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Reading *RuPaul's Drag Race*:

Queer Memory, Camp Capitalism, and RuPaul's Drag Empire

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Culture and Performance

by

Carl Douglas Schottmiller

2017

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Reading *RuPaul's Drag Race*:

Queer Memory, Camp Capitalism, and RuPaul's Drag Empire

by

Carl Douglas Schottmiller

Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor David H Gere, Chair

This dissertation undertakes an interdisciplinary study of the competitive reality television show *RuPaul's Drag Race*, drawing upon approaches and perspectives from LGBT Studies, Media Studies, Gender Studies, Cultural Studies, and Performance Studies. Hosted by veteran drag performer RuPaul, *Drag Race* features drag queen entertainers vying for the title of “America’s Next Drag Superstar.” Since premiering in 2009, the show has become a queer cultural phenomenon that successfully commodifies and markets Camp and drag performance to television audiences at heretofore unprecedented levels. Over its nine seasons, the show has provided more than 100 drag queen artists with a platform to showcase their talents, and the *Drag Race* franchise has expanded to include multiple television series and interactive live events. The *RuPaul's Drag Race* phenomenon provides researchers with invaluable opportunities not only to consider the function of drag in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, but also to explore the cultural and economic ramifications of this reality television franchise.

While most scholars analyze *RuPaul's Drag Race* primarily through content analysis of the aired television episodes, this dissertation combines content analysis with ethnography in order to connect the television show to tangible practices among fans and effects within drag communities. Incorporating primarily content analysis methods, the first two chapters study the integral role that Camp plays on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, as a form of queer social memory and a set of economic strategies. Chapter One analyzes how *Drag Race* uses encoded Camp references to activate audiences' memories and confer queer cultural status onto the referenced materials. Chapter Two investigates how the show uses Camp to build a *Drag Race*-based economy, through a process that I call Camp Capitalism. Incorporating primarily ethnographic methods, the latter two chapters study how RuPaul's expanding *Drag Race* economy impacts fan consumers and drag artists. Chapter Three draws upon participant observation data from three years of RuPaul's DragCon, in order to analyze how Camp Capitalism operates in RuPaul's expanding economy. Chapter Four presents interviews with three Los Angeles-based drag queens, who identify tangible impacts that *Drag Race* has on their lives and communities. Through this interdisciplinary study, I demonstrate how Camp theory and ethnographic methods provide invaluable research tools for reading *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

The dissertation of Carl Douglas Schottmiller is approved.

Mary Nooter Roberts

David Delgado Shorter

Sharon J Traweek

David H Gere, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2017

For Mamu



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Over the past six years, I had the privilege to interview 89 informants during my fieldwork in Los Angeles. These individuals include Los Angeles-based drag performers, queer artists, RuPaul's DragCon attendees, and *RuPaul's Drag Race* superfans. My informants generously shared their experiences and perspectives with me, and this dissertation would not exist without their input. While I individually acknowledge all my informants on page 316, I want to thank Jasmine Masters, Cake Moss, and Dani T in particular for contributing lengthy interviews to this project. These brilliant drag queens provided invaluable insight into how the *RuPaul's Drag Race* phenomenon impacts their lives and communities. My informants guided this project and challenged me to reflect on my own scholarly positionality and interpretation of *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

My brilliant committee members provided generous mentorship, guidance, feedback, and support throughout the dissertation process. Completing this project was immensely challenging, and I am very privileged to have worked with a group of such dedicated and thoughtful scholars. I am eternally grateful for the lessons they have taught me and the conversations we have shared. Professor David Gere expertly guided my Camp analysis and provided thorough feedback on my work, from largescale theoretical questions to the minutiae of writing style. His dedication, mentorship, and advocacy shaped every aspect of this dissertation. Professor David Delgado Shorter guided my thinking and research into drag scholarship and ethical ethnographic fieldwork. I am a better scholar and writer because of his generous feedback and mentorship. Professor Mary (Polly) Nooter Roberts introduced me to Memory theory and directly shaped my work on Camp memory. I am immensely privileged to have learned from and worked with such a brilliant, well-respected, and generous scholar. Professor Sharon Traweek grounded my research into queer oral history methods. Our conversations on conducting ethical queer ethnographic research encouraged me to envision the collaborative potentials of queer scholarship, and I am immensely grateful for her guidance.

Many departments and programs at UCLA provided invaluable mentorship opportunities and financial support. The faculty and staff of the Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance taught me the interdisciplinary skills needed to conduct this project. Over the course of my Doctoral work, I had the privilege to learn from Professors Al Roberts, Janet O'Shea, and Susan Leigh Foster in various seminars. Their invaluable feedback helped to shape my project. I am indebted to the support, mentorship, and friendship from the faculty and staff of UCLA's Disability Studies program. Victoria Marks, Kyle McJunkin, Brooke Wilkinson, Pia Palomo, Beth Goodhue, Doran George, Sara Wolf, Mana Hayakawa, Fred Ariel Hernandez, and Amanda

Apgar taught me so much through our collaborations. Professor Alicia Gaspar de Alba and UCLA's LGBTQ Studies program provided me with teaching opportunities to explore themes from this dissertation. The department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance also provided generous funding for my work through multiple Conference/Research Travel Grants, without which I could not have conducted my research. UCLA's Graduate Division also provided generous funding through a Dissertation Year Fellowship, Research Travel Grant, and University Fellowships.

My graduate cohort and colleagues provided generous feedback on my work throughout the dissertation process. Anna Brooks Creagh provided thorough feedback on my project at multiple conference presentations. Our many conversations about drag helped to shape and refine this project. Mana Hayakawa consistently provided brilliant insight and feedback on my research and writing. Her support and collaboration were integral to this project, and I am immensely privileged to work with such a rigorous and brilliant scholar. Throughout the dissertation process, Sarah Wilbur, Pallavi Sriram, Barry Brannum, Rita Martins Rufino Valente-Quinn, Alessandra Williams, Sylvia Ruiz, Antwann Michael, Frankie, and Cooper provided feedback and support that made this project possible. Amy Elizabeth Alterman and Sara Murdock also contributed insightful feedback on my writing.

Over the course of writing this dissertation, I received invaluable feedback from multiple colleagues at different conferences. Thank you to the audience members who attended my presentations and provided feedback on my work at the annual meetings of the American Folklore Society, Western States Folklore Society, and the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association. Thank you also to attendees at my Chew On This presentations organized by the graduate cohort of UCLA's World Arts and Cultures/Dance

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Last, but by no means least, thank you to my family for their support in completing this project. Jan Robinson, your sacrifices, love, and dedication made this possible, and I am eternally grateful to you and Doug Robinson for all that you have given me. Doug and Susie Schottmiller, thank you for your encouragement and unwavering support. Margie Slagle, thank you for your support and making my life complete. To all the Schottmillers, Gillens, McNears, Slagles, and Tallaricos, thank you for making this project possible.

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# Introduction

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## “Laying the foundation” Developing a Critical Camp Analysis of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*

Since premiering on February 2, 2009, the *RuPaul’s Drag Race* television series has become a queer cultural phenomenon that successfully commodifies and markets drag performance to television audiences at heretofore unprecedented levels. A competitive reality television show, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* features nine-to-fourteen drag queen entertainers as they vie for the title of “America’s Next Drag Superstar.” Hosted by RuPaul, the veteran drag queen performer, the show is both a massive commercial success and one of the most historically significant contributions to queer television. Over its nine seasons, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has provided over 100 drag queen artists with a platform to showcase their talents, and the franchise now includes multiple television series and interactive live events. Because of this success, the franchise creates a heretofore unprecedented level of public visibility for gay men of varying gender identities and trans women, many of whom are people of color. The *RuPaul’s Drag Race* phenomenon provides researchers with invaluable opportunities not only to consider the function of drag in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, but also to explore the cultural and economic ramifications of this reality television franchise. In just seven years, RuPaul and the show’s producers have created a *Drag Race*-based economy in which Camp and drag attain unprecedented levels of cultural, economic, and social capital.

When I first started writing about the show circa 2011, I adopted an analytical approach similar to most *Drag Race* scholars by focusing on issues of representation. I initially wanted to discuss how the show’s episodes accurately or inaccurately portrayed diverse drag and queer cultures, histories, and identities. Through this engagement, I sought to understand how *RuPaul’s*

*Drag Race* commodifies and commercializes drag performance for queer and straight television audiences. Similar to other *Drag Race* scholars, I harshly criticized the show for what I understood to be its shortcomings: how *Drag Race* seemingly valued glamorous queens above other forms of drag, how the show perpetuated hegemonic and offensively stereotypical notions of identity, how the show's platform failed to promote drag artists outside drag queens, and how the show espoused a normative politics at odds with drag's radical, subversive history. At this level of representation, *Drag Race* disturbed me, and yet, I continued to watch each season because I am endlessly fascinated by this show.

As I screened the episodes over and over, I started to approach the show with a more complex analysis. I soon discovered that a focus on representation, while crucial for critically engaging the franchise, could peel back only one layer of the *Drag Race* phenomenon. The more time I spent studying the show's use of Camp, the more I began to appreciate the intricacy and genius of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Over the past seven years, I studied Camp scholarship from brilliant queer writers in order to understand the historical significance of this practice. I extensively researched RuPaul's pre-*Drag Race* career by watching available videos of her 1980s underground cinema work, appearances on the New York Public Access station "The American Music Show," her 1990s Christmas special, and her 1990s VH1 talk-fest *The RuPaul Show*. I read Ru's books, purchased and listened to her music catalogue, and watched her filmography and videography.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, I watched and re-watched countless Camp films and television shows. Through this research, I learned how much Ru's career informs

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I interchangeably use the pronouns "he" and "she" when describing RuPaul. I use "she" most often when Ru appears in female drag, and I use "he" most often when Ru appears in male drag—although slippages may occur. Some readers could take offense to this approach; however, in using both pronouns, I respect and adapt RuPaul's Camp approach to pronoun usage. As he writes in her autobiography, "You can call me he, you can call me she, you can call me Regis and Kathie Lee, just so long as you call me" (RuPaul 1995:viii).



*RuPaul's Drag Race*, as well as how intricately the show parodies and references Camp classics from queer history. I gained a newfound appreciation for the show's use of Camp references, double entendre, parody, and irony, and I discovered how I needed to immerse myself in Camp in order to understand the show.

At the same time, I participated in and observed the expanding *RuPaul's Drag Race* economy. Over the past six years living in Los Angeles, I attended officially sponsored *Drag Race* premiere parties, live finale tapings, touring drag shows, the opening of RuPaul's Pop-Up shop in Hollywood, and three years of the weekend-long drag convention, RuPaul's DragCon. I interviewed over sixty *Drag Race* superfans at these events in order to understand how they engage with the franchise, and I spoke with multiple Los Angeles-based drag artists to understand how the *Drag Race* phenomenon impacts their lives. Through this research, I discovered that current scholarly considerations of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, including my own, did not fully capture the show's complexity, sophistication, evolving permutations of Camp, and impact on drag performers. While discussions of representation are crucial for understanding the show's politics, these approaches alone cannot fully account for the show's influence beyond television visibility. My dissertation fills this gap through a critical Camp analysis of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and the franchise's emerging economy.



I started watching *RuPaul's Drag Race* shortly after the series' premiere in 2009. I cannot recall exactly how I first learned about the show, but looking back, I assume that I either read about the premiere from an LGBTQ-themed online site/blog or heard of *Drag Race* from a word-of-mouth source. Regardless, I could not wait to consume the show because of my profound love for drag cultures and histories. Growing up a closeted, white gay man in a

religiously and politically conservative working class area outside Cincinnati, Ohio, I became an avid fan of drag artistry from an early age. I frequently listened to RuPaul's music, particularly "Supermodel" and "Snapshot," and I lovingly consumed the fine drag cinema available at the local Blockbuster video. Watching *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*; *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*; and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* was an invigorating experience for my teenaged self. Although usually performed by cis straight male actors, these drag performances still gave me an exhilarating sense of comfort. If these drag artists could embrace gender-bending queer identities then, perhaps, my effeminate gender presentation, fluctuating gender identity, and queer sexuality were not inherently shameful. At the time, I understood neither the intricate layers of identity representation in these films nor their resulting political ramifications. I consumed them lovingly and uncritically.

After "coming out" to close female friends later in high school, I attended my first live drag performance at a charity event for a Cincinnati HIV/AIDS-based organization. Wearing a sequin gown and gigantic stiletto heels, the drag queen performer kicked, twirled, and cartwheeled into the splits, all while lip-syncing Whitney Houston's "I Wanna Dance with Somebody." I was enthralled by the exhilaration of live drag performance, and though an infrequent activity until later in my life, attending drag shows at queer bars became one of my favorite delights. On my own, with queer friends, and then later for course credit in college LGBT Studies courses, I learned more and more about drag. I watched *Pink Flamingos* for the first time with my high school friend and her mother (who had no recollection of the movie's actual content when she allowed us to screen the film). Immediately, I fell in love with both John Waters' trashy Camp aesthetic and Divine's genderfuck drag. I then purchased the complete John Waters film oeuvre. After starting college at Ohio University in 2007, I studied Camp and

drag through texts by Esther Newton, Judith Butler, José Esteban Muñoz, and Susan Sontag. In an academic setting, I watched the drag documentaries *The Queen*, *Paris Is Burning*, *Wigstock*, and *Venus Boyz*, paired with accompanying scholarly critiques.

Because small-town Athens, Ohio did not have a gay bar, I could not attend drag performances regularly. Nevertheless, I anticipated our infrequent, local amateur drag shows and the larger LGBT Pride Month drag extravaganza featuring Vaginal Crème Davis, whose “terrorist drag” blew my mind. When I moved to Berkeley in 2007 for graduate school, I started attending drag shows in San Francisco and learned about the area’s drag cultures. Heklina’s weekly drag show introduced me to drag kings, faux queens, and non-binary drag artists. On multiple occasions, I watched Sister Roma and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence raise money for LGBTQ organizations, using their drag as a form of queer political activism and protest. I even experimented with drag myself, although never professionally.

By the time *RuPaul’s Drag Race* premiered in 2009 on Logo Television, a network that advertises itself as providing LGBT-specific content, I could not wait to see how the show would represent drag’s complex and multifaceted history.<sup>2</sup> The brainchild of gay male Executive Producers RuPaul, Tom Campbell, Randy Barbato, and Fenton Bailey, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is a reality television competition show that parodies *America’s Next Top Model* and *Project Runway*. Through weekly mini challenges, main challenges, themed runway presentations, and a final “Lip Sync For Your Life” battle, RuPaul and a panel of judges evaluate contestants according to their “Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve, and Talent.” In addition to showcasing the

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<sup>2</sup> A subsidiary of MTV Networks/Viacom, Logo TV is the “world's leading ad-supported cable, satellite, online, mobile and digital entertainment gay and lesbian-themed network” (Bibel 2014). The network reaches over 53 million U.S. homes, airs internationally, and provides free digital streaming of its programming through its official website, its downloadable Logo TV App, and various social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (ibid).

talents of drag queen performers through these various structured challenges, the show also provides viewers with a “behind-the-scenes” look at Camp and queer culture through documentation of contestants’ workroom interactions and individual interview sessions. Filmed on location in Los Angeles, California, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is produced by World of Wonder (WOW), a company run by Randy Barbato and Fenton Bailey, two long-term collaborators with RuPaul.<sup>3</sup>

During its first season, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* was a little-known part of the reality television landscape, dwarfed by such competitors as *Survivor*, *American Idol*, *Project Runway*, and *America’s Next Top Model*. In 2009, the show’s fan base consisted of a relatively small, mostly LGBTQ-identified cult following. A few queer websites, such as *Dlisted*, provided humorous coverage of the show, but overall *RuPaul’s Drag Race* did not have a very large online presence or social media following. During its first few seasons, *Drag Race* was not particularly accessible. Living in overpriced San Francisco, I could not afford the monthly cable bill for Logo TV, so I consumed the show primarily by downloading episodes from iTunes. By logging onto Logo TV’s website, I watched the accompanying online spin-off show, *Under The Hood*. This series featured RuPaul narrating behind-the-scenes footage of the Season One contestants as they waited backstage during judges’ deliberations. I found Season One to be wonderfully low-budget and hilariously campy, but I also disliked the show’s seemingly limited representation of drag. The judges more often praised glamorous styles of drag performance, and

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<sup>3</sup> Founded in 1991, World of Wonder produces reality and documentary television programs, feature films, and online/digital media for multiple networks in the U.S. and U.K. WOW almost always produces content related to LGBTQ people/cultures or Camp figures, such as a documentary about Christian televangelist Tammy Faye Bakker (narrated by RuPaul). As of 2015, WOW started producing conventions, with the advent of RuPaul’s DragCon, a now annual drag-related convention held in Los Angeles and New York City. For a fuller history of World of Wonder, see: Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, *The World According to Wonder* (Santa Clara: Almaden Press, 2012).

I did not see San Francisco's genderfuck-style drag represented. While the show gave drag queens a platform, the series did not showcase the brilliant drag kings, faux queens, and non-binary performers I watched in local clubs onto the program. In spite of these flaws, I appreciated the show's queer visibility, and I enjoyed the product as a distinctly subcultural, cult commodity. In 2009, I could not fathom the exponential growth and unprecedented commercial success that *RuPaul's Drag Race* would achieve over the next seven years.

By Season Two, the series added a televised spin-off, *RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked*. A retooling of *Under the Hood*, *Untucked* showcased behind-the-scenes footage as queens waited backstage during judges' deliberations.<sup>4</sup> This series started airing directly after *RuPaul's Drag Race*, making the *Drag Race* experience a 90-minute televised extravaganza. By 2010, the franchise added another spin-off series, *RuPaul's Drag U*, which featured *Drag Race* contestants giving makeovers to female participants. Hosted by RuPaul, *Drag U* was more similar in format to the reality show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* than *RuPaul's Drag Race*. I purchased and watched *Drag U* but ultimately found the concept less interesting compared to *Drag Race*.<sup>5</sup> From 2009 to 2011, I repeatedly watched episodes of *Drag Race*, discussed the show with friends, observed the growing online fan base, and read the first scholarly publications on the show. Most of these texts discussed the show's identity politics through issues of representation, and I found myself agreeing with the general critiques. Like other scholars, I found the show's celebration of stereotypes troubling, particularly when the performances seemingly perpetuated racist tropes.

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<sup>4</sup> For Seasons Two to Six, *Untucked* aired on Logo immediately after *RuPaul's Drag Race*. For Seasons Seven to Nine, *Untucked* became a web series, which World of Wonder uploaded to its YouTube channel, WOWPRESENTS, the day after *RuPaul's Drag Race* aired. For the upcoming Season Ten, *Untucked* will return to television and air on VH1.

<sup>5</sup> *Drag U* aired for three consecutive seasons and featured a rotating cast of *RuPaul's Drag Race* alumni, as well as a panel of judges that included legendary drag queen Lady Bunny.

After watching two seasons of *Drag Race*, I applied to UCLA's Culture and Performance Ph.D. program in order to write a dissertation on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. While I did not yet have a clearly defined analytical framework, I wanted to expand the discussion of *RuPaul's Drag Race* by incorporating ethnographic methods and theories from Cultural and Performance Studies. Moving to Los Angeles provided me with ample opportunities to participate in the local drag scenes and to interview drag artists, both those privileged enough to compete on *Drag Race* and the "local" performers. Through this research, I wanted to understand how the show affects the lives of drag artists.

