between professionalization and personal inspiration. Even though season ten's winner, outside of the competition, celebrates unconventional and democratic styles, during the competition, Aquaria put forward an image of the Drag Race Model almost as an effort to corporatize her identity for the crown. Consequently, this observation reinforces that

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[81] Masters, Jasmine. [Jasmine Masters]. (Jan 28, 2016). *Jasmine Masters RuPaul Dragrace fucked up drag* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gf25Xzhpz_k

[82] Only recently did the companies who produce these tutorials started to include drag queens who did not participate on *Drag Race,* such as *Dragula*'s season one winner Vander Von Odd, Rify Royalty, etc.

screen representation of the art form advocates for a limited aesthetic that guarantees mainstream success. Season ten thus ratifies the conflict between adapting one's aesthetic to the requirements of a television show and of the industry, while also staying true to personal morals and vision. The Vixen became a big part of my project because of her significance in the drag community before, during, and after her run on season ten. Contrary to Aquaria, The Vixen was able to present a personal take on the Drag Race Model while being vocal about the show's agenda, the injustices experienced on set that reflect society's, and her role as a spokesperson for marginalized groups within the community. However, her activism was quickly used against herself as the show seized the potential to make entertaining television by villainizing and infantilizing the competitor instead of rewarding her stances, which is exemplified in the season's second to last episode.

The reunion episode of season ten aired before the crowning, despite being filmed after.[83] This episode presents an opportunity for the contestants to get together and discuss disputes, emotional moments, and tensions that have occurred throughout the season. For example, Blair St-Clair, Dusty Ray Bottoms, and Yuhua Hamasaki discussed their journey with drag in relation to their families and their ongoing support or resistance, while Miz Cracker confronted Asia O'Hara for denigrated her aesthetic. This episode also became an ambush for The Vixen as RuPaul challenged the young Chicago queen for her behaviour throughout the season. As I previously explored in this thesis, The Vixen had arguments with Aquaria and Eureka O'Hara that resulted in heated exchanges. The performer showed herself to be politically engaged as she denounced problematic behaviours, such as Aquaria's racially insensitive narrative of victimisation and Eureka's undervaluing of unconventional aesthetics. The fight between The Vixen and Eureka

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[83] *Drag Race* films the finale in front of a live audience but record each finalist's wins before only one version airs weeks later.

actually resulted in a confrontation where Eureka admitted to pushing at The Vixen's limits on purpose.

In this episode, only The Vixen's behaviour was addressed by RuPaul and other competitors, which resulted in an uncomfortable situation where most of the contestants and the host blamed The Vixen for being outspoken and politically invested. Faced with strong and personal accusations, The Vixen decided to leave the set as the host and the fellow competitors were not taking into consideration Eureka's role in the dispute. The following sequence of the episode addresses her departure, with RuPaul castigating the Chicago performer for her perceived immaturity. The reunion episode continued to villainize The Vixen, making her appear as an aggressive competitor with attitude problems. Rather than addressing what The Vixen exposed, such as blatant racism within the drag and queer communities, season ten condemned the Chicago performer for holding such political stances. The villain-edit The Vixen was subjugated to deeply impacted her popularity and career; she confessed to Craig MacNeil on *Whimsically Volatile* that she received death threats on social media and a rejection from part of the fandom.[84] On the other hand, on the same episode, The Vixen tells MacNeil that the reaction from the fans also confirmed the importance and righteousness of her militancy on the show that must continue off-screen since being attacked by white fans has reflected the racism she attempted to point out in the community on *Drag Race*.

The reunion episode thus demonstrates that a competitor like The Vixen, who does not correlate with *Drag Race*'s ideals, will be punished with harsh editing where she wrongly appears as an aggressive and hateful competitor. Conversely, the decision to downgrade one's activism in the pursuit of entertainment value benefits careers and future mainstream opportunities. My

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[84] MacNeil, Craig. (Producer). (2019, October 13). The Vixen! [Episode 66]. *Whimsically Volatile*.

argument has consistently been that *Drag Race* seeks flawless femininity, marketability, and docility.[85] Throughout this thesis, I have explored how those ideals interplay with each other with consequences. While the first chapter introduced the three driving concepts of this work (ecology, representation, and consumerism), the following chapters directly engaged with related pertinent themes.

My second chapter focused on the exploitative conditions involved in competing on the show. By examining with precision the requirements of the art form, I analyzed how money, skill, and time management are being translated on screen. The close analysis of *Drag Race*'s tenth season illustrates that, because of the format of a reality television show, the conventions of the genre impedes the depiction of the art form in a thorough and authentic way. I observed that *Drag Race* rewards time management, financial resources, and the ability to perform female gender performance only when done flawlessly. In addition, personal struggles are often disregarded in the pursuit of entertainment value. *Drag Race*, therefore, transforms the art form, which takes a lot of work, into a limited representation that guarantees popularity across media platforms and revenue for the brand, producers, and network. In discussing the exploitation of the competitors for these two goals, I observed that the show pointedly caters to a unique and specific drag aesthetic that ensures financial and mainstream success.

