

Apr 7th, 3:00 PM - 3:50 PM

Realness Over Reality: Analyzing Gender Binary Deconstruction in RuPaul's Drag Race

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Wilson, Jonah, "Realness Over Reality: Analyzing Gender Binary Deconstruction in RuPaul's Drag Race" (2018). *Ray Browne Conference on Cultural and Critical Studies*. 6.
<https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/rbc/2018conference/011/6>

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Ray Browne Popular Culture Conference, Spring 2018

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Following the 2008 elections: twenty-nine out of fifty U.S. states legalized same-sex marriage (Liu), Stu Rasmussen, the first openly transgender mayor was elected in the country (Wong), and then-President Barack Obama appointed the first openly transgender woman to a cabinet position (Riley). After talking to producers beginning in 1998, RuPaul Charles premiered his namesake reality show, *RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR)* in 2009 (Daems 14). The show, with the potential to break down barriers of gender expression and sexuality, has had a fair share of controversies—particularly surrounding transphobia and misogyny. However, as the show prepares for its tenth season (Andreeva) and its third for its most successful spin-off, *All-Stars* (Bellino), what are the benefits of this radical media representation that pushes it forward?

Potential Benefits

GLAAD, by the release of *RPDR*'s second season and the start of its first spin off, *Drag U* (2010-2012), had already lauded RuPaul—and the Logo channel as a whole—for bringing a queer spotlight on the “realness” of “reality” shows as well as shows like *RPDR* that increase representation, not always because of the creators encoding, or original intent for the work, but rather the decoding or the way the potential audiences can view and digest it (GLAAD 13; Hall). With VH1 now hosting “the rare space on television that relishes honesty and exploration,” it is highly important to see what aspects of personal growth the show can translate to its broadening, typically young audience (Worthram).

Decoded Role Model Effect. RuPaul said in an interview that he believes that the show can create a sense of community and family for gay men without, drag queens “learning the ropes” and

trans women in the beginning stages of transition (Daems 5); for many queens, even in interviews on the show, this has been decoded as what Charles calls “teachable moments” (Daems 9). Even when it comes to kindness and respect for others—something that occasionally lacks on camera—RuPaul promotes general warmth on air and under a section titled “Drag Tips” in his autobiography, said “Be sweet: there are enough bitchy queens” (47). While the show generally began by following this rule, contestants like Coco Montrese, and Pearl began to show a stereotypical dramatic attitude akin to other reality shows (Logo; Mr Tasker). Even as recent as Season 9, Miss Congeniality winner, Valentina, exposed her neglect of her fans’ harassment of the other queens including telling contestant Alexis Michelle “to go kill [herself]” (Nolfi). This, indirectly, can reduce the “catty girl” stereotype perpetuated in other reality shows that is born out of misogyny and gendered behaviors.

Particularly in more recent seasons (e.g., season 8) one can begin to see not just more mentions of activism related to queer identities and other, but you see praise and questioning on how to get involved; Season 8 queen, Chi Chi DeVayne praised season winner, Bob the Drag Queen, about her work with marriage equality leading up to that point, particularly in the wake of the 2015 *Obergefell* decision. Bob responded by saying “Go do it, you can start anytime” (Wortham). By “[revealing] the human beings underneath the drag,” as Charles mentions, there is a similarity to Harry Hay and the Homophile Movement of the 1950s and 60s and the general message of homonormativity and “being just like everyone else” (Daems 5). Benny LeMaster writes on this homonormativity as a negative, saying the unsuccessful spin-off and the producers “[sought] assimilation into a mythical normative center.” However, in a very dismal, yet expository way for national television, DeVayne responded to Bob with “You can't do it in Shreveport...They'll blow your head off” (Wortham) Although it is unfortunate, *RPDR* has also

inspired more talks about homophobic and transphobic violence that not only the contestants have experiences, but also the judges and potentially the audience as well (Daems 6).