In 2012, as I took classes and started to write about the show, the *RuPaul's Drag Race* franchise began to expand exponentially through additional television and web-based content, as well as interactive live events. With Season Four's premiere in 2012, *Drag Race* started to gain a much larger viewership and fan base. The Season Four premiere episode and accompanying *Untucked* together reached nearly one million viewers (Shumaker 2012). These numbers set a record for Logo TV's highest rated premiere and marked a 50% increase in viewership from the Season Three premiere. In order to grow the *Drag Race* fan base, Logo increased the number of interactive, online marketing efforts on platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, GetGlue, and Foursquare (Winslow 2012). This marketing campaign provided fans with animated GIFs, memes, and contestant trading cards, in the hopes of building a more interactive online fan community. These efforts paid off, and over the course of Season Four, the *Drag Race* Twitter following increased by 77%, and the Facebook page accrued a 33% increase in likes (Slane 2012).

I noticed a significant increase in both online fan discussion and disturbing behavior during Season Four, as I started to participate more and more in these online communities.

Through different social media platforms, some members of the fan base started to send vitriolic insults to the drag queens. Contestants who came across as “villains” on the show, particularly Season Four contestant Phi Phi O’Hara, received incredibly hateful comments and death threats. I observed how these often (but not always) younger fans berated the drag queens and treated them as subhuman, as if their appearance on an edited reality television show justified such online violence. This behavior often manifested in forms of racism, particularly anti-black racism. Online fan communities berated Season Two winner Tyra Sanchez, a black queen, with anti-black racist slurs and derogatory comments. I was horrified (but unsurprised) to observe how Logo’s push for increased social media fan interaction manifested in vitriol and hatred—a trend that has only increased with the show’s growing visibility.

To capitalize on Season Four’s increased popularity, World of Wonder introduced three spin-off series between the end of Season Four and start of Season Six. *RuPaul’s Drag Race: All Stars* and an accompanying *All Stars Untucked* premiered in 2012, following completion of *Drag Race*’s fourth season. These shows follow the same format as *Drag Race* and *Untucked*, except they feature a returning cast of select *Drag Race* alumni.<sup>6</sup> Also in 2012, the LGBT travel company Al and Chuck (a frequent sponsor of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*) started a *Drag Stars at Sea* cruise. These events feature live performances from *RuPaul’s Drag Race* alumni and other drag artists not directly affiliated with the show. As of this writing, Al and Chuck have sponsored over eleven *Drag Stars at Sea* cruises, which travel to locations across the Caribbean, Europe, Greece, Cuba, Australia, and Russia. I have not yet participated in these events because I cannot afford the high costs, which average around \$1,000 for a seven-day trip. In 2013, the television lineup

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<sup>6</sup> As of this writing, World of Wonder has produced and aired two seasons of *All Stars*. The first season featured an accompanying *Untucked*. The second season did not include an *Untucked*. A third season of *All Stars* has finished filming and is scheduled to air in early 2018.

introduced *RuPaul's Drag Race: RuVealed* into the mix. In order to (re)introduce more recent *Drag Race* fans to Season One, World of Wonder repackaged the first season as *RuVealed: The Lost Season*. Similar in format to the VH1 music video series "Pop-Up Video," *RuVealed* provides viewers with insider information through pop-up commentary from RuPaul (or other guests), as well as additional on-screen text.<sup>7</sup>

By 2013, the officially-sponsored *RuPaul's Drag Race: Battle of the Seasons* (BOTS) tour began travelling to select cities in the United States and Canada. This tour is a much larger enterprise than the live drag shows that accompanied *Drag Race's* first five seasons. One of the show's main advertisers for Seasons One to Five, Absolut Vodka sponsored these early tours that were held in smaller venues, more often local gay clubs such as Micky's in West Hollywood. After Absolut stopped sponsoring *Drag Race* in 2013 for undisclosed reasons, Producer Entertainment Group (PEG) started to manage the renamed *RuPaul's Drag Race: Battle of the Seasons* (BOTS) tour.<sup>8</sup> This live show traveled to larger venues and stopped at more locations, which eventually grew to include select cities throughout the continental U.S., Canada, Europe, Australia, Singapore, and Mexico.<sup>9</sup> Following in PEG's footsteps, other major production/management companies such as Voss Events and Murray & Peter started to sponsor

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<sup>7</sup> As of this writing, the *Drag Race* franchise includes *RuVealed* versions of Seasons One, Four, Five, Six, Eight, Nine and Seven.

<sup>8</sup> PEG is one of the largest management companies that signs select *Drag Race* contestants and talent. They now have an official store in Los Angeles where fans can purchase merchandise from PEG-signed artists.

<sup>9</sup> The inaugural *Battle of the Seasons* tour premiered in September 2013 and ran until May 2014, covering dates in select U.S. and Canadian cities. The 2015 "BOTS Condragulations tour" covered 35 dates in select cities across the U.S. and Canada. The most recent 2016 "BOTS Extravaganza tour" covered 69 dates in cities throughout the U.S., Canada, Australia, Canada, Singapore, Mexico, and Europe (including the U.K., Ireland, Belgium, Norway, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, German, and Spain).



largescale tours featuring *Drag Race* alumni.<sup>10</sup>

I attended two *BOTS* tours in Los Angeles on February 2, 2014 at the Nokia Theater and on February 4, 2015 at the Belasco theater. According to their official websites, these venues hold a general capacity of approximately 2,300 and 1,700 attendees, respectively. These live events were unlike any other drag performance I had experienced before. The venues were no longer queer subcultural bars, and the audiences visually read as diverse in terms of age, race, gender expression, and sexuality. I saw heterosexual couples bringing their teenagers and younger children to the event, despite the often adult-oriented content. The show's high production values included videography and professional lighting, and the massive crowds of superfans greeted the performers like rock stars. RuPaul graced us with his presence at the first tour. When he came out in a suit to introduce the tour, the fan base erupted into applause and a standing ovation. Similarly, when the queens performed, the crowd cheered them on. These fans expressed their admiration through monetary exchange, often purchasing the queens' merchandise at the show and wearing their favorite performer's t-shirts and accessories. The live events easily sold out these large theaters. By this point in time, the franchise was decidedly no longer a cult hit with a small, mostly LGBTQ-identified fan base. Additionally, a more visible hierarchy started to emerge among the *Drag Race* contestants. Because PEG managed the tour, the lineup consisted of PEG-signed talent. The drag queens signed by PEG gained access to the tour and, by virtue, the emerging *Drag Race* economy in ways not afforded to other *Drag Race*

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<sup>10</sup> To date, Murray & Peter have sponsored the 2016 "Season 8 Tour" featuring cast members from *Drag Race* Season Eight at 20 dates across the U.S.; the 2016 "A Drag Queen Christmas" tour featuring *Drag Race* alumni at 22 dates across the U.S.; the 2017 "The Shady Tour" featuring *Drag Race* alumni at 18 dates across the U.S.; and, most recently, the 2017 "WERQ The World" tour featuring *Drag Race* alumni at 27 dates across the U.S., Canada, Australia, and Europe (including the U.K., Ireland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Switzerland, Austria, the Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium).

talent.<sup>11</sup>

Between 2014 and 2015, the *Drag Race* economy continued to grow, with an increased number of interactive live events for which fans could purchase tickets. On May 10, 2014, RuPaul celebrated the launch of his first candy bar through a “RuPaul Pop-Up” shop at the Sweet! Hollywood candy store. Located just off Hollywood Boulevard, Ru’s Pop-Up store secured space for the drag legend in the heart of mainstream Hollywood. Sweet! Hollywood is located directly across from the Kodak theater, where the Oscars are filmed. Any tourist walking up the flight of stairs to visit the Kodak theater could take a left turn and experience a space dedicated to selling RuPaul’s merchandise and celebrating her celebrity. I attended the grand opening celebration and marveled at how Sweet! Hollywood dedicated a very large wing of its main store to RuPaul. This Pop-Up shop featured displays of Ru’s gowns and suits from *Drag Race*, as well as various RuPaul merchandise, including shirts, CDs, posters, and candy. As of this writing, Ru’s Pop-Up shop remains a large part of the Sweet! Hollywood store, and RuPaul now collaborates with Sweet! to sell multiple candy bars and a line of mints.

In conjunction with the show’s sixth season finale in 2014, the *Drag Race* franchise started to include live finale tapings, for which fans could purchase tickets.<sup>12</sup> These events generally last around eight or nine hours and include warm-up routines from past contestants, as well as a multi-hour filming of the grand finale episode. I attended the finale tapings for Season

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<sup>11</sup> According to Jacob Slane, Partner and Associate Manager at PEG, some of the “top queens” can earn an income in the low-to-mid six figures annually, through touring, recording, merchandise, and endorsements (Harrison 2017). Not every contestant on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* gains access to this level of economic and social capital.

<sup>12</sup> For Seasons One to Three of *Drag Race*, the season’s winner was crowned on set during the taped final episode. After an Internet troll spoiled the winner of Season Three, World of Wonder began to host live finale taping. At these events, each queen in the Top Three would be filmed winning the crown. The season’s winner would not be revealed until the episode’s airing. For Seasons Four and Five, these finale tapings were exclusive, invite-only events.

Six, held at the Ace Hotel theater, as well as Seasons Seven and Eight, held at the Orpheum theater. According to their official websites, the Ace Hotel seats around 1,600 attendees, and the Orpheum seats around 2,000 people. These often sold-out tapings provided a fascinating behind-the-scenes look into how the crew filmed the show and, ultimately, how the editors chose what content to include (and exclude) in the aired episode. For instance, I was disappointed to observe that the televised Season Seven finale did not include a video segment from the live filming, which directly addressed anti-black racism from the fan base. In 2015, while Season Seven aired, black contestants Jasmine Masters and Kennedy Davenport received racist comments via social media from some fans.<sup>13</sup> During the live filming, RuPaul introduced a video segment that directly criticized the fan base's vitriolic behavior. After watching the video, the audience gave a standing ovation. We celebrated the show's direct rebuke of some fan's social media behavior. However, the aired episode did not include this footage for some reason. I found this omission incredibly disheartening, particularly because RuPaul and World of Wonder invested time and money into creating the segment. While RuPaul continues to chastise this social media behavior on his podcast and Twitter account, the Season Seven finale video segment has yet to be released (Shorey 2015).

Also corresponding with the show's seventh season, the franchise started to offer touring premiere parties in 2015.<sup>14</sup> These parties occurred before the season's first episode aired. The

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<sup>13</sup> Throughout the show's history, many black contestants have received anti-black racism on their social media accounts. Season Two winner Tyra Sanchez has spoken about her experience with anti-black racism in the fan base (Hey Qween 2017), as has Jasmine Masters (Hey Qween 2015).

<sup>14</sup> The show sponsored premiere parties for every season, but the parties did not become larger-scale events until Season Seven. For instance, World of Wonder held the series' premiere party at their Storefront Gallery, and Seasons Two to Five featured parties in L.A. (and sometimes New York City) at more local gay venues, including Eleven Nightclub, Rage, and The Abbey in Los Angeles. For Season Six, the parties moved to larger venues (the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel in Los Angeles and Stage 48 in New York City). For Season Seven, fans could purchase tickets to premiere parties in Los Angeles, New

event included a pre-screening of that season's first episode, followed by performances from the full cast. I attended the premiere parties for Seasons Seven and Eight, both held at the Mayan Theater in downtown Los Angeles. According to its official website, the theater seats around 1,491 attendees. These parties provided a similar experience to the *BOTS* tour, in that the events drew massive crowds of *Drag Race* superfans. By attending, I observed the increasingly diverse crowd makeup in terms of age, race, gender presentation, and sexual identity. Many couples visually read as heterosexual, and the crowd consisted of increasingly younger-looking fans who often wore their favorite *Drag Race* queen's merchandise. During these events, I witnessed many attendees using their phones to participate in different online *Drag Race* fan communities. These fans took photographs and videos of the event and uploaded them to Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, Reddit, or other social media platforms. Through these uploads, the fans enjoyed the live event while simultaneously sharing their experiences with a wider online community.

These parties also provided unique opportunities to appreciate the *Drag Race* cast's talents before consuming their edited narratives through the show. Some of the most dynamic live performers ultimately did not last long on the reality show. Their drag artistry did not necessarily translate into an engaging reality television personality. Nevertheless, their talents shone when in the space of a live drag performance. Additionally, the live premiere party provided the queens with opportunities to present political statements outside the television show's purview. During the Season Eight party, Bob the Drag Queen performed a Black Lives Matter-themed number, which included a mash-up of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech with the *Les Misérables* song "I Dreamed a Dream." Watching this amazing number with

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York City, Las Vegas, Chicago, and Austin. For Season Eight, fans could purchase tickets for parties in Los Angeles, New York City, Chicago, Austin, and San Francisco. For Season Nine, only one premiere party was held in New York City.

a sold-out crowd of *Drag Race* superfans was extraordinary. Bob's celebration of Black Lives Matter showcased drag's power as a form of queer political activism, honored the legacy of queer black drag artists, and impressed upon the crowd how vital this movement is to our current political climate. Bob used his drag performance to present a queer political statement not featured on Season Eight of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Participating in these live events reiterated to me that a *Drag Race* contestant's capabilities and talents could not always be effectively evaluated by their representation on the show. Additionally, the political messages included on aired *Drag Race* episodes did not always align with or encompass the beliefs espoused by drag artists through live performance.

During this period, I also attended live drag performances throughout Los Angeles in order to observe the different cultures and to identify potential informants. I observed drag queen and king performances at different venues in West Hollywood, Silverlake, downtown Los Angeles, and Long Beach.<sup>15</sup> By participating in these scenes, I met many drag artists and learned about the different drag cultures in Los Angeles. Over the next four years, I conducted eleven in-depth interviews with drag queens, drag kings, and queer performance artists. My informants shared with me how the *RuPaul's Drag Race* phenomenon impacts their lives and livelihoods as artists. Through this generous collaborative conversation, we discussed the benefits and pitfalls of the franchise, and I gained an invaluable insight into how the show's expanding economy created different opportunities for these performers. I learned how *RuPaul's Drag Race* provided these artists with different levels of access to social and economic capital from the emerging *Drag Race* economy.

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<sup>15</sup> During my fieldwork, I regularly attended drag shows at Micky's, Hamburger Mary's, Rage, The Abbey, Flaming Saddles, and Revolver in West Hollywood; Casita del Campo and Akbar in Silverlake; and The Precinct in downtown Los Angeles (DTLA).

This same year, the *RuPaul's Drag Race* franchise introduced the, as of this writing, largest interactive event for superfans: RuPaul's DragCon. A now annual multi-day event held at the Los Angeles Convention Center, DragCon has featured more than 200 vendors and exhibitors, panel discussions on various aspects of drag culture, autograph and photograph possibilities with *Drag Race* contestants, keynote addresses from RuPaul, and ample opportunities for shopping. In just three years, over 76,293 *Drag Race* fans attended RuPaul's DragCon in Los Angeles. I attended DragCon all three years, and during the events, I interviewed over sixty superfans. I observed the increasing presence of heterosexual families at the event, as well as the inclusion of younger children. Fans adorned themselves in increasingly outlandish costumes, and the atmosphere felt both distinctly queer and increasingly less subcultural. The panels featured drag kings and drag legends not showcased on the show, thereby providing them with access to the growing economy. In rooms packed with over 100 fans, I witnessed political discussions that directly challenged white supremacy and conservatism. By attending RuPaul's DragCon, I realized how an analysis of only *Drag Race* episodes could not account for the experience of this interactive economy. Beginning in September 2017, the RuPaul's DragCon event moved to the Jacob K. Javits Center in New York City, and as of this writing, DragCon now occurs annually in both Los Angeles and New York City.

As *RuPaul's Drag Race* expanded beyond television into these various interactive opportunities, the franchise also steadily amassed an increased viewership and more mainstream critical recognition. Over the course of nine seasons, *Drag Race* consistently broke Logo's network and digital ratings records.<sup>16</sup> Starting in 2017, with the show's ninth season, *Drag Race*

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<sup>16</sup> Over 10 million people regularly stream episodes of *Drag Race* from the show's official website. The show has over three million fans on social media platforms and reaches a diverse audience that includes a large straight demographic and a strong viewership in the 18-49 age range (Shepherd 2013).

began to air concurrently on Logo and the more mainstream VH1 network (both part of Viacom). This channel change continued the franchise's viewership gains, as Season Nine's premiere and finale episodes set series high records for Nielsen ratings.<sup>17</sup> *Drag Race* provided multiple ways for fans to engage with the franchise, through official accounts on social media outlets such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. As of this writing, the *RuPaul's Drag Race* official accounts have approximately 3.9 million followers on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, *World of Wonder's* official accounts have approximately 378,500 followers on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.<sup>19</sup> *World of Wonder* also features a popular YouTube channel, WOWPRESENTS, which regularly produces content featuring *Drag Race* contestants. This channel currently has 777,000 followers and approximately 422 million overall views. The *RuPaul's Drag Race* fan base now regularly participates in social media outlets, including an active *RuPaul's Drag Race* subreddit forum with approximately 101,000 subscribers.<sup>20</sup> The social media fan base frequently discusses the show while episodes air, which often results in the show trending on Twitter and other outlets. The Season Nine episode premiere, featuring guest

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<sup>17</sup> The VH1 airings of Season Nine's premiere drew 987,000 viewers, both doubling the show's viewership from the Season Eight premiere and tripling VH1's average viewership for that time slot (Friday at 9:00 p.m.). These ratings constitute "live plus same day ratings" and do not include DVR viewership. The Season Nine finale drew 859,000 viewers (a 218% increase over the Season Eight finale viewership in the 18-49 demographic). In total, Season Nine increased the franchise's viewership by 122% in the 18-49 demographic (Velocci 2017).

<sup>18</sup> As of this writing, the *RuPaul's Drag Race* accounts have 1.9 million followers on Facebook, 1.4 million followers on Instagram, and 638,000 followers on Twitter.

<sup>19</sup> As of this writing, the *WOW* official accounts have 166k followers on Facebook, 140k followers on Instagram, and 72.5k followers on Twitter.

<sup>20</sup> Reddit is a discussion-based website organized into areas of interest called "subreddits." Registered community members of a subreddit can submit content to the forum, and other users can then vote submitted posts up or down. The votes determine at which position in the form a submitted post will appear. The *RuPaul's Drag Race* subreddit is incredibly active and receives multiple posts throughout the day. Community members on this forum discuss the show and *Drag Race* contestants consistently, both while a Season of *Drag Race* airs and during the "off season."

judge Lady Gaga, was the highest trending television program on social media for March 24, 2017 (Velocci 2017). This steady increase in viewership and the often ravenous online fan base greatly contributed to the franchise's growing presence and success.