The third chapter tackled *Drag Race*'s mission to capitalize on their narrow representation of the art form in the construction of a palatable, limited, and limiting aesthetic. I introduced the Drag Race Model, which presides on and off television due to the show's casting and its reward model. By looking at the contestants on season ten as well as the criticisms offered on each episode,

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[85] Docility in the sense that the contestants are not only praising both the show and RuPaul for revolutionizing the art form of drag, but are also not prominently socially and politically invested, but rather are competing somewhat passively and offering what the judges want to see.

I argued that the panel of judges are prone to reward and feature the illusion of femaleness as the primary component of successful gender performance in a new, mainstream drag economy. In turn, this chapter assessed the reasoning behind this decision. Queer theory and other analyses of queerness in the media identify that screening queer identities has the potential to profit networks and producers as long as their depiction is palatable and agreeable. In relation to drag, this means that, in order for the show to generate profit, the representation of the art form on mainstream screens is finite and marketable. The show has managed to turn drag into a product available for consumption with restricted options in terms of aesthetic and inspiration. This explains why *Drag Race* only features drag queens, for the most part, from male-identifying homosexual bodies who present a perfected and flawless illusion of female bodies and mannerisms.

My last chapter directly investigated the impact of exploiting the labour of the competitors and gatekeeping the full spectrum of drag on Montreal-based performers and fans. This chapter, which relied heavily on interviews with drag queens and enthusiasts, argued that the show calls for a level of drag proficiency from working drag queens. These standards have put pressure on certain performers who seem to feel a necessity to converge their drag aesthetic with the one on screen in order to benefit from similar popular and financial success. In addition, the show has also raised the expectations for drag fans who, whether they're introduced to the art form by the show or not, appear to be attracted to live drag shows that mirror what is displayed on screen. I thus discussed how corporate screens influence democratic streets in terms of the lack of exploration and acceptance of the full diversity of the art form. In turn, this situation affects the careers of drag artists who are directly impacted by the discrepancies between screen and street identities and the understanding of the art form by fans. The ethnographic component of this chapter showed that most of my interviewees are able to identify the ways in which *Drag Race* fails to represent the

complexities in the art form in the pursuit of financial revenue. The responses also acknowledge the show's merit in making drag a desired and sought-after form of entertainment on and off screen. This chapter consequently interrogated the repercussions of the drag empire in the streets, which included a dissociation between Drag Race Fans and Drag Fans.

The show, in its narrow portrayal of the art form, shapes how drag is consumed both on and off screen. As the careers of the contestants are propelled by the show, the Drag Race Model changes the face of drag in gay neighbourhoods. My interviews attempted to directly identify the ramifications of *Drag Race*'s pursuit of financial and popular successes. However, there are limitations to this study. I was able to discuss the topics of my research with less than ten participants made of drag queens and drag fans. The pool of drag fans was diverse in terms of age and cultural backgrounds, but I admit that the small number of participants impedes the claims I attempted to support. In fact, their observations, while intriguing and captivating, at times appear repetitive. In terms of the drag artists with whom I had the chance to speak, only drag queens agreed to participate in this study, which also reduces the perspectives shared in this work. In this way, I failed to honor the perspectives of other drag performers, such as drag kings and gender-non conforming artists. My work thus only discusses the careers of drag queens who are impacted by the show, rather than an expanded pool of participants to performers who do not get as many opportunities as drag queens to talk about the state of the art form. However, because I analyzed the impact of *Drag Race* on drag queens, I did get to engage with how the show influences the lives of those it captures specifically.

This topic certainly deserves to be studied in more depth. A larger pool of more diverse drag artists and drag fans should be interviewed because, with the ongoing success of the show on and off screen, its international versions, and inclusion on mainstream distribution platforms such

as Netflix, Crave TV, and OutTV, the questions that this work poses are still and will continue to be extremely relevant. I would propose turning this work into a dissertation funded by a governmental body, which would allow a more complete and international ethnographic study. Utilizing the perspectives of drag artists outside of Montreal and Canada would benefit this initiative enormously as the impact of the show is international. Concomitantly, the art form of drag also serves as a case study of the discrepancies between corporate screens and democratic streets more widely. This discrepancy occurs in many other instances, which could be highlighted and scrutinized politically.

In the end, *Drag Race* has changed the face of the art form globally. As a fan of the show, it has introduced me to new facets of drag and inspired me in captivating ways. As a form of entertainment, I attest that it is successful in creating a strong following and emotional attachment with individuals on screen who are sharing their artistry. I impatiently await new seasons of the show while often returning to old favorites. While my research might appear to pejoratively scrutinize the show, I have simply attempted to point to a certain formula that dominates screen representation of queerness. I have also tried to discuss the impacts of said formula on the lives of those who *Drag Race* depicts. That acknowledged, I can also praise RuPaul, their show, and its producers for celebrating an arguably small yet valuable portion of the spectrum of drag and introducing it to a mainstream audience. It has, in my opinion, brought acceptance within and outside of the queer community, legitimized drag as a professional career, and inspired queer youth to fully experience their personal identities. *Drag Race* has indeed made the world fall in love with drag.

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