Racial and Growing Gender Diversity. Building off the praise from GLAAD, *RPDR* has maintained a fair amount of diversity, much of what is true to the history of drag and RuPaul's background. One of the primary examples of the continued diversity can be seen with five of nine winning queens being people of color (POC) (and Season 5 winner, Jinkx Monsoon, is white and Jewish) and five of nine queens awarded "Miss Congeniality" have been POC. As Season 9 recently concluded, it is very notable that it not only featured Peppermint as the first openly transgender woman to compete (Beard), but showed her doing fairly well as the season's runner-up; this is extremely contrary to the former rule that can disqualify trans women if they are out about their identity or do not spend a significant amount of screen time as a "boy" (Daems 22). From a psychological perspective, clothing choices to craft an individual gender presentation is very crucial to individuals facing emotional and social symptoms of gender dysphoria, fitting back in with RuPaul's model and belief of drag having the potential to serve as a presentational stepping stone for trans individuals (van de Grift 583; Daems 5).

Potential Negatives

Through the growing and dynamic nature of RuPaul's franchise, many of the things that have been decoded have had underlying—or more explicit—prejudices, despite their good intentions. Jim Daems, citing Judith Butler and her work related to drag and gender, addresses a great point of the critique of packaging drag and its counterculture as a "reality show" (6). Butler theorizes and writes that drag is an example of the artificiality of the "gender reality" and how it is meant

to show there is no true metanarrative or fixed reality, in a very postmodern lens. By packaging this counterculture and fluid narrative into a more “real” lens, one could argue it takes away from the intent of the historical creators of drag, could be meant to have more focus on “realness”—or for many trans/gender non-conforming (GNC) people, “passing”—rather than a fixed “reality” (Daems 6).

Transphobia in the Show and RuPaul. Almost at the same time as the premiere of *RPDR*, Charles released his fifth album, *Champion*; while it was generally at par with his others at the time, what brought some of the most attention was the single released in December of 2009 titled “Tranny Chaser.” By this time, the show had not only been renewed but was soon closing off auditions, expanded from nine to twelve contestants, and began to offer more in prizes for the ultimate first place winner; this was not retracted after backlash of perpetuating negative stereotypes of the ‘sneaky’ trans woman/drag queen trying to sleep with heterosexual men and degrading sex work that is historically and presently is found in transgender communities (Jenkins 42; Smith and Laing).

It is notable, however, that RuPaul historically has not been as transphobic as he has been in the past decade. Writers have theorized that he may have distanced himself from being supportive of the trans/GNC community due to wanting to appear more marketable (Daems 72). RuPaul has hinted at his positive views of sex work and particularly the role sex work has played in communities of trans women of color as a frequent occupation (Daems 79-80); this was the very first episode of the very first season and was never seen again, especially as VH1 ended up picking it up and broadcasting her as a more “traditional” icon for this larger potential audience. Given that around sixteen percent of transgender individuals have reported engaging in sex work,

there is a great disparity between this figure and the overall U.S. estimate of sex workers consisting of less than one percent (Grant, et al. 22; Chen).

Similarly to the trans exclusion that elite white gay men like John Aravosis and Gregory T. Angelo, President of the LGBT-inclusive Log Cabin Republicans, have exhibited, it could be possible that the predominantly white, gay male producers that dictate how *RPDR* should present itself for best marketing have suggested RuPaul retract some of his progressive personal opinions (“The Elephant in the Room.”; Daems 72). Even in these allegedly more progressive and radical spaces, it becomes difficult to apply the lessons and work done by the show because of the underlying narrative of the trans person “born in the wrong body” and genitals equating to gender (Daems 72); this unfortunately, can counteract many potential benefits the show can have for tearing down gender binary-related beliefs and systems.

Commodification of Contestants and Drag Culture. RuPaul has been stating as early as the publishing of his autobiography in 1995, that he has some degree of a resentment towards consumerism, commodification of queer people, and capitalist cultural hegemonies (like those described by Gramsci): so, why does his show focus on promoting these systems so much? Up until 2014-15, there was a strong sense that RuPaul judged the contestants based on a “mini-me” approach and praising and looking for queens that would seem to “be able to follow in [his] footsteps” (Daems 7). Similar to the intersectionality people like black women face (performing black femininity/womanhood), there is a similar phenomena that queens of color face, particularly starting in the show with Bebe Zahara Benet (Season 1’s winner) (Daems 80-81).