The show also earned increasingly prestigious mainstream critical recognition. Over the past eight years, *RuPaul's Drag Race* achieved a large number of critical accolades, including both nominations and, increasingly, wins.<sup>21</sup> Unsurprisingly, the show first received recognition more often from LGBT-specific organizations and fan-voted polls. Starting in 2014, however, the show and RuPaul began to receive more mainstream accolades. The show's first major win included a 2014 Television Critics' Association (TCA) award for Outstanding Achievement in Reality Programming. In 2015, makeup genius and drag artist Mathu Andersen achieved the show's first Primetime Emmy Award nomination for makeup, and the following year, RuPaul won the 2016 Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Host for a Reality or Reality-Competition Program.<sup>22</sup> In 2017, *RuPaul's Drag Race* earned a whopping eight Primetime Emmy Award nominations, and the show ultimately won three awards.<sup>23</sup> For the first time, the

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<sup>21</sup> Since 2010, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has received the following award nominations and wins: a 2010 GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Reality Program (won); 2010 NewNowNext Award for Best New Indulgence (won); 2011 Critics' Choice Television Award for Best Reality Series-Competition (nominated); 2012 TV.com's Best of 2012 Awards for Best Reality Competition Series (won); 2013 RyanSeacrest.com's Favorite TV Show Awards – Best Reality Series (won); 2013 Poprepublic.tv Awards for Favourite International TV Shows (nominated); 2014 Television Critics' Association Award for Outstanding Achievement in Reality Programming (won); 2017 MTV Movie & TV Awards for Best Reality Competition (won); and 2017 Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Reality-Competition Program (nominated).

<sup>22</sup> Since 2012, RuPaul has received the following award nominations and wins: 2012 Critics' Choice Television Award for Best Reality Show Host (nominated); 2012 TV.com's Best of 2012 Awards for Best Reality Show Judge/Host (won); 2014 Critics' Choice Television Award for Best Reality Show Host (nominated); 2016 Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Host for a Reality or Reality-Competition Program (won); 2017 MTV Movie & TV Awards for Best Host (nominated); and 2017 Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Host for a Reality or Reality-Competition Program (won).

<sup>23</sup> RuPaul won his second Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Host for a Reality or Reality-Competition Program, costume designers Zaldy Goco and Perry Meek won for Outstanding Costumes for



show itself earned a nomination for Outstanding Reality-Competition Program, and the spin-off web series *RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked* also received a nomination for Outstanding Unstructured Reality Program. Additionally, *RuPaul's Drag Race* contestants and crew members have accumulated multiple award nominations and wins, which have grown in prestige.<sup>24</sup> This critical recognition, along with the show's ever-increasing viewership, growing social media presence, and expanding business ventures all demonstrate the franchise's unprecedented commercial success.

By observing and participating in the *RuPaul's Drag Race* economy, I discovered how this changing landscape requires that scholars rethink their approaches to studying the franchise. As the diverse fan base continues to grow and the franchise continues to expand beyond just a television show, scholars should expand their repertoire of cultural theories and research methods. With my dissertation, then, I want to make both a theoretical and methodological contribution to current *Drag Race* Studies. I want to demonstrate how a thorough understanding of Camp theory is fundamental to accurately analyzing *Drag Race's* complexity. While scholars consistently draw concepts from Queer Theory, Gender Theory, and Critical Race Theory, they

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a Variety Program or a Special, and editors Jamie Martin, John Lim, and Michael Roha won for Outstanding Picture Editing for a Structured or Competition Reality Program. The show received 2017 Primetime Emmy Award nominations for Outstanding Casting for a Reality Program (Goloka Bolte and Ethan Petersen); Outstanding Hairstyling for a Multi-Camera Series or Special (Hector Pocasangre); and Outstanding Makeup for a Multi-Camera Series or Special (Non-Prosthetic) (Jen Fregozo, Nicole Faulkner, and Natasha Marcelina).

<sup>24</sup> Since 2009, the following individuals associated with *RuPaul's Drag Race* have received these award nominations and wins: a 2009 NewNowNext Award for Most Addictive Reality Star (win for Season One contestant Ongina); 2010 NewNowNext Award for Most Addictive Reality Star (nomination for Season Two contestant Jujubee); 2011 NewNowNext Award for Most Addictive Reality Star (nomination for Season Three contestant Carmen Carrera); 2012 NewNowNext Award for Most Addictive Reality Star (nomination for Season Four contestant Willam); 2015 Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Makeup for a Multi-Camera Series or Special (Non-Prosthetic) (nomination for Mathu Andersen); 2016 Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Costumes for a Variety, Nonfiction or Reality Program (nomination for Zaldy Goco).

largely ignore Camp theory. I study the *Drag Race* phenomenon through a critical Camp framework, and in so doing, I hope to demonstrate how scholars would benefit from incorporating Camp theory into their investigations. I also want to demonstrate how a combination of content analysis and ethnographic research methods provides a more nuanced approach for understanding the *Drag Race* phenomenon. Thus far, most *Drag Race* scholars analyze the show's aired episodes. While this approach provides invaluable discussions regarding representations of drag identities on the show, this research method cannot account for the show's effects off-screen. By incorporating content analysis along with ethnography (participant observation and interviews), I hope to model how *Drag Race* scholars can combine these research methods in order to connect the television show to tangible social practices.

My dissertation argues that, through *RuPaul's Drag Race*, RuPaul and World of Wonder utilize Camp as forms of queer cultural, economic, and social capital. To build this argument, I first situate my project within the current scholarship on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. I identify some of the key concepts and research methods used within this discourse, and I lay out the field's overall four key areas of inquiry. Then, I suggest how my dissertation fills gaps within these conversations by incorporating a unique combination of content analysis and ethnographic methods. I situate my project within a lineage of queer ethnographies, and I identify how ethnography provides invaluable tools for collaborating with informants, reflecting on scholarly positionality, and connecting theory with praxis. Then, I unpack the concept of Camp in order to build my critical Camp theoretical framework. I review key scholarly debates on Camp in order to understand how the nebulous concept operates in queer cultures. Finally, I end this Introduction by discussing the dissertation's methodology, previewing the four chapters, and identifying the project's overall goals.

## Situating My Project Within the Current Discourse on *RuPaul's Drag Race*

While an abundance of peer-reviewed scholarship on drag exists, the literature specific to *RuPaul's Drag Race* is relatively small and still emerging.<sup>25</sup> As of this writing, the body of scholarship currently available in English includes: one published anthology (Daems 2014), one upcoming anthology (Brennan and Gudelunas 2017), four Theses (Hernandez 2014, Herold 2012, Metzger 2016, Tucker Jenkins 2013), three chapters in non-*Drag Race* specific anthologies (Perez 2017, Rodriguez y Gibson 2014, Schottmiller 2017), and fifteen articles (Collins 2017, de Villiers 2012, Edgar 2011, Gamson 2013, Goldmark 2015, González and Cavazos 2016, Gudelunas 2016, Hall-Araujo 2016, Hargraves 2011, Hicks 2013, Moore 2013, Simmons 2014, Strings and Bui 2014, Vesey 2016, Zhang 2016).<sup>26</sup> While I analyze in closer detail some of these studies later in my dissertation, I first want to identify the larger trends within this current discourse. Understanding how scholars study *RuPaul's Drag Race* allows me to better situate my project within the growing field of “*Drag Race* Studies.” For this dissertation, I do not present a literature review for the larger field of drag studies within academia because doing so is both too expansive an endeavor and not useful for my particular

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<sup>25</sup> Since the show's premiere in 2009, multiple writers have published online “think pieces” about the show. While these opinion pieces often provide interesting perspectives on the show, the mostly digital articles are not peer-reviewed scholarship. Therefore, while a number of writers discuss *RuPaul's Drag Race*, only a relatively small number of scholars have published peer-reviewed articles about the show.

<sup>26</sup> I have identified this scholarship through scholarly databases (including Google Scholar and ProQuest), LGBTQ-specific peer-reviewed journals (including *GLQ* and *TSQ*), and Bibliographies of published *Drag Race* scholarship. In compiling this list, I look only at scholarship specifically about *RuPaul's Drag Race* and do not include scholarship on the spin-off series *RuPaul's Drag U*. Additionally, I include only the scholarship currently available in English. Scholarship written in Portuguese and Spanish does exist but remains inaccessible to me as of right now. Despite my best efforts, I may have inadvertently overlooked a scholarly publication on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, an unintended slight for which I apologize to the author(s). In the future, I will add any missed sources to this growing list.

project.<sup>27</sup> I do, however, first need to define some of the key terms that I and other *Drag Race* scholars use in our analyses. While I provide working definitions for these key concepts in order to offer the reader a shared vocabulary, I caution against universalizing these limited definitions. The word “drag” and the various identities related to the practice do not have rigid, singular definitions. On the contrary, this terminology changes significantly both over time and in different cultural contexts. The following definitions relate specifically to how *RuPaul’s Drag Race* portrays the practices and identities. The terminology, therefore, cannot and should not be understood as universal, static definitions that encompass the totality of diverse drag identities, styles, and cultures.

RuPaul and *RuPaul’s Drag Race* frame “drag” in two different ways: as an ideology and as a performance. With one of his signature catchphrases, “You’re born naked and the rest is drag,” RuPaul describes drag in ideological terms (RuPaul 1995:xiii). In this formulation, drag encompasses every act of gender identity that occurs after an individual’s birth. Essentially, drag represents the enactment and performance of gender identity. In this formulation, RuPaul provides a definition for drag that aligns with what philosopher Judith Butler calls “gender performativity.” In her 1990 text *Gender Trouble*, Butler critiques the understanding that identity is fixed, natural, and apolitical. Instead, she argues that identity is “performative,” meaning identity requires discursive means and corporeal signs to manufacture and sustain itself as natural (Butler 1990:136). Drawing examples from Esther Newton’s 1972 book *Mother Camp*, an ethnographic study of female impersonators, Butler uses drag performance as evidence to

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<sup>27</sup> These studies of drag are found in scholarship across multiple academic departments/programs, including Anthropology, Sociology, History, Philosophy, Psychology, American Studies, Cultural Studies, and Theater and Performance Studies, among others. These interdisciplinary investigations often bring together theories and methods from LGBT and Queer Studies, Gender and Women’s Studies, Critical Race Studies, and Media Studies, among others. Needless to say, scholarly investigations into drag performance encompass an expansive, diverse, and multi-disciplinary discourse.

show how gender is a performative identity. She argues that drag queens use words, acts, and gestures to manufacture and perform a gendered identity (ibid 137). Through stylized repetition of gendered acts, drag queens imitate gender and, through the process, reveal that gender itself is an imitative structure. Therefore, Butler argues, gender becomes a normalized social category through the “mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (ibid 140). For RuPaul and Butler, both gender philosophers in their own right, drag ideology reveals how identities are social constructs that humans continually perform through repeated actions.

In addition to representing drag as an ideology, *RuPaul's Drag Race* showcases drag as a performance-based art. The show frames drag performance as a specifically queer artistic practice that specializes in transformation: through makeup, costuming, parody, and individual characterization, drag artists create personae for themselves distinct from their non-drag identities. The term “queer” has multiple meanings, some of which I discuss here.<sup>28</sup> In colloquial usage, “queer” often functions as an umbrella term used to describe all the non-normative identities within LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) communities. Whereas “LGBT” refers to four specific identity labels, “queer” refers more broadly to all non-normative identities within this diverse community. These non-normative identities are most often opposed to dominant ideologies of sexuality and gender; in other words, “queer” identities are often non-heteronormative and non-gender normative. Historically, the term “queer” functions as a more inclusive term, often used to recognize the diversity within LGBTQ communities while offering a coalitional potential for political activism. *RuPaul's Drag Race* embraces the term “queer” in

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<sup>28</sup> For a more complete history of the term “Queer” and its different usages, see: Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

this sense, as a descriptor that locates drag within a distinctly LGBT history. However, the term “queer” also has a specific political connotation, which I address in detail momentarily.

While *RuPaul’s Drag Race* frames drag as a queer performance-based art form, the show thus far includes only drag queen contestants, portrayed on the show as artists who specialize in performing femininity. Over its nine seasons, *Drag Race* features drag queens who showcase different drag styles and subcultures, including glamorous drag, genderfuck drag, comedy and Camp drag, and pageant drag, among others. Although the show represents some facets of this diverse art form, these representations are necessarily limited and do not always explore the breadth of different drag histories and subcultures. Drag scholarship and documentary films more fully encompass the diversity and more directly account for how gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and geographic location inform the different manifestations of drag queens (Bailey 2013; Baker 1968; Baker 1994; Bérubé 1990; Butler 1990; Butler 1993; Chauncey 1994; Fleisher 1996; Garber 1992; Hilbert 1995; Kirk and Heath 1984; Krahulik 2008; Manalansan 2003; Muñoz 1999; Newton 1972; Newton 1993; Newton 2000; Rupp and Taylor 2003; Schacht 2002; Schacht and Underwood 2004; Senelick 2000; Shils 1995; Slide 1986; Tewksbury 1994; Thompson 1995). As represented on *Drag Race*, drag queen performers differ from drag king performers, who more often specialize in performing masculinity. As of this writing, *Drag Race* does not permit drag king competitors; therefore, the plethora of drag king scholarship better represents this diverse art form (Barnett and Johnson 2013; Baur 2004; Berbary and Johnson 2016; Braziel 2005; Escudero-Álías 2009; Escudero-Álías 2011; Halberstam 1998; Halberstam 2005; Hanson 2007; Hobson 2013; Maltz 1998; Miyahara and Osborn 2013; Noble 2009; Rupp, Taylor, and Shapiro 2010; Shapiro 2007; Torr and Bottoms 2010; Troka, Lebesco, and Noble 2002; Volcano and Halberstam 1999).

In queer subcultural communities, drag queen performers embody any number of gender and sexual identities; however, *RuPaul's Drag Race* thus far represents drag queen performers as primarily gay men (of various gender identities) and trans women. In discussing the following sexual and gender identity labels, I want to reiterate that these definitions are incredibly fluid and change significantly over time. Particularly since the 1990s, with the increased prevalence of trans visibility, gender and sexual identity labels change rapidly. I recommend referring to Transgender Studies scholar and activist Julia Serrano's glossary of terms as an ever-updating resource for these labels.<sup>29</sup> Broadly speaking, sexual identity or sexuality (an individual's romantic and/or sexual attraction) differs from gender identity (a spectrum of identities that include but are not limited to "male" and "female"). The terms "transgender" and "cisgender" are two umbrella labels that encompass a diverse spectrum of individual gender identities. According to Serrano's glossary, the term "cisgender" or "cis" refers broadly to people who do not identify as transgender or trans. "Transgender" is an umbrella term for people who transgress gender norms or defy traditional gender categories in some way, and the term encompasses a full spectrum of gender identities. A "trans woman" is someone who was assigned "male" at birth but who currently identifies and/or lives as a woman. Of the 113 featured *Drag Race* contestants, a majority self-identify as gay men, and a smaller number self-identify as trans women.<sup>30</sup>

Because *RuPaul's Drag Race* is a competitive reality television show modeled after RuPaul's own career, the show frames drag performance as primarily a commercial enterprise.

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<sup>29</sup> Serrano's glossary of terms is available at: <http://www.juliaserano.com/terminology.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Some scholars and *Drag Race* viewers reductively label all the gay male contestants as "cisgender." However, a number of the gay men self-identify as having gender identities that are part of the transgender spectrum. Because gender and sexual identity categories are fluid, many of the contestants' identities change over time. When discussing *RuPaul's Drag Race*, scholars and viewers should not rigidly assign identity categories to the performers solely based off their representations on the show.

Through their one-on-one interviews and workroom/backstage conversations, contestants discuss the myriad ways in which drag benefits them personally (as well as the economic hardships they face in making drag a financially stable career). While these conversations demonstrate how drag performance is not solely a financial enterprise, *Drag Race*'s overall format frames drag as a job. Some drag scholars would critique the show's political potential because *Drag Race* is a commercial product for television audiences and the show emphasizes drag as a profession. In his 1999 text *Disidentifications*, José Esteban Muñoz distinguishes "commercial drag" from more radical, queer versions of drag performance. Citing RuPaul's 1990s VH1 talk show as an example, Muñoz describes "commercial drag" as presenting "a sanitized and desexualized queer subject for mass consumption. Such drag represents a certain strand of integrationist liberal pluralism. The sanitized queen is meant to be enjoyed as an entertainer who will hopefully lead to social understanding and tolerance" (Muñoz 1999:99). Muñoz contrasts this commercial drag to "queerer" forms of drag "performed by queer-identified drag artists in spaces of queer consumption" (ibid 99). In particular, Muñoz identifies drag artist Vaginal Crème Davis's "terrorist drag" as an alternative to commercial drag. Muñoz suggests that "Davis's political drag is about...creating an uneasiness in desire, which works to confound and subvert the social fabric" (ibid 100). According to Muñoz's framework, *RuPaul's Drag Race* would be considered a more sanitized and "less queer" version of drag because the show is produced for "mass consumption."

This understanding of "commercial drag" relies upon a particular definition of "queer" that comes from Queer Theory and activism. Within certain activist circles and academic discourses, the term "queer" refers to a set of politics at odds with more mainstream LGBT politics. Historically, "queer" derives from radical activist groups, such as the organization



Queer Nation from the 1990s. In their work around the HIV/AIDS epidemic, these activists adopt “queer” as an in-your-face, unapologetic identity descriptor. In this way, “queer” denotes a radical political stance less concerned with universalizing sameness and assimilationist politics. This activist history translates into the term’s academic usage. Within “Queer Studies,” scholars in the 1990s frame the term as an indefinable, anti-normative, radical political position. Queer activists and scholars often frame “queer politics” in opposition to assimilationist “Lesbian and Gay politics.” Queer provides an oppositional stance to what Lisa Duggan calls “homonormativity.” Duggan defines homonormativity as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan 2002:179). For Duggan, Muñoz, and other Queer Theorists, the term “queer” ought to be maintained in this radical, oppositional sense in order to critique mainstream LGBT identities and politics.

If “queer” is necessarily opposed to “homonormativity,” then some scholars might decry using the term “queer” to describe *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. These individuals could suggest that *Drag Race* cannot be “queer” because the show is a commercial reality television product, and RuPaul often promotes more mainstream LGBT political issues such as marriage equality and U.S. military support. Logo TV’s marketing strategy for *RuPaul’s Drag Race* would support this position. In her article, “A ‘Post-Gay’ Era? Media Gaystreaming, Homonormativity, and the Politics of LGBT Integration,” Eve Ng analyzes how Logo TV’s executives adopt a marketing technique called “gaystreaming” in order to draw in larger general audiences of particularly heterosexual women (Ng 2013:259). By interviewing Logo Executives and analyzing Logo’s internal memos, Ng discovers that gaystreaming stresses the “normalcy of gayness” at the

expense of queer identities and practices that would seriously challenge existing social and economic structures (ibid 261). Gaystreaming aligns with Lisa Duggan's notion of homonormativity because, similar to homonormativity, gaystreaming promotes more assimilationist politics rooted in a white, upper class cis gay male experience. RuPaul often espouses more of an assimilationist politics on *Drag Race*, perhaps as a way to grow the fan base and draw in higher numbers of straight, white women consumers. Thus, if we evaluate *Drag Race* according to Logo's gaystreaming strategy, then the show would not be "queer" in the traditional sense.

However, my experiences observing and participating in the growing *Drag Race* fan base and economy lead me to argue that this definition of queer is not complex enough to describe the *Drag Race* phenomenon. Alexander Doty's definition of queer and discussion of "cultural queer space" provide more adequate frameworks. Doty uses the term queer to "mark a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception" (Doty 1993:3). This formulation is useful because *RuPaul's Drag Race* is a decidedly contra-straight cultural production, and the online fan communities and live interactive spaces provide opportunities for contra-straight cultural reception. Here, queer constitutes both specifically "LGBT" people and heterosexual individuals who consume and participate in the *Drag Race* economy. This understanding of "queer" accurately describes *Drag Race* communities. When I attend events such as RuPaul's DragCon, I meet, interview, and engage with many individuals, some who self-identify as LGBTQ and others as heterosexual. What connects us as a fan community is not necessarily a shared queer identity rooted in similar lived experiences of marginalization or a shared radical politics. Instead, what connects us is our love for and consumption of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Our shared enjoyment in consuming this contra-

straight queer cultural (and commercial) product defines our “queer” identity. Throughout my dissertation, then, I refer to the *Drag Race* fan base as “queer,” drawing specifically from Doty’s definitional framework. My intention with this usage of queer is twofold. First, I use this language to account for how *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, via gaystreaming, builds a queer fan community of LGBT and straight viewers who consume the same commercial queer product. Second, I want to demonstrate how this queer community challenges understandings of *Drag Race*’s politics. Throughout my dissertation, I show how the expanding *Drag Race* enterprise creates opportunities for *both* radical and assimilationist political engagement. Some scholars could take issue with my use of “queer” and suggest that I instead adopt a more chic term such as “post-gay” in order to maintain queer’s radical roots. However, early Queer Theorists maintain that one of the term’s radical potentials lies in its definitional fluidity and indefinability. Rather than betraying “queer” by rigidly defining the term, scholars instead ought to analyze how the *Drag Race* phenomenon mutates the identity in complex and interesting ways.

Having discussed some of the key concepts within discourse on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, I now identify the four key areas of inquiry in *Drag Race* studies. Scholars who write about *RuPaul’s Drag Race* generally approach the show through intersectional analyses. A term coined by black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, intersectionality refers to a way of conceptualizing discrimination and politics that understands identity to be multi-layered rather than structured around singular issues (Crenshaw 1989:167).<sup>31</sup> Drawing from Queer and LGBT

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<sup>31</sup> A renowned legal scholar and American Civil Rights advocate, Kimberlé Crenshaw coins the term “intersectionality” in her examination of U.S. antidiscrimination laws. Crenshaw argues that antidiscrimination laws look at gender and race separately, an approach that does not account for how black women and women of color experience overlapping forms of discrimination. While Crenshaw coins the term, the concept of intersectionality has been theorized and discussed by black women throughout history, as a way to account for how race, gender, and other identity characteristics are always overlapping and mutually constitutive.

Studies, Gender and Women's Studies, Critical Race Studies, and Media Studies, *Drag Race* scholars frequently seek to understand how the show uses drag performance to challenge or uphold different identity norms. Because the majority of *Drag Race* scholars utilize an intersectional approach to studying the show, these writers bring together multiple disciplinary perspectives. While these scholars draw from various disciplines, they have thus far utilized primarily content analysis methods in their investigations. The majority of studies support their arguments by analyzing examples from the aired episodes of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. A few studies incorporate ethnographic methods, such as interviews with different *Drag Race* audiences and fans. Looking at the current field of *RuPaul's Drag Race* Studies as a whole, I would describe the landscape as an interdisciplinary, intersectional, and primarily content analysis-based field that seeks to understand how this reality television show challenges, subverts, and/or reifies normative identity categories through queer drag performance.

Having studied the currently available *RuPaul's Drag Race* scholarship, I would organize the overall literature into four key areas of inquiry.<sup>32</sup> One area provides in-depth analyses of *RuPaul's Drag Race* in terms of intertextual referencing (de Villiers 2012, Fine and Shreve 2014, Schottmiller 2017).<sup>33</sup> A second area analyzes the show primarily through linguistic analysis, in order to understand how contestants use language to construct shared identities and/or to challenge dominant norms (Anthony 2014, Goldmark 2015, Moore 2013, Simmons

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<sup>32</sup> As I discuss these four areas of inquiry, I provide in the footnotes a brief overview of each author's perspective/approach/argument. In presenting this information, I use the pronoun "they" for each author because I do not know their individual preference. I discuss many of these works in more detail throughout the dissertation but provide an overview here.

<sup>33</sup> In their 2012 article, Nicholas de Villiers examines how *Drag Race* uses parody and referencing to provide "meta commentary" on reality television shows and figures. In their 2014 chapter, David J. Fine and Emily Shreve analyze how RuPaul uses allusions to the film *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* to establish his teaching pedagogy.

2014).<sup>34</sup> A third area investigates *Drag Race*'s relationship to larger systems of consumerism and capitalism (Gudelunas 2016, Hall-Araujo 2016, Pagnoni Berns 2014, Vesey 2016).<sup>35</sup> The largest area of study thus far investigates *Drag Race* in terms of representation (Chernoff 2014, Collins 2017, Edgar 2011, Gamson 2013, González and Cavazos 2016, Hargraves 2011, Hernandez 2014, Herold 2012, Hicks 2013, Kohlsdorf 2014, Marcel 2014, Mayora 2014, Metzger 2016, Morrison 2014, Norris 2014, Rodriguez y Gibson 2014, Strings and Bui 2014, Tucker Jenkins 2013, Zhang 2016).<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> In their 2013 article, Ramey Moore uses theories from Judith Butler, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jacques Derrida to analyze how contestants' linguistic usage allows them to exhibit possibilities for radical agency. In their 2014 chapter, Libby Anthony uses a "translingual lens" to study how non-standard-English-speaking contestants use language to push back against traditional conceptualizations of gender and language. In their 2014 article, Nathaniel Simmons analyzes how contestants use speech codes to construct, reinforce, and perpetuate cultural values. In their 2015 article, Matthew Goldmark analyzes how *Drag Race*'s emphasis on English proficiency troubles the show's narrative of upward mobility.

<sup>35</sup> In their 2016 article, Lori Hall-Araujo analyzes how RuPaul parodies consumer culture in order to differentiate his form of capitalism and expand his brand. In their 2016 article, Alyxandra Vesey examines how the show engages the pop recording industry in order to reinforce both pop music and reality television's neoliberal and post-racial politics. In their 2014 chapter, Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns analyzes how *Drag Race* mocks and parodies reality competition shows (and by extension professional success) through arbitrary challenges. In their 2016 article, David Gudelunas analyzes how *Drag Race* uses "culture jamming" to subvert and parody conventions of reality competitions.

<sup>36</sup> In their 2011 article, Eir-Anne Edgar analyzes how the show defines "successful drag" in a way that celebrates stereotypical femininity and limits drag's subversive queer politics. In their 2012 article, Hunter Hargraves analyzes how the show commodifies HIV-positive experience and situates the identity within corporate consumption. In their 2012 Thesis, Lauren Herold analyzes how the show celebrates stereotypical performances of race, gender, and class and promotes a post-racial and neoliberal narrative. In their 2013 article, Jessica Hicks how the show legitimizes drag as entertainment and builds a community through messages of self-love and support. In their 2013 Thesis, Sarah Tucker Jenkins explores how the show promotes "simplistic caricatures" of women and fat contestants, as well as hegemonic representations of femininity and racist stereotypes. In their 2013 article, Joshua Gamson analyzes how *Drag Race* offers more complex roles for gay men than traditionally featured on reality television. In their 2014 Thesis, John Hernandez argues that *Drag Race* conveys largely hegemonic ideas that reinforce normative gender expression, as well as racial and ethnic stereotypes. In their 2014 article, Sabrina Strings and Long T. Bui analyze how performances on *Drag Race* subvert, invert, or reify gender while politicking racial identity along codes of "realness." In their 2014 article, Eliza Rodriguez y Gibson analyzes how Puerto Rican contestants use Latina/o Camp aesthetics and *relajo* to critique citizenship and comment on Latinidad identities. In their 2014 chapter, Carolyn Chernoff examines how the show destabilizes static notions of gender and highlights collaborative relationships between queens and cis women. In their 2014 chapter, Kai Kohlsdorf argues that *Drag Race* upholds a limited representation of

My dissertation contributes specifically to two of these four areas of investigation within the current discourse: the show's relationship to intertextuality/referencing and the show's relationship to consumerism/capitalism. I do not directly contribute to the study of *Drag Race* in terms of linguistic analysis because I have neither the scholarly training nor background to conduct that type of analysis. When I started writing about *RuPaul's Drag Race*, I analyzed the aired television episodes according to their representations of drag cultures and queer identities. I evaluated *Drag Race's* politics based on this point of entry. However, as the franchise expanded and I participated in the live events, I realized that my perspectives needed to shift. The arguments I had made about the television episodes did not always align with my interactive experiences. While I read a certain politics from the television texts, I witnessed and participated in a different politics through my ethnographic work. Interviewing drag performers and *Drag Race* fans provided me with new perspectives that challenged my preconceived notions and generalized arguments about the show. I had to expand my focus in order to account for the franchise's nuance and complexity.

My unique Doctoral training and fieldwork experiences guided my project into a different direction. In my Culture and Performance studies program at UCLA, I have learned to combine

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drag and follows a post-racial, post-feminist, gender normative, and transphobic politics. In their 2014 chapter, Mary Marcel examines how *Drag Race* mainstreams marginalized identities and approaches to gender that both reinforce and disrupt gender binarism. In their 2014 chapter, R. Gabriel Mayora analyzes how Puerto Rican queens on the show disidentify with hegemonic gender, sexual, and racial categories that *Drag Race* has them perform. In their 2014 chapter, Josh Morrison analyzes how the show uses Camp humor to adopt an assimilationist narrative instead of radical queer politics. In their 2014 chapter, Laurie Norris analyzes how *Drag Race's* early seasons present homonormative, misogynistic, and transphobic depictions of cis and trans femininity, which before more nuanced over time. In their 2016 Thesis, Megan Metzger analyzes how the show retools hegemonic perceptions of the drag queen from deviant to "cultural influencer". In their 2016 article, Eric Zhang analyzes how Asian American contestants use costuming and performance to engage in ambivalent rhetorics of race and gender. In their 2016 article, Jorge C. González and Kameron C. Cavazos trace how representations of gender identity evolve from mockery and negative stereotypes to more holistic portrayals. In their 2017 article, Cory G. Collins analyzes how the show embraces more non-normative identities and performance styles over time.

ethnographic methods with cultural and performance studies theories. For this project, I incorporate my unique fieldwork experiences engaging in the *Drag Race* phenomenon, interviewing Los Angeles drag artists, and observing fan participation at RuPaul's DragCon. I connect my analysis of the *RuPaul's Drag Race* television episodes to the tangible effects that my informants experience and that I observe through ethnography. In so doing, I want to demonstrate how *Drag Race* scholars can incorporate ethnographic methods into their studies in order to develop more complex research questions and analyses. In focusing on content analysis, *Drag Race* scholars largely ignore ethnography, which has been an instrumental research method within drag studies specifically and LGBT Studies more generally (Bailey 2013, Bérubé 1990, Boyd 2008, Boyd and Ramírez 2012, Chauncey 1994, D'Emilio 1983, Faderman and Timmons 2006, Fleisher 1996, Johnson 2008, Kennedy and Davis 2014, Manalansan 2003, Newton 1972, Rupp and Taylor 2003, Wat 2002).

Specifically, I want to suggest that ethnographic methods better position scholars to analyze the changing *Drag Race* landscape, to privilege the perspectives of stakeholders in drag communities, and to self-reflect on their own positionalities as researchers. Unlike most reality-competition shows, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has created an entire economy that now impacts local drag performers and communities. Reality competition shows such as *Project Runway* and *America's Next Top Model* do not create new fashion or modeling industries, respectively. These industries exist prior to the reality show's creation, and the competition series provides contestants with public visibility so that, with luck, they may later succeed in these already established industries. By contrast, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has created an entire *Drag Race*-based economy, which now includes internationally touring drag shows, cruise events, and a weekend long convention. Content analysis of the show's aired episodes cannot account for this emerging

economy. Ethnographic methods, including participation observation in the *Drag Race* economy and interviews with drag performers, provide more applicable research tools for this changing landscape.

Additionally, content analysis of the aired episodes often restricts the possibility for collaborative engagement with stakeholders. The *Drag Race* phenomenon impacts drag performers and drag communities, both those directly associated with *RuPaul's Drag Race* and those not represented on the show. To understand how this phenomenon impacts the lives of performers, scholars must collaborate with stakeholders. Collaborating with and learning from informants within drag communities allows us to privilege their perspectives and to analyze the show's tangible effects. If we want to understand how the show does and does not represent the diversity of drag cultures, histories, and identities, then we should utilize research methods that provide more opportunities to collaborate with these stakeholders in drag communities. Rather than speaking for these informants, scholars should use their research as opportunities for collaborative engagement.

This research collaboration with informants provides scholars with an invaluable opportunity to question their own preconceived notions. In *Mother Camp*, her brilliant 1972 ethnographic study of female impersonators, Esther Newton discusses how working with her informants changed her unconscious personal biases. As a white lesbian who is initially unfamiliar with drag culture prior to her dissertation research, Newton starts her project as a cultural outsider. At first, Newton engages with her informants in a hierarchical relationship wherein she is the scholar and they are the “deviants” to be studied. While prepared to find the “views of deviants” interesting, Newton does not seriously consider that such views could be “correct” (Newton 1972:xvii). What she calls her initial “scholarly arrogance” leads Newton to



underestimate the economic exploitation of drag performers and to devalue the seriousness of their views (ibid xvi-xvii). However, as she collaborates with them, lives with them in cheap hotels, helps with their shows, and listens to, questions, and argues with them, Newton changes her perspective (ibid 132-134). By self-reflexively challenging her own preconceived notions as a cultural outsider and using ethnographic methods to collaborate with and learn from her informants, Newton develops a more nuanced and accurate research project. In the currently published literature, many *Drag Race* scholars do not discuss their own histories with drag. They sometimes critique the show's representations of drag cultures and histories, but these authors do not discuss how their own personal connections to drag may inform their arguments. Scholars who analyze *RuPaul's Drag Race* should reflect on how their interpretations of the show may be greatly determined by their status as insiders or outsiders to drag culture. In my own experience, I negatively criticized the show's representations of drag because what I saw on the aired episodes did not match what I witnessed in local drag communities and performance spaces. As I started to learn more about Camp, however, my opinion of the series changed because I could better understand the show's complexity.

On that note, I want to impress upon *Drag Race* scholars the importance of incorporating a Camp analysis into their research. Within the current body of scholarship, only four studies provide an extensive analysis of how Camp operates on *Drag Race* (Morrison 2014, Perez 2017, Rodriguez y Gibson 2014, Schottmiller 2017). While many scholars use the word Camp or mention the concept in passing, so far only these four works draw extensively upon Camp theory and literature. This limited engagement with Camp scholarship negatively impacts how scholars analyze *RuPaul's Drag Race*. As I seek to demonstrate, Camp is one of the integral operating logics of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Camp infuses every aspect of this show and permeates the

growing live economy. To understand a show created by gay men, scholars need an understanding of how Camp historically operates as a distinctly queer practice. Scholars who study *Drag Race* in terms of intertextuality and parodic consumerism fail to consider how these practices are specifically Camp. With my dissertation, I demonstrate how *Drag Race* uses Camp referencing as an intertextual practice to confer queer cultural status and capital, and through Camp marketing, RuPaul and World of Wonder build an entire economy rooted in Camp value. The fan base then consumes Camp as cultural and economic capital through their participation in *Drag Race*'s emerging Camp economy. Additionally, this economy impacts the lives of Los Angeles drag performers because these artists attain different forms and levels of social capital, depending on how much access they have to the *Drag Race* economy. This critical Camp framework allows me to connect the show's episodes to the tangible impacts on the fan base and drag performers. In order to analyze these different forms of Camp in relationship to *RuPaul's Drag Race*, I must start by laying the foundation of Camp.

### **Building a Critical Camp Analysis**

Understanding how Camp operates on *RuPaul's Drag Race* requires contextualizing the practice historically; however, this project proves difficult because of Camp's nebulous nature.<sup>37</sup> The word itself appears simultaneously as an adjective (*camp, campy, campish*), noun (*camp,*

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<sup>37</sup> Within Camp discourse, authors frequently use capitalized and lower-case versions of the word for different reasons. In her essay "Notes on Camp," Susan Sontag capitalizes because, I would argue, she provides the first scholarly investigation of the phenomenon. By capitalizing the term, Sontag distinguishes Camp as a proper noun and distinct sensibility. Other scholars, such as Moe Meyer, capitalize "Camp" in order to distinguish queer versions of the practice. Meyer uses the capitalized version when discussing Camp as a queer identificatory practice, and he makes the term lower-case when referring to what he deems an appropriated heterosexual version (Meyer 1994:1). Throughout this dissertation, I choose to capitalize the term "Camp" in my general usage because, like Sontag, I want to grammatically distinguish the practice as a proper noun. While I agree with Meyer that Camp is historically a specifically queer subcultural practice, I do not capitalize the term in order to de-authenticate heterosexual versions of Camp.

*campness, campiness*), adverb (*campily*), and verb (*to camp, camping, to camp up*), and these various parts of speech lack one cohesive meaning (Cleto 1999:10).<sup>38</sup> Additionally, scholars disagree on whether Camp's etymological roots ultimately derive from English (as *camp* in the U.S., *camp* or *camping* in the U.K., or *kamp* in Australia and New Zealand), Italian (as *campeggiare*), or French (as *champagne* or *se camper*), and each trajectory assumes an historically and culturally specific origin for the phenomenon (ibid 10-11).<sup>39</sup> Within Camp studies, scholars consistently struggle to develop a singular definition for the term. Initially framed as "*sensibility, taste, or style*, reconceptualised as *aesthetic* or *cultural economy*, and later asserted/reclaimed as (*queer*) *discourse*," Camp develops multiple, often contradictory meanings over time as authors use the same word to describe vastly different things (ibid 2).<sup>40</sup> While their individual definitions for this ambiguous concept vary, Camp scholars generally address three central concerns in their theorizations: how to delineate what bodies, actions, gestures, objects, and/or performances count as Camp (a question of definition); how to understand Camp's

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<sup>38</sup> For examples of how these parts of speech affect the meaning of Camp, see: Richard Dyer, "It's Being So Camp as Keeps Us Going," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 110-116.; Christopher Isherwood, *The World in the Evening* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 110-111.; Esther Newton, "Role Models" in *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), 97-111.; and Bruce Rodgers, *The Queens' Vernacular: A Gay Lexicon* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1972), 40-42.

<sup>39</sup> For further consideration of the origins of *se camper*, see: Mark Booth, *Camp* (New York: Quartet Books, 1983), 33. For further consideration of the origins of *camp*, see: Moe Meyer, *An Archaeology of Posing: Essays on Camp, Drag, and Sexuality* (Madison: Macater Press, 2010), 53-72. For further considerations of the origins of *kamp* and *campeggiare*, see: Fabio Cleto, "Introduction: Queering the Camp," in *Camp Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 1-43. For further consideration of the origins of *champagne* and *camping*, see: Bruce Rodgers, *The Queens' Vernacular: A Gay Lexicon* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1972).