BeBe Zahara Benet shows one of the most prominent examples of the show’s exoticization and commodification. Benet as an immigrant from Cameroon, as Sarah T. Jenkins writes, was “a fact the audience was never allowed to forget” (57). With one of the strongest

show-made ties to her birthplace, BeBe—on her accord or not—perpetuated the view of Africa as a cultural monolith and stereotypes of African gender (Jenkins 57-59)—making the deconstruction of gender barriers in *RPDR* intercontinental from the show’s conception. Latrice Royale, later in Season 4, won Miss Congeniality and became the “‘model minority’ fat contestant” for years to come and represented the drag version of the “mammy” stereotype often linked to black women in popular culture (Jenkins 72, 74). Kenya Michaels and Jessica Wild, prominent Puerto Rican queens from Seasons 2 and 4, were exoticized similarly to Benet, faced pressure from different sources over English proficiency, and dealt with comments that “sexualizes and animalizes” them (Jenkins 79).

On the *Drag U* episode titled “Lesbians Gone Wild,” it is clear that RuPaul and his producers are insinuating that presenting as a butch woman is not womanly enough by the internalized misogynist standards of feminine presentation (Daems 127). Similarly to the Ellen episode, “Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah”, one of the contestants on this episode, is shown to have a deeply sad and slightly homophobic interaction with her estranged mother and that it all resolves by her wearing a low cut dress and exposing her breasts; her mother comments “‘She’s a beautiful person inside now, and she showed it’” at her runway presentation (Daems 127-128).

Aside from the cis females on *Drag U*, *RPDR* commonly lauds hyper, pageant queen femininity in drag over androgyny. Ongina and Nina Flowers were both criticized on their respective seasons for lack of wigs, something that has become a firm staple with competitions like Miss Gay America becoming more broadcast, and tucking (hiding of male genitalia) to further promote a sense of ‘realness’ or ability to pass as a cisgender woman (Daems 79); both of these concepts that work to promote the overall appearance of ‘realness’ typically end up “...‘normalizing’ depictions of said participants while still reinforcing heteronormative

stereotypes” (González). It is notable, that like Ongina, recent Season 9 winner, Sasha Velour, is a self-described “bald queen” and uses a lot more dull femininity and androgyny to express herself (Bromwich).

Despite the prominence of androgyny and what drag culture has labeled “genderfuck” drag, including successful Austrian queen Conchita Wurst who won the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest, *RPDR* has maintained a consistent stringency on rewarding primarily “pageant queen” and hyper feminine performance, making it difficult to break down barriers of gender presentation that are hesitant to androgyny. Milan recreated femininity through this duller lens resembling singer Janelle Monáe in a pantsuit, Milk used a beard as part of her outfit in Season 6, Raja morphed androgyny into her looks—particularly one without using prosthetic breasts (Van Kessel 112)—and even local Bowling Green queen, Rosie D. Riveter, utilize facial hair and other masculine/androgynous pieces for their artistry.

Conclusion

As previously stated, the producers are producing a new season for both *RPDR* and *All-Stars*—this could mean the changes to move into a more constructive, inspirational, yet postmodern medium for social progression could still develop. Even with its success, *RPDR* has not fully cracked the ‘pink glass ceiling’, as writers like Jenna Wortham still radiate notions that the show’s counterculture has limitations with statements like “It’s as mainstream as a show about drag can get.” The show, while it has positive aspects of it that can be decoded as politically and socially inspirational, “it generally promotes a relatively narrow set of representations however much Logo executives like to point to [it] as an exemplar of racial and sexual diversity” (Ng 259). Homonormativity, while great in theory, does not always deconstruct gender binary-centric and hetero/cis normative systems of oppression and can be

“aimed at securing privilege for gendernormative gays and lesbians based on adherence to dominant cultural constructions of gender,” or in the case of *RPDR*, only privileging GNC people if they adhere to the strict gender binary (Stryker 147-148).

I previously touched on the historical trans radicalism Charles has expressed over the years (Daems 72, 79-80); if RuPaul genuinely believes in more progressive and liberatory gender ideologies, how does the larger structures of capitalist media and institutions of trans oppression/suppression dictate him and others with his mindset to present a certain persona to change their minds? This era of misogyny and transphobia-infused drag television may have begun to change with Season 9, but there still needs to be a radical change in how audiences view and digest cultural texts like this show (Van Kessel 123). Whether it is exposing prejudices in and outside of the queer community, advocating to break down societal conceptions of gender and expression, or working for better queer representations, “drag exposes the charade of modern life” (Wortham). Most importantly, as Sasha Velour, the current winner, said, “the future of drag needs to be a lot more than just *RuPaul's Drag Race*” (Bromwich).

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