<sup>40</sup> For the sake of this literature review, I focus mostly on theorizations of Camp as they relate to queer subjectivity. For a more complete list of Camp usages, see: Fabio Cleto, "Digging the Scene: A Bibliography of Secondary Materials 1869-1997," in *Camp Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 458-512.

relationship to homosexuality (a question of authorship); and how to interpret Camp's subversiveness (a question of political efficacy). The question of Camp's relationship to homosexuality is one of the paramount issues that informs debates within this body of scholarship. Some scholars suggest that Camp is a specifically queer subcultural practice, while others propose that Camp need not be directly tied to queer communities.<sup>41</sup> To understand these debates, I first analyze early definitions of Camp to demonstrate how the phenomenon originates in direct relationship to queer communities. Then, I discuss how Susan Sontag popularizes Camp for straight audiences, leading to the creation of mainstream "pop camp." Finally, I analyze queer scholarship on Camp that refutes Sontag's formulation and provides the background necessary for understanding how Camp operates on *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

When "Camp" first enters printed English in a 1909 dictionary of late-Victorian slang, the term means "actions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis. Probably from the French. Used chiefly by persons of exceptional want of character" (Ware 1909:61).<sup>42</sup> While this definition changes significantly in future theorizations of Camp, it does contain some key attributes that

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<sup>41</sup> In distinguishing Camp as a queer practice versus a commodified heterosexual practice, some scholars alter Camp's naming to reflect its different usages within and without queer communities. Moe Meyer, for example, capitalizes Camp when referring to the queer identificatory practice and makes the term lower-case when referring to the heterosexual appropriation (Meyer 1994:1). While I agree that Camp has historically operated as a specifically queer practice, I do not differentiate through naming the different forms of Camp. Because scholars use the same word to describe different things, I apply the term "Camp" as scholars use the term in their theorizations. When scholars differentiate types of Camp, such as "pop camp," then I alter the naming to reflect the argument. I sometimes use the phrase Queer Camp when referring specifically to the body of knowledge that understands Camp as a specifically queer social practice. This naming functions as a way to make clear the distinctions within theories of Camp.

<sup>42</sup> While the word "Camp" first enters printed English in 1909, scholars have pointed toward earlier forms of what could be described as Camp. For considerations of how Camp relates to late 17<sup>th</sup>/early 18<sup>th</sup> century English aristocracy and posturing, see: Thomas King, "Performing 'Akimbo': Queer pride and epistemological prejudice," in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994), 23-50. For considerations of how Camp relates to Oscar Wilde's experimentation with French Delsarte posturing, see: Moe Meyer, "Under the Sign of Wilde," in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994), 75-109.

remain consistent throughout the term's development: first, that Camp utilizes exaggeration of some form (often, but not always, through bodily self-presentation) and, second, that Camp operates in opposition to some aspect of dominant culture. By identifying Camp individuals as people who lack "character," this definition frames Camp as a deviant practice in opposition to "normal" behavior. While this first definition does not explicitly tie Camp to homosexuality, later dictionaries state the connection more explicitly.<sup>43</sup> By 1920, the term Camp (when used in theatrical argot) refers specifically to "homosexuals and Lesbians" (White 1966:71).

Camp's connection to homosexuality is further evidenced in Christopher Isherwood's 1954 novel *The World in the Evening*, which contains the first printed reference to Camp from a gay man. In his text, Isherwood identifies two forms of Camp, "High Camp" and "Low Camp/camping," both of which directly relate to queer practices. Isherwood describes Low Camp/camping as "a swishy little boy with peroxidized hair, dressed in a picture hat and a feather boa, pretending to be Marlene Dietrich" (Isherwood 1999:51). Low Camp/camping thus refers to gender performance, and Isherwood frames the "little boy" as both a queer male and female impersonator. High Camp functions as a process of expressing a serious emotional connection to "high (Western) art" through humor, style, and artifice. While Isherwood does not specifically define an authorship for High Camp, the fact that he (as a gay man) has such an extensive knowledge of it suggests that queer people are familiar with and use High Camp; however, High Camp could still be a practice utilized by heterosexuals. Thus, as both Isherwood's text and early dictionary definitions demonstrate, Camp originates within a queer subcultural context.

Dubbing Isherwood's description of Camp a "lazy two-page sketch," Susan Sontag sets out to provide a more definitive understanding of the concept in her 1964 essay "Notes On

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<sup>43</sup> For example, Pollock's 1935 collection of "Underworld slang" defines Camp as a "meeting place of male sexual perverts where they dress as females" (Pollock 1935:unpaginated).

Camp.” Sontag defines Camp as a sensibility rooted in love of artifice and exaggeration, as well as a vision of the world that emphasizes exaggerated style over content (Sontag 1964:515, 518). She theorizes Camp as a comedic counterpoint to High Culture’s focus on artistic “seriousness,” as well as a means for cognoscenti (largely homosexuals) to establish themselves as aristocrats of taste during a time when aristocracy no longer exists (ibid 526, 527).<sup>44</sup> While she does recognize that homosexuals have been Camp’s vanguard and most articulate audience, Sontag suggests that if they had not more or less invented Camp then another group would have (ibid 529). Following its publication, “Notes on Camp” received widespread acclaim and even featured in a December 1964 *Time* magazine article (White 1966:70). By popularizing her formulation of Camp while dismissing Isherwood’s text and ignoring earlier dictionary definitions, Sontag codifies an understanding of Camp that erases the breadth of its history and diminishes the role queers play in its construction.

Sontag’s proliferation of Camp occurred alongside a 1960s Pop Art movement, which created a context for the mainstreaming of Camp taste (Robertson 1996:120). Appearing in early 1960s New York with the works of Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, Pop Art appropriated the techniques and subject matter of consumer culture and popular advertising (Thomas 1999:989). Pop ideology rejected elitist notions of value ascribed by arbiters of dominant culture (particularly modernist traditions) and sought to democratize taste by declaring that everyday cultural currency and mass produced objects had aesthetic worth (Ross 1989:150). By rejecting modernist style, subverting the separation between kitsch and art, and elevating kitsch to “high art,” Pop artists paralleled Camp and its principles of being “committed to the marginal with a

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<sup>44</sup> For further consideration of how this type of Camp provides 1960s intellectuals with cultural power to establish themselves as tastemakers, see: Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 135-170.

commitment greater than the marginal merits” (Thomas 1999:990, Booth 1983:18). Because Pop art shared a similar sensibility with Camp, the Pop movement received homophobic backlash accusing it of taking part in a homosexual conspiracy to infiltrate mass culture (Thomas 1999:992). As Pop became more mainstreamed, it seemingly merged with aspects of a Camp sensibility (Robertson 1996:120). The resulting mixture of Pop and Camp produced what some scholars suggest is a sanitized version, dubbed “pop camp,” “residual camp,” and/or “Camp lite.” (Ross 1989:150, Meyer 1994:5, Rudnick and Andersen 1989:95).<sup>45</sup> Pop camp became a way for mainstream audiences (largely heterosexual) to take on qualities of Camp (irony, love of style and artifice) while potentially ignoring how Camp historically operated in queer subcultures.

In response to Sontag’s essay, queer scholars accuse her of appropriating Camp, erasing the role homosexuals play in its creation and deployment, and “outing” a once minority discourse to straight audiences.<sup>46</sup> These scholars frame Camp as a (sub)cultural phenomenon that develops directly from the lived experience of homophobic oppression (Babuscio 1980:40, Bergman 1993:92, Bérubé 1990:86, Britton 1999:142, Bronski 1984:42, Case 1999:189, Chauncey 1994:290, LaValley 1995:63, Long 1989:53, Medhurst 1997:275, Melly 1970:160-1, Meyer 1994:5, Muñoz 1999:120, Newton 1972:105, Sedgwick 1990:156). However, these

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<sup>45</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of “pop camp,” “residual camp,” and “Camp lite,” see: Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 135-170; Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).; Moe Meyer, “Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp,” in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (New York: Routledge. 1994), 5-18.; and Paul Rudnick and Kurt Andersen, “The Irony Epidemic: How Camp Changed From Lush to Lite, Why David Letterman is a God, Our Field Guide to the Unwittingly Hip and the Fashionably Unfashionable, and an Introduction to the Tiny Conversational Art of Air Quotes,” *Spy* (March 1989): 92-98.

<sup>46</sup> For critiques of Sontag’s “appropriation” of Camp, see: Sue-Ellen Case, “Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic,” in *Camp Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 185-199.; Moe Meyer, “Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp,” in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (New York: Routledge. 1994), 5-18.; D.A. Miller, “Sontag’s Urbanity,” *October* 49 (Summer 1989): 91-101.

authors do not necessarily agree on a singular definition for Camp, and even within this body of scholarship, ascertaining exactly what Camp *is* can be difficult. This confusion arises, in part, because Camp operates in multiple forms that vary according to the sociohistorical moments in which queers deploy them. Therefore, while queer scholars agree that Camp's authorship is in some way directly tied to homosexuality, they disagree on the questions of Camp's definition and political efficacy. To make sense of how these scholars understand Camp, I first analyze and then problematize considerations of Camp as the product of a "gay sensibility." Next, I discuss both the consistent qualities of what can be called "Camp," as well as the various forms in which Camp appears. Last, I analyze how these different forms relate to queer politics. Through this process, I locate an historical framework for situating how Camp functions on *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

With regard to Camp's authorship, some scholars suggest that the phenomenon is created by a "gay sensibility," or a shared perception of the world that is "coloured, shaped, directed, and defined by the fact of one's gayness" (Babuscio 1980:40). According to this logic, because queer people face similar social experiences vis-à-vis homophobia, they develop a collective consciousness different from that of heterosexuals. This queer perception of the world varies according to time and place, reflecting the specific social circumstances of the era. As a response to heteronormativity, queers develop methods for understanding and navigating their social marginalization. In its different deployments, Camp provides queer people with ways to make sense of, respond to, and undermine the social categories that oppress them (Bérubé 1990:86, Chauncey 1994:290, Dyer 1999:110, Halperin 2012:200, Medhurst 1997:276, Muñoz 1999:120). In this sense, Camp is not a person or thing per se but a relationship between individuals,



situations, activities, and gayness (Babuscio 1980:40-41, Medhurst 1997:276, Newton 1972:105).

While these analyses of Camp have been invaluable for the study of queer cultures, communities, and histories, their definitions for the phenomenon frequently rely upon some unsupportable presuppositions. In defining Camp as the product of a “gay sensibility,” some scholars essentialize a gay subjectivity that is ungendered, unclassed, and unraced (Babuscio 1980:40, Chauncey 1994:290, Dyer 1999:110, Meyer 1994:1). This construction can normalize Camp as (and restrict it to) a white upper-class gay male practice, while also universalizing this limited lived experience as representative of “gay sensibility” bar none. As a result of this essentializing, Camp scholarship predominantly focuses on white gay men. Because identities operate intersectionally, scholars cannot isolate “queerness” as the sole subjectivity from which Camp emerges without also (inadvertently) normalizing dominant identity categories. While the majority of Camp scholarship post-Sontag has been predominantly an upper-class white gay male discourse, brilliant scholarly considerations of Camp expand the conversation to consider lesbian uses of Camp (Brickman 2017, Case 1999, Davy 1994, Graham 1995, Halberstam 2005, Koller 2009, Morrill 1994, Nielsen 2016, Vänskä 2007), heterosexual women’s uses of Camp (Crosby and Lynn 2017, Morreale 1998, Robertson 1996), Nicki Minaj’s use of Camp (McMillan 2014), Chicana/o and Latina/o versions of Camp (Contreras 2005, García 2006, Muñoz 1999, Rodriguez y Gibson 2014), Camp in relationship to Hip-Hop (Mazur 2015), Camp deployments in Spanish cultures (Garlinger and Song 2004), and Camp uses in Chinese cinema (Ka-Hang 2012).

Although Camp differs in its deployments, the phenomenon generally maintains four key features. Through irony/incongruity, theatricality/parody, humor, and aestheticism, Camp turns

an identity laden with shame (homosexuality) into a positive subjectivity, thereby helping to relieve the stigma associated with gayness (Bérubé 1990:86-7, Halperin 2012:186, Newton 1972:110). Camp takes as its subject matter incongruity/irony in response to heteronormative society's defining queers by a stigmatized position of social and moral deviancy (Babuscio 1980:41, Newton 1972:106-107). Homosexuals often utilize Camp as an ironic commentary on their Othered positions in society. Theatricality is Camp's style, with Camp reveling in exaggeration and the notion of life-as-theater (Babuscio 1980:44, Newton 1972:107). Camp's theatricality develops in part from the need for queers to "pass" as heterosexual. Because masquerading as straight often functions as a form of survival in homophobic societies, queers learn to hide their identities through calculated self-presentation. As a form of role-playing, Camp frequently parodies heteronormative gender and sex roles (Babuscio 1980:41-49, Bérubé 1990:86, Case 1999:189, Flinn 1999:400, Newton 1972:106-111). For example, female impersonation and butch/femme aesthetics display the performativity of gender such that masculinity, femininity, and identity itself become signifiers that any individual may perform through role-playing (Butler 1990:137, Case 1999:197, Newton 1972:109). Camp's theatricality thus transforms the "natural" into the performative, thereby disrupting essentialized identity categories. Humor is Camp's strategy, with the aim of making a queer audience laugh at their incongruous position instead of crying (Babuscio 1980:47, Bérubé 1990:86, Halperin 2012:186-7, Newton 1972:109). Often ironic, sarcastic, and even hostile, Camp's bitter wit neutralizes the sting of homophobia by embracing and mocking homosexuals' stigmatized identities, thereby undercutting rage through derision (Babuscio 1980:48, Chauncey 1994:290, Newton 1972:111).

Camp's aestheticism operates in three interrelated ways: as a view of art, a view of life, and a practical tendency in people or things (Babuscio 1980:42). As a view of art, Camp operates

in opposition to puritan morality and heterosexist aesthetic standards (ibid 42). Camp emphasizes an exaggerated, ostentatious and outrageous style that values “bad taste” and refuses the distinction between true art and cheap imitation (Shugart and Waggoner 2008:34). By changing what dominant culture considers “natural” and “normal” into style and artifice, Camp deconstructs normative categories of identity and art, aiming to change the ordinary into the spectacular (Babuscio 1980:44, Bronski 1984:42). As a view of life, Camp values style as a form of consciousness (Babuscio 1980:43). Just as Camp values life-as-theater and role-playing, so too does Camp revel in the sensuousness of identity construction. Relatedly, as a practical tendency in things or people, Camp emphasizes style as a means of self-projection, an expression of emotional tone, and a conveyor of meaning (ibid 43). In the decorative arts and cultivation of taste, queers find ways of constructing a positive identity and of exercising control over their environment (ibid 44).

While these four qualities are central attributes to Camp generally, the multifaceted phenomenon operates variously as a performative role (“a/the Camp”), as a social practice among queers (“camping/camping about/a camp”), as a form of coded language (“camp talk”), and as a queer relationship to dominant cultural products (“Camp”). As a performative role, “a Camp” is the central figure in Camp ideology (Newton 1972:105). This figure is a witty homosexual and “clown” whose campy productions and performances create a positive homosexual identity often by making light out of homosexuals’ oppression (Newton 1972:110-111). Camp queens accept and flaunt their homosexuality, using their flippant wit to entertain others at homosexual gatherings such as bars or parties (ibid 110). By fully embracing their queer identities, Camp figures neutralize the stigma associated with gayness, make the identity laughable, and undercut those who refuse to accept homosexuality (ibid 111).

“Camping” or “camping about” is a distinctive way of behaving that queers develop to create a sense of collective identification (Bérubé 1990:86, Dyer 1999:110). This interactive process involves joking with an audience through sarcastic and (sometimes) hostile humor (Bérubé 1990:86, Newton 1972:111). In camping, the Camp queen uses her verbal agility to “read” all challengers and cut them down to size. In his discussion of “camping about,” Richard Dyer states that the practice is used specifically by gay men to create a sense of collective identity. While I do not disagree that gay men have predominately used camping historically, I would avoid framing the practice as only a gay male phenomenon. As discussed earlier, this type of essentializing can normalize an unclassed, unraced, gay-male-centric subjectivity. Instead, I discuss the practice as “queer” in order to recognize how camping/camping about can operate among multiple lines of identity in relationship to queerness. The process of camping/camping about can change in different queer contexts depending upon the group’s intersectional identities.

As a form of coded language, “camp talk” or “camp slang” originates in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a specifically homosexual gesture used for communicating publicly about one’s personal or sexual life without fear of retribution (Bronski 1984:43, Core 1984:9). Forced to mask their gay identities while in heteronormative places, queers developed coded language that gave common words a second meaning only they could recognize (Bérubé 1990:86, Chauncey 1994:286). For example, when discussing their sexuality publicly, some gay men would often use the word “fish” in reference to women. While a public conversation revolving around one’s distaste for fish appears to be about food, cultural insiders could decipher the lingo using their knowledge and recognize the double meaning of the speech. (Chauncey 1994:286). Using this

coded argot, queers carved out spaces for themselves in straight societies and developed subcultural communities.<sup>47</sup>

As a relationship to cultural art forms, Camp provides queers with methods of reformulating dominant culture by making it represent and respond to their lives (Bronski 1984:41, Creekmur and Doty 1995:2-3, Farmer 2000:111, Padva 2000:237, Smelik 1998:141, Wolf 2013:289). This process works both as a form of reading texts as Camp (regardless of whether those texts intended to be Camp) and as a form of hiding Camp within dominant cultural products. With regard to the former, Camp provides queer people with “a characteristically gay way of handling the values, images, and products of the dominant culture through irony, exaggeration, trivialization, theatricalisation, and an ambivalent making fun of and out of the serious and respectable” (Dyer 1986:178). Camp provides queer audiences with collective ways of enjoying the products of a dominant culture that excludes them. At the same time, queer producers of popular culture often hide Camp codes within dominant cultural forms so that those with insider knowledge may decipher the double narratives hidden in plain sight from (frequently heterosexual) cultural outsiders (Chauncey 1994:288).

While scholars agree that homosexuals use Camp to define a positive identity, they disagree on Camp’s political nature. Some scholars situate Camp as a pre-gay liberation practice and suggest that the phenomenon is a- or proto-political because it operates within and does not seek to destabilize an oppressive heteronormative system (Babuscio 1980:48, Bergman 1993:108, Britton 1999:138, Newton 1972:111). According to this perspective, Camp subverts and reinforces a heteronormative sex-gender system because it allows queers to play with

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<sup>47</sup> For additional considerations of “camp talk” from a specifically linguistic perspective, see: Keith Harvey, “Translating Camp Talk: Gay Identities and Cultural Transfer,” *The Translator* 4, no. 2 (1998): 295-320. and Keith Harvey, “Describing camp talk: language/pragmatics/politics,” *Language and Literature* 9, no. 3 (2000): 240-260.

normative gender tropes without actually dismantling the stereotypes. Some scholars, such as Daniel Harris, suggest that because “oppression and camp are inextricably linked,” Camp will “die” as queer people gain civil rights and social acceptance (Harris 1997:35). Other scholars disagree and suggest that Camp is and will always be an inherently political practice through which homosexuals signify their identities (Bronski 1984:43, Meyer 1994:11). From this perspective, Camp does and will exist beyond gay liberation, changing with the sociocultural and historical context in which it is deployed. For example, during the 1980s Queer Nation utilized Camp in its zaps and public demonstrations in order to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS, to challenge the Reagan administration’s (and local government’s) refusal to acknowledge the crisis, and to effect tangible public policy changes through organized, in-your-face tactics. The problem with these perspectives is that in determining whether Camp *is* or *is not* “political,” scholars often assume a universal definition for “politics” that ignores how what counts as “political” necessarily changes in each sociohistorical moment. What someone deems “radical” in a pre-gay liberation context may lose its political efficacy when visibility politics and “outness” become a gauge for activism. Framing Camp as always subversive fails to consider how developments in queer visibility, queer economies, and neoliberal queer political ideologies significantly alter Camp. As homosexuality develops new sociocultural meanings and (certain) queers gain more political, economic, and cultural influence, Camp practices necessarily change to reflect this new situation.

As this literature review demonstrates, Camp studies provides *RuPaul’s Drag Race* scholars with innumerable ways to analyze the show. Camp literature spans multiple disciplines, includes diverse research methods, and incorporates intersectional cultural theories. However a scholar chooses to study *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, Camp scholarship provides authors with

invaluable research methods and theories. Thus far, scholars analyze Camp on *Drag Race* primarily in terms of aesthetics, humor, and parody (Morrison 2014, Perez 2017, Rodriguez y Gibson 2014). These authors analyze examples from the aired episodes in order to discuss how Camp reifies or challenges normative identity representations. These texts do a wonderful job incorporating a Camp analysis, but I want to demonstrate how critical Camp analysis can extend beyond content analysis and issues of representation.

While my dissertation cannot possibly account for every manner in which Camp theory can benefit *Drag Race* Studies, I do want to emphasize how this literature provides a necessary context for understanding the show. *RuPaul's Drag Race* is a distinctly queer product, created by gay men and starring queer drag queens (gay men of various gender identities and trans women). As a result, *Drag Race* showcases queer cultural practices and identities that derive from a longer queer history. In particular, Camp permeates every aspect of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, from the show's humor to the aesthetics and identity performances. Audiences unfamiliar with Camp may not understand how the practice operates, which in turn may affect how these viewers interpret the show. Camp literature provides the historical and queer subcultural context necessary for more fully understanding *Drag Race's* queer features. Camp literature provides scholars with useful theories for analyzing *Drag Race* and contextualizing the show's features within a longer queer history. Scholars do themselves and their readers a disservice when they study this queer television show without a thorough understanding of Camp. To demonstrate this point, my dissertation conducts a critical Camp analysis of *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

### **Dissertation Methodology and Chapter Breakdown**

By combining content analysis and ethnographic research methods, I study the reality television show itself, the franchise's interactive elements, and the phenomenon's tangible

impacts on drag performers. I divide my dissertation into four chapters, each of which explores a different aspect of the *RuPaul's Drag Race* phenomenon. My first two chapters incorporate primarily content analysis methods. Over the past seven years, I have repeatedly watched *RuPaul's Drag Race*, studied Camp and *Drag Race* scholarship, and researched RuPaul's pre-*Drag Race* career. These materials provide both the theoretical foundation and evidence for Chapters One and Two. My latter two chapters incorporate primarily ethnographic research methods. Over the course of my fieldwork in Los Angeles, I participated in multiple interactive *Drag Race* events. During these events, I documented my observations through field notes, photographs, and digital recordings. At the same time, I conducted over seventy interviews with *Drag Race* superfans and Los Angeles-area drag performers. This research provides the primary data for Chapters Three and Four. Over the course of these four chapters, I analyze how the television show's use and representation of Camp translates into fan practices and tangible impacts on drag performers. I seek to understand the complexity of how the *RuPaul's Drag Race* phenomenon commodifies and markets the previously queer subcultural practices of Camp and drag for more mainstream audiences. Through my analysis, I demonstrate how scholarly understandings of the franchise's politics become much more complex when we analyze not only the television episodes but also the emerging franchise.

Chapter One analyzes how *RuPaul's Drag Race* uses intertextual Camp references to queer and popular culture. I study how the aired episodes feature encoded Camp references that activate memory differently for viewers. I suggest that audiences who possess queer cultural knowledge will experience memory activation and decode the Camp reference, but audiences without this knowledge will experience no memory activation. Drawing multiple examples from throughout the show's episodes, I analyze how *RuPaul's Drag Race* uses these encoded Camp



references to confer queer cultural status and capital. In particular, I demonstrate how RuPaul and *Drag Race* use Camp references pedagogically to educate viewers and self-referentially to build the show's own cultural legacy. Using RuPaul's recitation of Stephanie Yellowhair's "Excuse my beauty" as a case study, I ruminate on the political implications of the show's Camp referencing.

Chapter Two investigates how RuPaul and World of Wonder, through *RuPaul's Drag Race*, use Camp to build a commercial drag empire. Having established in Chapter One how the show deploys Camp to establish its own queer cultural value, I now explore how the franchise uses Camp to build an entire *Drag Race*-based economy. I use the term Camp Capitalism to describe the process by which RuPaul and World of Wonder create a drag empire that can confer economic and social capital. I study the show's episodes chronologically and examine in close detail exactly how this economy emerges instrumentally in two stages. I suggest that within Camp Capitalism's first stage, RuPaul slowly and strategically incorporates Camp into his marketing strategies in order to redefine "shameless" consumerism. This stage builds the audience's tolerance for RuPaul's brand of parodic Camp consumerism. In Camp Capitalism's second stage, RuPaul then teaches *Drag Race* contestants his marketing tactics, defines the contours of acceptable parody, and builds a *Drag Race*-based economy. This new, distinctly queer economy redefines value according to Camp. By analyzing exactly how RuPaul and World of Wonder use Camp to build and expand RuPaul's commercial drag empire, I set the stage for analyzing how fans consume Camp and how this economy impacts drag performers.

Chapter Three brings together themes from my first two chapters, as I observe how fans interact with this *Drag Race*-based economy at RuPaul's DragCon. This chapter incorporates participant observation and short-form interview data from my three years attending RuPaul's

weekend-long convention in Los Angeles. I study four particular aspects of RuPaul's DragCon: the featured panels, the vendors, the fan presence and participation, and RuPaul's keynote addresses. By studying these different features, I seek to understand how this event nuances scholarly understandings of the franchise's political potential. I suggest that the panels often provide more diverse representations of drag cultures and histories, opportunities for non-queen performers to gain social capital, and space for radically queer political discussions. By studying how the vendors sell Camp commodities, I connect my theory of *Drag Race's* Camp Capitalism to tangible marketing and business practices. My interviews with fans provide data on how these LGBTQ+ and straight participants consume the culture and investment time and money into their experiences. By comparing RuPaul's three keynote addresses and the accompanying question-and-answer sessions, I analyze the changing marketing strategies Ru uses in connecting with fans. Through these different observations, I demonstrate how the *RuPaul's Drag Race* franchise has become a complex and often contradictory phenomenon that demands more nuanced scholarly research questions and methods.

Chapter Four addresses how the *Drag Race* phenomenon tangibly impacts the lives of three Los Angeles-based drag artists. This chapter presents long-form interviews with local drag queens Dani T and Cake Moss, as well as *RuPaul's Drag Race* Season Seven contestant Jasmine Masters. I present these conversations in a long-form narrative style, with very minor edits, in order to privilege the perspectives of my informants. I provide accompanying analysis and synthesis to connect my informants' experiences back to my dissertation's overarching themes. Through these conversations, my informants discuss how the *Drag Race* phenomenon provides them with different forms of social and economic capital. These artists discuss how *Drag Race* impacts their ability to earn money and their participation in institutionalized drag networks (e.g.,

where they can perform and how they can gain more status). By reflecting on the changes they have observed within drag communities post-*Drag Race*, my informants identify how the franchise is changing drag cultures locally. They identify how *Drag Race* influences younger drag artists, changes the demographics at their performance venues, and impacts how fans and audiences engage with them. Through these interviews, my informants identify the complex and nuanced benefits and drawback that arise because of *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

With my Conclusion, I drag these overarching themes together and reflect on the political implications of the *RuPaul's Drag Race* phenomenon. I discuss how my research can push *Drag Race* Studies in new directions, both in terms of incorporating ethnographic research methods and asking more complex research questions. I discuss how I will develop this project for future research, and I end my dissertation by ruminating on what political obligations scholars and viewers of *RuPaul's Drag Race* have when they consume and analyze this show. Through this dissertation research, I hope to challenge how scholars and viewers understand and approach *RuPaul's Drag Race*, to foreground the voices and perspectives of my informants, and to reflect on the political obligations that come with consuming drag cultures and histories through this reality television phenomenon.

# Chapter One

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## “Excuse my beauty” Camp Referencing and Memory Activation on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*

From the driver’s seat of a moving police vehicle, a cameraman films cars on the road ahead. Text superimposed onto the filmed footage informs viewers that this segment of the reality television show *Cops* will focus on a “public nuisance call.” As the cameraman shifts focus to the white male police officer behind the wheel, the officer explains the “situation.” He says, “We have a little group of guys that are cross-dressers that kind of sell themselves for money to buy liquor and alcohol, and they kind of just hang out in the area, in the alleys....They’ll drink right there on the property or in the alley of the local convenience store, causing problems, harassing customers, panhandling.” Over the police radio, a voice informs the officer that the group has been accused of stealing “just some balloons.” When the officer speaks to the cameraman, however, he relays a list of accusations that includes drinking in a parking lot, trying to solicit business, stealing property, and destroying property from a car lot.

The officer drives into a parking lot, in which a group of three individuals stand and speak with a second officer already on the scene. The two officers ask the group for identification. One member of the trio, a woman dressed in a black shirt and blue jean shorts, stands with her hands pressed against her thighs. She is Stephanie Yellowhair, a Navajo trans woman. She looks at the ground and away from the officers, avoiding eye contact. The first officer instructs her to “come here” and asks if she has identification. She responds “no” and says that she lost her ID. In the *Cops* footage, she never gives the officers her name or any form of identification. The officer tells her to turn around and lock her hands behind her head. She complies. Holding his hand on top of her clasped hands, the officer interrogates Stephanie about

her lack of identification. He asks what she was doing in the area; she says that she was waiting for her cousin. He asks why she was previously arrested; she says “attitude.” As she speaks, Stephanie uses one hand to shield her face from the sun. The officer tells her to lower her. She complies but vocally protests, saying that she does not want to get sunburned. Sarcastically, the officer asks why, then, is she wearing short shorts? With her forehead scrunched and eyebrows raised in seeming annoyance, she sassily responds, “Because I like tans on my legs, not on my face. Am I covering my legs? No. I’m covering my face. Why are you grilling me?” Stephanie explains to the officer that she and her friend wanted to borrow a man’s mirror in order to do their makeup. After the man refused, Stephanie and her friend painted each other’s face without a mirror. The officer rudely replies, “It looks like you did a better job,” insinuating that Stephanie looks unattractive. In a sing-song voice, she tells the officer to “shut up,” as she tilts her head downward, raises her eyebrows, and stares at the officer. A second officer misgenders her as “Steven” and tells her to put her hands behind her back. The officers handcuff Stephanie and tell her that because she has a warrant out for her arrest, they will be taking her to jail.

Now handcuffed and sitting in the back of a police vehicle, Stephanie sighs, closes her eyes, and opens her mouth slowly. Turning toward the officer but avoiding eye contact, she tilts her head down and to the right. In a lowered voice, she asks, “Um, can you release me?” As Stephanie speaks, she opens her eyes and looks to her right, directing her gaze toward the ground. The officer asks, rhetorically, if she wants to be let go. Avoiding eye contact with the officer, she says in a louder voice, “Yes, please. I’m sorry for everything.” As the officer tells Stephanie that he will be checking on the warrant for her arrest, she rolls her eyes. She tells the officer that she “won’t be in the streets no more.” The officer asks if she will give her word to “take off out of here and not stick around.” She tells the officer, “I’ll leave, okay. Whatever, I’ll

do it, I'll be a boy for you." Her voice lowers slightly as she says that she will "be a boy" for the officer. In response, the officer tells Stephanie that he will "see what we can do, Steven."

Avoiding eye contact with the officer, she says with defiance, "I won't work my looks no more.

Excuse my beauty!"



A siren blares and RuPaul's voiceover signals the start of another week's challenge. The drag queens, who have been sitting around the workroom discussing the previous week's events, now move toward and look up at a television screen. As the contestants huddle around the screen, RuPaul's image appears. Wearing one of her signature bright blonde wigs and a black dress, RuPaul delivers a video message filled with references to the popular television sitcoms *Friends*, *Designing Women*, *The Golden Girls*, *Sex and the City*, *The Jeffersons*, *Will and Grace*, *Absolutely Fabulous*, and *Alice* :

Friends, you stand on the shoulder pads of a long line of designing women: golden girls who have traveled down the road and back again. So, whether you're looking for Mr. Big or just working for Mr. Jefferson, America's Next Drag Superstar needs the will and grace to do whatever it takes to be absolutely fabulous. Now, kiss my grits.

As the video message ends and the contestants laugh, RuPaul enters the workroom dressed in male drag. Reciting dialogue from *The Comeback*, Ru greets the contestants with "hello, hello, hello." He introduces the week's mini-challenge by informing the queens that they are "all under arrest." The footage cuts to an individual interview session with contestant Latrice Royale, a black gay man who has spoken on the show about his traumatic incarceration. In the interview, Royale laughs and says to the camera, "*What* are you talkin' about, girl?" When the footage cuts back to the workroom, RuPaul explains that the queens will pose for a "memorable mugshot" photoshoot in front of a booking background. Working in pairs, the contestants must

paint their partner’s face and transform themselves into outrageous arrestees—all while handcuffed to each other. In an individual interview, Royale tells the camera with a smile, “I have been to prison. I don’t plan on going into no more handcuffs.”

The “pit crew,” two underwear-clad muscular men, enter wearing black sunglasses, black boots, black vests that feature “police” written on the back, and black hats that feature fake police badges on the front. They carry batons and an assortment of handcuffs, which they attach to the duos. Footage of the contestants dragging themselves follows. Some queens choose “glamorous” dresses and well-put-together makeup, while others paint on fake black eyes, missing teeth, and running mascara. The scene switches to the mugshot area, where the contestants hold a booking placard that reads, “Tuckahoe Cnty. Women’s Penal Facility. L8YB0I-4EVA.” While the queens stand in front of the booking background, RuPaul shouts out commentary that includes various prison-related references. As contestant Madame LaQueer poses, Ru says, “Honey, you’ve got me scared straight,” referencing the 1978 prison documentary *Scared Straight*. When drag queen Milan takes her photograph, Ru recites lyrics from the reality show *Cops*’ theme song: “Bad boys, whatchu gonna do?” To Latrice Royale, Ru shouts, “If the wig don’t fit, you can’t acquit,” a play on defense attorney Johnnie Cochran’s “If it doesn’t fit, you must acquit” line from OJ Simpson’s 1995 homicide trial. As contestant Sharon Needles poses in a Confederate flag-adorned tank top, Ru shouts “Deliverance,” referencing the 1972 film about murderous hillbillies. While contestant Chad Michaels poses, Ru says, “Attica,” a reference to the New York State maximum security prison. As a still image of Michaels’ photograph appears, RuPaul in a voiceover imitates Stephanie Yellowhair and shouts, “Excuse my beauty!”



Two scenes from vastly different reality television shows, connected by the same phrase, “Excuse my beauty!” After her episode of *Cops* aired in early 2007, Stephanie’s footage from the show went “viral,” particularly among drag performers and online queer websites. Drag icon Lady Bunny posted the footage to her blog on June 5, 2007, which circulated the phrase among her followers (Bunny 2007). Stephanie then received wider circulation from a July 28, 2007 post on the popular queer gossip blog *Dlisted*. I first learned about Stephanie from *Dlisted*, which also happens to be RuPaul’s self-described favorite website (“Reunited!” 2009). *Dlisted*’s creator Michael K included the *Cops* footage, along with commentary that both celebrated Stephanie and mocked her physical appearance (Michael K 2014). After this initial posting, Michael K then began consistently using “Excuse my beauty” as a catchphrase and tagline to mock celebrities whose appearances he found amusing. Stephanie’s phrase circulated widely through these and other online LGBTQ media. By 2010, New York City-based drag performer Peppermint, who would eventually compete on Season Nine of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, released a song and accompanying music video titled, “Excuse My Beauty.” The video’s description on YouTube states that Peppermint’s song is “inspired by the classic viral video clip from *Cops*” (MissPeppermint 2010). Through various queer media, Stephanie’s phrase (if not always her name) was transmitted from the scene of her arrest all the way to *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.

When I first watched the Season Four “Queens Behind Bars” episode of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and heard Ru’s recitation of “Excuse my beauty,” I immediately thought of Stephanie Yellowhair. I recalled the footage of her sitting in the back of a police car, sassily speaking back to power and police harassment. Because I knew the phrase’s origin, I decoded Ru’s reference to Stephanie without his having to explicitly name her. This recognition gave me a sense of connection to RuPaul. Both gay men who love queer and popular culture, Ru and I shared, in this



moment, a queer cultural knowledge. My ability to identify Ru's reference revealed two things to me. First, Ru's recitation marked Stephanie and her phrase as having a type of queer cultural status. Ru had heard the phrase or seen the *Cops* footage at some point in his life, and he deemed "Excuse my beauty" worthy of remembrance through repeated performance. Second, I possessed a certain queer cultural capital that allowed me to decode Ru's reference. This cultural capital, my knowledge of Stephanie, allowed me to identify Ru's recitation. We shared a set of Camp references that provided us with insider cultural knowledge and connected us as gay men. I knew that not every viewer of *RuPaul's Drag Race* possessed this queer cultural capital. Upon hearing "Excuse my beauty," many viewers would not decode Ru's reference and remember Stephanie. Even though I and *Drag Race* fans around the world watched the same episode, our viewing experiences differed greatly because the show activated our memories differently. Ru's recitation of Stephanie Yellowhair's "Excuse my beauty" presents one example of how *RuPaul's Drag Race* uses encoded Camp references.

As I argue in this chapter, *RuPaul's Drag Race* contains multiple encoded Camp references that, when decoded by viewers, confer queer cultural status onto the referenced material. Decoding these Camp references requires that the audience possess a queer cultural capital (knowledge of the source materials). When viewers have this knowledge, Camp references on *Drag Race* activate the audience's memories. As the "Excuse my beauty" example demonstrates, viewers familiar with Stephanie's phrase will experience some form of memory activation while watching the "Queens Behind Bars" episode. Ru's reference will activate knowledgeable viewers' remembrance of the phrase—they may recall Stephanie and her *Cops* appearance specifically, Peppermint's song/music video, or another iteration of the phrase. Audiences unfamiliar with "Excuse my beauty" will not experience the same mnemonic

activation when watching *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Because these viewers do not possess this queer cultural capital, they cannot decode the Camp reference. This situation results in a type of oblivescence, wherein viewers “forget” Stephanie.<sup>48</sup> As a result of this oblivescence, the Camp reference remains encoded and does not confer queer cultural status onto Stephanie. These processes of memory activation and oblivescence, which characterize the experience of watching *RuPaul's Drag Race* and heighten my fascination with the show, also raise significant ethical questions. By analyzing how the show's Camp references activate memory differently for diverse audiences, I want to consider the political implications of remembering the queer individuals, cultures, and histories encoded within *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

With this chapter, I explore how *Drag Race* uses encoded Camp references to activate memory and confer queer cultural status—if viewers possess the queer cultural capital necessary for the decoding process. I first apply theories of memory to Camp scholarship in order to demonstrate how Camp is a form of queer social memory. I demonstrate how queer social groups historically use Camp as a form of social memory that transmits queer cultural histories and practices. I argue that this cultural transmission happens, in large part, through Camp references that require mnemonic activation. Through this historical context, I emphasize how LGBTQ

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<sup>48</sup> In using the term “oblivescence,” I draw from Walter Melion and Susanne Kuchler's discussion of “forgetting,” which I discuss in more detail later in this chapter. Discussions of oblivescence or “forgetting” are prevalent throughout Memory Studies. Memory theorists/scholars discuss different forms of forgetting as they relate to remembrance. These forms range from violent forms of forced forgetting (often instituted by governments or dominant systems of power) to more benign forms of forgetting that arise from lack of cultural knowledge. In my discussion of oblivescence/forgetting, I draw primarily from Kuchler and Melion's theorization of recollecting and forgetting as allied mnemonic functions (Kuchler and Melion 1991:7). These scholars discuss forgetting and remembrance as they relate to image consumption/interpretation, which as I suggest later, directly relates to interpretations of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. This form of forgetting is neither violent nor forced but, most often, results because audiences lack necessary queer cultural knowledge. My use of oblivescence, then, comes from a very specific theoretical trajectory and does not encompass the totality of discussions on forgetting/oblivescence within memory scholarship.

people developed coded Camp references in response to oppression. Then, I look specifically at *RuPaul's Drag Race*. I situate my project within the current literature that analyzes *Drag Race's* intertextual features. In doing so, I argue that *Drag Race* incorporates a very specific, definitively queer form of intertextuality (Camp) that should not be conflated with other postmodern cultural analyses of intertextuality. By putting Moe Meyer's analysis of Camp parody into conversation with Stuart Hall's theory of encoding/decoding, I develop a framework for analyzing how Camp referencing works on *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

Then, I analyze how RuPaul intentional encodes Camp references into his performances and *RuPaul's Drag Race*. When decoded by viewers, these Camp references confer queer cultural status onto the referenced materials. Using Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, I suggest that the decoding process requires that viewers possess queer cultural capital. If audiences share knowledge with RuPaul, then they can decode the Camp references and receive recognition from RuPaul as queer cultural insiders. If these viewers do not possess this knowledge, they can still gain queer cultural capital by learning the references. In this way, RuPaul and *RuPaul's Drag Race* uses Camp references pedagogically. The aired television episodes serve an educational function because they embed multiple queer histories, identities, and cultures into the show. If they learn to decode the Camp references, then viewers can accumulate queer cultural capital—a stand-in for real money, which in some cases can actually be monetized. After laying out these foundational features of Camp referencing, I then study how *RuPaul's Drag Race* uses Camp references self-referentially in order to build the show's queer cultural legacy. I then analyze how RuPaul uses Camp pedagogically on *Drag Race*. Through this discussion, I suggest that memory activation plays a crucial role in the show's queer pedagogy. I end this chapter by discussing the political implications of Camp memory on

*RuPaul's Drag Race*. In particular, I discuss the consequences of “forgetting” Stephanie Yellowhair. Through this project, I demonstrate the sociocultural and political significance of unpacking Camp memory activation on *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

### **Understanding Camp Through Memory Theory**

Analyzing Camp scholarship through the lens of memory theory helps both to clarify key debates within Camp literature and to develop a framework for analyzing *RuPaul's Drag Race*. As I discussed in my Introduction, Camp scholars frequently differentiate between Queer Camp and non-Queer Camp (an appropriated version often labeled “pop camp” or “Camp Lite”). Using social anthropologist and memory scholar Paul Connerton’s theories of social memory, I analyze how Queer Camp operates as a different form of social memory from non-Queer Camp. In *How Societies Remember*, Connerton seeks to understand how social groups convey and sustain collective memories. He develops a framework for understanding social memory as a dynamic performative process of knowledge production and transmission. Connerton argues that participants in any collective social group share common memories that construct the group’s identity. These shared images of the past often serve as collective, historical justifications that legitimate how the group’s present social order operates. However, because social groups consist of multiple generations with different experiences of the past, the same social group can develop diverse, often contradictory sets of social memories. Rather than a singular “truth” passed down through each successive generation, social memory produces multiple understandings of the present through acts of transfer (Connerton 1989:3).

In order to study these acts of transfer as a particular type of performative memory, Connerton distinguishes three distinct classes of memory: personal, cognitive, and habit. He defines personal memory as “those acts of remembering that take as their object one’s life

history, [which are] located in and refer to a personal past” (ibid 22). Personal memories determine self-description, as one’s individual past largely determines self-knowledge. Cognitive memories refer to memories that in some way exist because of a past cognitive or sensory state. Unlike personal memories, cognitive memories do not require that one remembers the specific context of learning, only that they met, experienced, or learned the object of memory at some point in the past. Examples of cognitive memories include jokes, stories, or logical truths. Habit-memories require only “having the capacity to reproduce a certain performance” and do not require that people remember how, when, or why they acquire such knowledge (ibid 22). Often, the fact of the performance is the only way that people recognize and demonstrate to others their remembrance of habit-memory. Connerton looks at “commemorative ceremonies” and “bodily practices” as two types of performative rituals that convey and sustain group knowledge through habit-memory. Connerton defines commemorative ceremonies as performative ritual re-enactments of socially significant moments from the past (ibid 72). These ceremonies cultivate habit-memory by encoding appropriate bodily postures, gestures, movements, and linguistic utterances through their re-enactments (ibid 58). As participants learn the rituals and continuously perform them, they internalize and maintain habitual memory, which becomes a “mnemonics of the body” (ibid 72, 74). Bodily practices similarly encode habit-memories through daily re-enacted rituals. By repeating bodily practices, such as cultural gestures, social groups internalize collective social memories and transfer cultural and social values (ibid 83-88, 94).

With Connerton’s understanding of social memory in mind, I propose that non-Queer Camp functions as a different form of social memory from Queer Camp. Although both forms of Camp involve collective social groups, what connects these individuals differs markedly for the

distinct forms of Camp. Scholars who discuss forms of non-Queer Camp emphasize a necessary detachment between the Camp audience and the Camp object. Susan Sontag suggests that Camp objects are often old-fashioned or out-of-date because time/distance provides the detachment necessary for celebrating failed seriousness (Sontag 1964:524). Because audiences in the present no longer have the same moral attachment to objects from the past, these contemporary viewers can appreciate the Camp object instead of becoming frustrated by the object's failure. Andrew Ross further suggests that a "camp effect" occurs when products of an earlier mode of production become available in the present for redefinition according to contemporary codes of taste (Ross 1989:139). In Ross's formulation, Camp objects generally have a historical association with a power that is now in decline or no longer existent (ibid 140). By liberating these objects from disdain and neglect, Camp celebrates them anew and rediscovers "history's waste" (ibid 151). Through this process, Camp operates within its own kind of economy wherein discarded materials initially excluded from serious high culture attain value (ibid 151).

According to this logic, any object from the past could potentially be claimed by a Camp sensibility, depending upon the Camp audience's predilections. In both Ross and Sontag's formulations, Camp audiences are primarily cognoscenti (people considered connoisseurs of fine art). Cognoscenti in the 1960s do not necessarily share a collective marginalized group identity or similar lived experiences, outside their desired role as tastemakers. Instead, these individuals are connected by virtue of their shared appreciation for the Camp object and their desire to maintain cultural power of taste making. Camp in this regard does not operate as a collective social memory transferred through successive generations. Instead, Camp disrupts a cohesive, linear transmission of objects and memories, instead retrieving past objects that are not part of the cognoscenti's own collective history.

By contrast, Queer Camp develops from collective queer social groups whose individual subjects share similar-yet-distinct experiences of homophobic oppression.<sup>49</sup> I choose to use the label “queer social groups” here to describe the communities who created Camp in response to homophobic oppression. Other identity labels such as “homosexual” or “Invert” could, perhaps, more accurately reflect the available language from that particular time period. In keeping “queer,” I want to maintain the term’s use as a nebulous umbrella label that recognizes how these communities included many different non-normative identities. As previously discussed, these lived experiences are not monolithic and differ greatly depending upon each queer subject’s intersectional identity. Therefore, while I refer to collective “queer social groups” in my discussion of how Camp functions mnemonically, I also recognize that labeling these groups in such a way can seemingly belie the fundamental fissures and distinct features within queer communities. Additionally, not all individuals who would describe themselves as “queer” utilize and/or appreciate Camp. Thus, the label “queer social groups” ought to be understood not as describing a cohesive LGBTQ community but functioning as a type of umbrella term that refers to queer individuals who utilize and/or appreciate Camp. At the same time, I want to emphasize that queer social groups created Camp in response to homophobic oppression and social marginalization. Camp developed as a form of survival in order to combat violence and trauma.

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<sup>49</sup> In my discussion, I have chosen to use the label “queer social groups” here to describe the communities who created Camp in response to homophobic oppression. Other identity labels such as “homosexual” or “Invert” could, perhaps, more accurately reflect the available language from that particular time period. In keeping “queer,” I want to maintain the term’s use as a nebulous umbrella label that recognizes how these communities included many different non-normative identities. At the same time, I want to be explicit in saying that these queer social groups created Camp in response to homophobic oppression and social marginalization. Camp develops as a form of survival, in order to combat violence and trauma. While I want to maintain queer’s unifying capacity, I also want us to remember this oppressive history. For considerations of how Camp relates more directly to sexology, Oscar Wilde, and Inversion, see: Gregory Bredbeck, “Narcissus in the Wilde: Textual cathexis and the historical origins of queer Camp,” in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, edited by Moe Meyer, 51-74. New York: Routledge. 1994.

While I want to maintain queer's unifying capacity, I also want us to remember this oppressive history. Understood in this way, queer social groups are, historically, connected by an appreciation for the Camp object that develops from similar-but-unique experiences of marginalization.

Camp frequently operates as a type of social memory within queer social groups.<sup>50</sup> Historically, as a form of communication, Camp talk could produce personal and/or cognitive memories. Queer individuals learned Camp's coded language and gestures in order to communicate secretly. When cultural insiders recognized one of these gestures and/or speech acts, their memories activated, informing them of a mutual queer connection between the individuals. This memory activation allowed queer individuals to communicate openly in homophobic spaces because Camp would not activate the memories of cultural outsiders. Thus, learning Camp's coded speech and gestures could operate as a personal memory (in the sense that Camp affected self-knowledge of one's own history and subjectivity), as well as a cognitive memory (in the sense that Camp functions as a form of queer cultural communication learned at some point). Camp must be passed down from different generations in order to function effectively. Therefore, in contrast to non-Queer Camp, Queer Camp derives from a shared sense of group identification and continues to exist because queer social groups transfer Camp as a subcultural practice to successive generations of queers.

Camp references hidden in dominant popular culture and Camp readings of heteronormative texts also function as types of cognitive memories. Similar to camp talk, Camp codes hidden within dominant cultural texts activate memories for queer social groups able to

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<sup>50</sup> From this point forward, I use the term "Camp" rather than "Queer Camp" in my discussion. The label "Queer Camp" is useful when differentiating the divergent fields of inquiry within Camp scholarship. At this point, I am talking exclusively about queer peoples' use of Camp and no longer add the qualifier.



recognize them. The codes activate memories of queer viewers, who then recognize their subcultural forms within the (seemingly) heteronormative cultural product. This process functions as a form of collective queer communication that hinges on the queer audience's ability to identify the code through mnemonic activation. Similarly, when queers read as campy a dominant cultural product that does not include hidden Camp codes, they participate in a collective social process of cognitive memory activation. Because Camp is "in the eye of the beholder," queer audiences must learn how to recognize potential campy qualities within a work of art. Camp's aestheticism, which celebrates the work's bad taste and/or outrageous style, hinges on a collective understanding that such qualities are valuable within a queer context. These standards are learned and transferred as cultural knowledge among queer social groups. For example, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* retains its cult Camp status among successive generations of queer social groups because the film has historically been identified as Camp and has been "passed down" as such by different queers. Queer individuals may not remember when they learned Camp aesthetic qualities or Camp codes, but their ability to recognize these different aspects requires collective cognitive memory.

The ritualized aspects of camping and Camp gender performance function as forms of habit-memory that produce a "mnemonics of the body" through bodily repetition. "Camping" or "camping about" is a way of behaving that queers develop to create a sense of collective identification. This practice frequently involves joking with or "reading" an audience, as well as using the "wrong" gendered pronouns (from a gender normative understanding) to refer to one another (e.g., gay men referring to one another as "girl"). While these practices do not exactly fit Connerton's definition for commemorative ceremonies, they do cultivate habit-memory through encoding appropriate bodily gestures and speech acts. The ability to "read" requires a certain

verbal wit that one develops and internalizes through repeated performance. Unlike the telling of a joke or story, which would be classified as a cognitive memory, the ability to “read” is demonstrated through the performance itself—a set joke is not learned; rather, through practice, the queer individual develops an ability to cut down another individual through verbal wit. Camping or camping about, then, functions as a ritualized queer performance wherein one must know the expected bodily practices and speech acts.

Understanding Camp’s gender performance through Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity demonstrates how the practice functions as a type of habit-memory. In her 1990 text *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that drag queens use words, acts, and gestures to manufacture and perform a gendered identity. Through stylized repetition of gendered acts, drag queens imitate gender and, through the process, reveal that gender itself is an imitative structure. Butler suggests that gender becomes a normalized social category through the “mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 1990:140). If individuals cultivate habit-memory through encoding appropriate bodily postures and gestures, then bodies encode gender in part through habit-memory. The repetition of gender’s imitative structure normalizes gender and creates a gendered mnemonics of the body, such that bodies have the capacity to reproduce the performance of gender without remembering when they first learned gender normative gestures and bodily postures. Through a queer ritual of gender impersonation, Camp gender performance not only reveals gender to be an imitation but also produces new habit-memories. The drag show cultivates habit-memory by encoding queer bodily postures, gestures, movements, and linguistic utterances through the ritualized performance. The drag performer internalizes a queer set of habit-memories (in terms of how to ritually perform gender), and the audience internalizes a

queer set of habit memories (in terms of learning the appropriate audience responses to the drag show).

Not only does Connerton's theory of social memory help to elucidate how Queer Camp operates mnemonically, it also helps to account for how Camp differs so much generationally. In his description of collective social groups, Connerton recognizes their diversity in how they consist of multiple generations with different experiences of the past. Connerton's formulation for social groups, then, inherently recognizes distinctions among group participants while accounting for their shared experiences and memories. This recognition accounts for how Camp operates differently over time, as successive generations of queers understand their subjectivities according to various sociohistorical contexts and utilize Camp differently to respond to their oppression. The question of whether or not Camp is "dead" hinges on a false presupposition that Camp necessarily operates in only one form. On the contrary, because Camp develops from queer social groups who experience the present differently depending upon their pasts, Camp will inherently change to suit the needs of each successive queer social group.

### **Camp in Relationship to Postmodern Parody and Intertextuality**

Because Camp changes to suit the needs of queer social groups, scholars need analytical frameworks that best suit Camp's specific historical and sociocultural context. My analysis of Camp as form of queer social memory provides a useful approach to theorizing Camp generally and historically. However, the context of *RuPaul's Drag Race* requires a more specific framework that accounts for the show's television format. In this section, I develop a way to analyze *Drag Race's* intertextual Camp references. I first address how *Drag Race* scholars analyze the show's intertextual features in order to situate my project within this discourse. While most scholarly analyses of *RuPaul's Drag Race* discuss, in some manner, the show's use

of parody and/or intertextuality, I focus on two particular studies that provide more in-depth considerations. While these scholars identify key questions about the show's references, which my project also addresses, they do not apply a Camp analysis to the show. I want to suggest that Camp scholarship provides a more fruitful way for discussing the show's distinctly queer intertextual features. To make this point, I turn to Moe Meyer's discussion of Camp in relationship to postmodern parody. While Meyer demonstrates how Camp intertextual practices have a distinctly queer purpose, his framework must be adapted for a reality television show context. To make this change, I incorporate Stuart Hall's theory of encoding/decoding. Through this section, I put together a more accurate language for analyzing *Drag Race's* encoded Camp references.

In their texts, Nicholas de Villiers, David J. Fine, and Emily Shreve all provide brilliant analyses of *Drag Race's* intertextual features; however, they study the show using more general literary and cultural theory. Innumerable poststructuralist and postmodern scholars discuss issues of intertextuality and parody, but these theories do not provide the best analytical lenses. Camp scholarship is necessary for understanding the distinctly queer referential practices on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. In his 2012 article, Nicholas de Villiers incorporates literary theorist Werner Wolf's concept of "metaization" to study how *Drag Race* provides "meta-commentary" on reality television shows/personalities (de Villiers 2012:2). According to de Villiers, Werner Wolf defines "metaization" as a process whereby contemporary arts and media move from a first level of referential communication to a higher level of self-reflexive referencing (ibid 2). Using Wolf's concept, de Villiers argues that *Drag Race* provides "meta-commentary" on reality television series by incorporating similar structures and challenges from these shows. He argues that RuPaul, through his multiple personas, provides "meta-commentary" on reality hosts. While I

agree with de Villiers' assertions, I do not think Werner Wolf's theory is the most useful for studying *RuPaul's Drag Race*. While this concept from literary theory accurately assesses some of *Drag Race's* key features, I question the efficacy of applying a non-queer literary theory to a distinctly queer reality television show. I am not convinced by reading de Villiers' work that Wolf's concept provides any particularly new ideas that cannot be found within Camp scholarship. Studying a queer show through specifically and unequivocally queer theory, to me, is an important political project.

Interestingly, and I think tellingly, when de Villiers studies *RuPaul's Drag Race* in relationship to *Paris Is Burning*, he does not incorporate Wolf's theory as directly. A 1990 drag documentary starring Dorian Corey Pepper LaBeija, Venus Xtravaganza, Octavia St. Laurent, Willi Ninja, Angie Xtravaganza, Freddie Pendavis, and Junior LaBeija, *Paris Is Burning* chronicles black and Latina/o gay male and transgender participants in New York City's 1980s ball culture. De Villiers suggests that *Drag Race* hails director Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris Is Burning* through "intertextual references," including direct quotation, revision, and re-inflection (ibid 2). Through this discussion, de Villiers raises a crucial political point about audience consumption. He questions the sociopolitical implications of cultural outsider television audiences consuming queer culture through *Drag Race*. In particular, de Villiers suggests that *Drag Race's* "intertextual references" to *Paris Is Burning* raise a concern when we consider how this documentary shares a history and culture that come specifically from the lived experiences of marginalized black and Latina/o gay men and trans women. I absolutely agree with de Villiers' concern here and discuss the issue in detail at this chapter's conclusion. For now, I want to note the significance of how de Villiers shifts to a language of "intertextual references" when discussing *Drag Race* and *Paris Is Burning*. I think this language shift represents an inability to

apply Werner Wolf's theory to these particularly queer intertextual practices. I would suggest that Camp theory provides a better language and framework to understand this queer referencing.

Similar to de Villiers, David J. Fine and Emily Shreve study how *RuPaul's Drag Race* creates a pedagogy through intertextual "allusions." In their 2014 chapter, Fine and Shreve read *Drag Race* and the spin-off series *Drag U* together, as representative of RuPaul's larger pedagogical project. They argue that RuPaul uses allusions to *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* as a way to build her pedagogy (Fine and Shreve 2014:168). A 1961 novel written by Muriel Spark and later adapted into a 1969 film starring Dame Maggie Smith, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* tells the story of an unconventional teacher at an all-women's boarding school. Through a fascinating and detailed analysis, Fine and Shreve analyze how RuPaul constantly alludes to Miss Jean Brodie on *Drag Race* and *Drag U*. These referential practices include direct quotations and direct imitations of Maggie Smith's performance. For Fine and Shreve, these allusions allow RuPaul to build her own radical pedagogy and comment on her role as educator to the *Drag Race* contestants—whom RuPaul often calls "my girls," in an allusion to Miss Jean Brodie (ibid 180). While I agree with Fine and Shreve's analysis, I want to suggest again that these "allusions" are a specifically queer form of intertextual referencing—Camp. I agree with Fine and Shreve that RuPaul uses references as part of her pedagogical project; however, in my analysis, I am more concerned with how this queer pedagogy engages viewers more specifically. Understanding RuPaul's queer pedagogy in this way requires engaging more directly with Camp scholarship.

I want to be clear in saying that I am not invalidating the brilliant scholarly contributions of de Villiers, Fine, and Shreve. On the contrary, I overall agree with their assertions and want to directly engage with their point about pedagogy and cultural outsider consumption. At the same

time, however, I want to suggest that Camp scholarship would provide *Drag Race* scholars with a more precise language and distinctly queer theory for understanding the show's intertextual features. In order to prove this point, I want to demonstrate how Camp theories of referencing are distinctly queer compared to other postmodern theories. Issues of intertextuality and parody are rife throughout postmodernist theories. However, I want to show why a Camp analysis provides a more appropriate lens for understanding *Drag Race*. Scholars interested in the show's intertextual or parodic features could choose innumerable postmodern approaches, so I want to prove why Camp should be the de facto choice. Like "Camp," "postmodernism" is a nebulous term that has vastly different meanings across disciplines. My goal in this section is not to offer an all-encompassing investigation of how Camp relates to concepts of postmodernism.<sup>51</sup> Rather, my discussion focuses on how Camp operates as a distinctly queer form of intertextual, postmodern parody.

Camp's emergence as a "worthy academic issue" took place alongside larger debates about the nature of "Culture" and a restructuring of academic disciplines caused by the onset of poststructuralist and postmodernist theories (Cleto 1999:2). In their discussions of Camp's relationship to postmodernism, Camp scholars consistently cite Frederic Jameson and Linda Hutcheon, in part because the works of these established cultural theorists are foundational in discussions of postmodernism generally. Interestingly, while Jameson and Hutcheon do discuss Camp, they only briefly mention the practice as a substratum within their larger analyses of postmodernism's relationship to parody. Jameson equates Camp with "postmodern pastiche" or

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<sup>51</sup> For example, outside the purview of this Chapter are postmodernist cultural theories that investigate Camp as a model for gender performance analyzed through masquerade theory. For more information on this strand of Camp and postmodernism, see: Cynthia Morrill, "Revamping the Gay Sensibility: Queer Camp and *dyke noir*," in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (New York: Routledge, 1994), 110-129.

“blank parody,” which he describes as a random, heterogeneous, nostalgic, and dehistoricizing imitation of dead styles (Jameson 1984:65). For Jameson, postmodern pastiche/Camp lacks a satirical impulse found in parody and equalizes identities, styles, and images through ahistorical nostalgia. Because Jameson builds his argument by citing Susan Sontag’s canonical essay, he does not conceptualize Camp as a specifically queer practice. For Jameson, then, Camp does not operate as a subcultural form of resistance tied to queer social groups, and Camp’s parodic quality lacks a subversive subcultural edge. By contrast, Hutcheon argues that postmodernism offers a denaturalizing critique through its use of parody, which is neither nostalgic nor ahistorical (Hutcheon 2002:176-8). With regard to Camp in particular, Hutcheon suggests that, like postmodernism, it utilizes irony and parody in order to demystify and subvert (ibid 179). Unlike Jameson, Hutcheon discusses Camp in direct relation to Queer Theory, and she also identifies the practice’s significance among queer communities. Nevertheless, Hutcheon’s discussion of Camp is too brief to provide a thorough analysis of how Queer Camp relates to postmodernism.

This analysis ultimately comes from Moe Meyer, who discusses Camp in terms of postmodern parody as part of his larger project to reclaim Camp as a solely queer discourse.<sup>52</sup> Utilizing Hutcheon’s postmodern redefinition of parody, Meyer suggests that Camp refers specifically to strategies and tactics of queer parody, which possess cultural and ideological analytic potential (Meyer 1994:41-2). According to Meyer, Hutcheon redefines postmodern parody as an intertextual manipulation of multiple conventions that “has a hermeneutic function

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<sup>52</sup> As I discussed in my Introduction, in his first version of “Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp,” Meyer defines Camp as a “queer” discourse. In the reprinting of this text, however, he replaces “queer” with “gay,” a term referring specifically to ungendered and unraced gay men. In my use of Meyer’s theory, I utilize “queer” rather than “gay” in order to push back against the essentializing aspects of Meyer’s reprinted text.



with both cultural and even ideological implications” (Hutcheon 1985:7). In this formulation, parody turns to other art forms and depends on an already existing text in order to fulfill itself. Building on Hutcheon’s theory, Meyer suggests that this relationship between texts serves as an indicator of power relationships between social agents who wield those texts (Meyer 1994:42). The dominant social agent possesses the “original” text and exercises control over signification, while the subordinate social agent possesses the parodic alternative. Through the process of parody, then, “the marginalized and disenfranchised advance their own interests by entering alternative signifying codes into discourse by attaching them to existing structures of signification” (ibid 43). According to Meyer, without the process of parody, marginalized agents have no access to representation because representation is controlled by a dominant order. As specifically queer parody, Camp “becomes, then, the only process by which the homosexual is able to enter representation and to produce social visibility” (ibid 43). For queer subjects, then, Camp provides a way to claim agency and to fight against social marginalization. Camp’s intertextual referencing has a very specific function that stems from queer peoples’ histories of oppression. A Camp analysis of intertextuality provides a better framework for understanding *Drag Race* because this approach foregrounds the distinctly queer political nature of Camp referencing.

While Meyer’s analysis of Camp as queer parody presents a useful framework for understanding the practice’s intertextual features, parts of his argument need to be updated in order to apply to contemporary Camp practices. Meyer first published this essay in 1994 as part of an anthology on the politics and poetics of Camp. His project at the time was to wrest control of Camp from Susan Sontag and Andrew Ross’s theorizations, in order to resituate queer social agents as (sole) producers of Camp and to reaffirm Camp’s political nature. Meyer built his

argument around the central premise that what Sontag and Ross call “Camp” is actually an inauthentic, appropriated version of Queer Camp. According to Meyer, by framing Camp as a quality in objects, Sontag erases the queer agent who produces Camp and fails to articulate how Camp is actually a “way of reading, of writing, and of doing” that originates with the queer Camp agent (Meyer 1994:44). For Meyer, the process of “rediscovering history’s waste” that Ross describes is actually an act of appropriation that renders the queer agent invisible. Meyer’s discussion of Camp as postmodern parody is a relatively small (but poignant) part of his overall project. Understanding Camp as queer parody allows Meyer to distinguish the dominant and subordinate subject positions that heterosexuals and queers inhabit.

Some of Meyer’s assertions absolutely remain true for Camp on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*: Camp still operates as a form of intertextual parodic play, and the relationship between texts still indicates power relationships between social agents. However, Meyer’s claims regarding authenticity, social visibility, and access to representation do not necessarily hold up in this contemporary moment. For one thing, Meyer’s argument is limited in how he diametrically opposes Camp (a solely gay discourse in Meyer’s terms) to camp (an appropriated form, i.e. “pop camp/Camp lite”). As Fabio Cleto suggests, by insisting on an authentic original queer/gay “Camp” in opposition to the appropriated imitation “camp,” Meyer reproduces a false binary between “real” and “copy” that postmodernism seeks to destabilize (Cleto 1999:19). While Meyer’s formulation is beneficial to understanding Camp in how it frames the practice’s intertextuality, his argument is also inherently flawed in how it reproduces notions of authenticity and originality. As my previous application of memory theory to Susan Sontag and Andrew Ross’s theories demonstrates, one can differentiate between Queer and non-Queer Camp without relying upon essentialist notions of authenticity.

Meyer's formulation also cannot account for how contemporary television fuses pop camp and Queer Camp. As Pamela Robertson suggests, the mainstreaming of Camp post-Sontag has been primarily televisual, such that television has become a seemingly definitive reference point for Camp Lite sensibility (Robertson 1996:121). By mainstreaming Camp, television made pop camp no longer the province of cognoscenti (ibid 122). When pop camp moved into the realm of dominant culture and became available for wider audiences, pop camp lost its specificity as a marginal sensibility. Television brought Camp Lite into the homes of consumers, and the practice underwent another transformation. No longer a queer subcultural social practice or a means for cognoscenti to secure cultural capital, Camp became a significant part of dominant U.S. popular culture and (eventually) a successful marketing strategy.<sup>53</sup> As Helene Shugart and Catherine Waggoner suggest, contemporary U.S. pop cultural forms (including television) largely merge pop camp/Camp Lite and historic Camp. The previously distinguishable forms of Camp become intermixed through this fusion.

To understand how Camp texts operate within this contemporary context, Shugart and Waggoner analyze late 20<sup>th</sup>- and early 21<sup>st</sup>-century Camp icons in order to understand how seemingly appropriated forms of Camp may still contain resistive elements. Drawing on cultural critics such as Stuart Hall and John Fiske, Shugart and Waggoner argue that contemporary forms of Camp can be best understood as “double texts,” wherein distinct messages seemingly at odds with the text's superficial reading may emerge depending on the cues foregrounded and attended to by the audience (Shugart and Waggoner 2008:48). Even within appropriated forms of Camp, then, transgressive readings exist because the Camp text contains both dominant and resistive

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<sup>53</sup> For example, programming such as *Nick at Nite* utilizes Camp as a form of nostalgia to “eulogize a fantasy of the baby boomers' American innocence” (Robertson 1996:121). This nostalgic embrace of “classic TV” eventually infiltrates the film industry, which more and more bases movies on past television shows to appeal to audience's nostalgia.

messages. Because Meyer's understanding of Camp as postmodern parody strictly differentiates between "Camp" and "camp," his framework cannot efficaciously analyze contemporary, fused forms of Camp on television. Meyer's binary division seeks to separate the inseparable: multiple types of Camp mixed together. Understanding how Camp postmodern parody operates on *RuPaul's Drag Race* therefore requires a different analytical framework.

While Moe Meyer rightly identifies the political nature of Camp intertextual referencing, his framework cannot be directly applied to *RuPaul's Drag Race*. In Meyer's formulation, Camp provides queers with a means of achieving social visibility within a dominant heterosexual culture. Inherent in this theorization is a distinction between the queer subordinated agent and the dominant heterosexual agent. Thus, Meyer's formula hinges on an imbalanced power relation between queer and straight agents: queer individuals must be subordinated in order to use Camp as a way to achieve visibility within a dominant heterosexual medium. However, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is an explicitly queer show created by, produced by, hosted by, and starring queer people. While the existence of *Drag Race* by no means creates a new situation wherein queer individuals are no longer oppressed or subordinated, the show does represent an unprecedented level of social visibility that disrupts Meyer's binary. With *Drag Race*, queer individuals are in the position of dominant agents who use Camp not to achieve social visibility within a heterosexual medium but to display a (sub)cultural practice for queer audiences on an explicitly queer television show. Additionally, because of Logo TV's gaystreaming marketing strategy, *Drag Race* disseminates Camp to both queer and heterosexual audiences. These diverse audiences often consume queer culture and Camp through *Drag Race* as cultural outsiders watching a queer reality television show. In this situation, Camp functions not only as a practice to achieve social visibility but also as a commodity for consumption by both LGBTQ and straight audiences.

Therefore, Camp parody does not solely operate for the purposes of achieving queer social visibility within dominant heterosexual media. Meyer's analysis does not hold.

Combining Stuart Hall's theory of encoding/decoding with Meyer's assertions about Camp intertextuality provides a productive and appropriate language for analyzing Camp on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Hall's theory is particularly useful because he focuses on how mass media (particularly television) transmits messages. Thus, Hall's framework inherently applies to *RuPaul's Drag Race* because of the show's nature as a reality television program. In his analysis, Hall proposes a four-stage theory of communication: production, circulation, consumption/distribution, and reproduction (Hall 1994:91). At the production stage, media apparatuses utilize material instruments and social relations to organize messages into discursive codes. At the circulation stage, mass media distributes these codes to multiple audiences. At the consumption/distribution stage, audiences consume these discursive codes through the distributing media. At the reproduction stage, audiences translate these codes into social practices, thus completing the circuit of dissemination. Hall suggests that this cycle includes determinate moments of encoding and decoding. At the stage of encoding, mass media transforms messages into discursive codes able to be disseminated. At the decoding stage, audiences decode the messages, which then "influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological, or behavioral consequences" (ibid 93). Because production and reception of television messages are not identical, encoding and decoding are not necessarily symmetrical. Therefore, audiences may decode messages in ways different from those intended by mass media.

The Camp references on *RuPaul's Drag Race* operate according to Hall's framework of encoding and decoding, but they require memory activation in order to be decoded. As I will

demonstrate in more detail later in this chapter, *Drag Race* includes multiple encoded references to queer culture/history and popular culture. These often parodic references are sprinkled throughout *Drag Race*, such that the show becomes a multilayered, intertextual product. These encoded Camp messages require knowledge of the source materials in order to be recognized and decoded. When the audience knows the source material being referenced, then the Camp reference on *Drag Race* activates the viewer's memory, leading to a decoding of the message. When this memory activation fails to occur, the viewer "forgets" the source material and assumes that the reference originates on *Drag Race*—or has no idea that a reference even occurred. Thus, using Hall's four-stage model, the *Drag Race* cycle operates in the following way. At the production level, RuPaul, the show's writers/producers, and the drag queen contestants make a Camp reference while being filmed. When performing the reference, these individuals know the source material—hence, their ability to make the Camp reference. The show's editors then include the filmed footage as part of aired episode. Next, at the circulation stage, the aired episodes of *RuPaul's Drag Race* disseminate the encoded Camp references. Then, at the distribution/consumption stage, the show's multiple audiences view the episodes with encoded Camp references. Finally, at the reproduction stage, the show's multiple audiences either recognize (decode) the Camp reference and remember the source material or fail to recognize (decode) the reference and experience no memory activation. Through this process of encoding and decoding, Camp references on *RuPaul's Drag Race* have the ability to confer queer cultural status and/or capital.

### **Conferring Queer Cultural Status and Cultural Capital Through Camp Referencing**

To understand how this process works, I now look more directly at Camp referencing on *Drag Race*. In this section, I combine my theory of Camp as queer social memory with Stuart

Hall's language of encoding and decoding. This combination allows me to analyze how RuPaul and *RuPaul's Drag Race* use encoded Camp references to activate viewers' memories—when the viewer decodes the reference. I want to suggest that the decoding process confers queer cultural status onto the referenced material and queer cultural capital onto the viewer. By virtue of being referenced through Camp, the source material gains status as something worthy of remembrance. I describe this status as “queer cultural status” for two reasons. First, queer people on a queer reality television show are the ones making the references. Because the context and participants are specifically queer, they confer a queer cultural status onto the referenced item. In other words, queer people use Camp referencing to highlight a cultural item as valuable and worthy of remembrance. This status is specifically “cultural” because the recognition does not necessarily result in monetary gain. Rather, the conferred cultural status marks the referenced item as worth knowing and worthy of remembrance. I define “queer cultural capital” later in this section when I discuss the pedagogical aspects of RuPaul's Camp referencing. First, I want to use memory theory to discuss how *RuPaul's Drag Race* attains and confers queer cultural status through the aired/archived television episodes and Camp references.

The success of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and the franchise's various enterprises secures the show's legacy in the historical archives of queer culture. As sites devoted to preserving significant moments in queer history, these archives document what historian Pierre Nora calls “modern memory,” which relies “entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, [and] the visibility of the image” (Nora 1989:13).<sup>54</sup> Because Western archives more

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<sup>54</sup> In his theorization of memory, Nora relies upon a colonialist narrative that differentiates between the truer form of memory (situated in the past and in peasant culture) and contemporary (Western) history influenced by democratization and globalization. While I work with Nora's theory of *lieux de mémoire*, I strongly disagree with this distinction that situates non-Western cultures in opposition to “advanced” Western nations.

often collect tangible artifacts over other supposedly “ephemeral” practices, they value material representations of the present as worthier of preservation and remembrance. While the expansive *Drag Race* franchise encompasses multiple types of performances, performing bodies, and social practices, the recorded television episodes and the images of drag culture that they depict are the brand’s most preservable, material traces of modern commercial drag memory. I want to suggest that because queer archives operate as material *lieux de mémoire*, *Drag Race* episodes (once archived) may become functional *lieux de mémoire*. As “sites where memory crystallizes and secretes itself,” *lieux de mémoire* inscribe borders around domains of memory and mark them as socially significant (ibid 7, 19). Sites or objects become material *lieux* when invested with a symbolic aura, such as when societies establish archives as repositories of memory. Queer archives, then, operate as material *lieux de mémoire* because they are tangible repositories of queer histories and because they attain a symbolic aura by virtue of preserving queer memories. Functional *lieux* are both sites and objects of ritual, such as dictionaries or testaments. Once archived, *Drag Race* episodes may become functional *lieux de mémoire* because they operate as objects of memory. Watching the episodes becomes a way to ritually re-experience commercial drag in the early 21<sup>st</sup>-century.

By virtue of becoming archived *lieux de mémoire*, *Drag Race* episodes legitimize RuPaul and her representation of drag by framing them as supposedly collective memories of a shared queer history. Queer archives generate officialized representations of queer culture by bestowing historical significance onto the archived materials. Therefore, as *lieux de mémoire* operating within these archives, *Drag Race* episodes crystallize a RuPaul-centric drag history. As future generations screen these archived episodes, they remember U.S. drag in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century through RuPaul and her legacy. Through this process, RuPaul, *Drag Race* contestants, and queer



individuals represented and referenced on the show all attain queer cultural status and historical significance. On the contrary, drag artists and queer individuals excluded from *Drag Race* potentially receive neither the same queer cultural status nor the same place within officialized queer history. Because *lieux de mémoire* activate remembrance of a shared cultural past, individuals excluded from *Drag Race* episodes face potential erasure from archived queer history. Therefore, *Drag Race* confers queer cultural status in part through construction, preservation, and activation of memory.

On *Drag Race*, this process of mnemonic activation operates primarily through Camp references, a practice that uses speech acts, gestures, and performances in the present to invoke culturally significant objects, bodies, and events from queer history and/or popular culture. As previously discussed, memory is a dynamic process whereby stimuli in the present activate one's remembrance of the past. This activation largely operates through representation, with images effecting mnemonic processing and engendering different modes of recollection (Küchler & Melion 1991:7). Because memory is both historically contingent and socioculturally constructed, these modes of recollection necessarily differ among cultures and individuals. A single image viewed by multiple audiences may activate different memories because audiences experience the present depending upon their knowledge of the past, as well as their individual references to past events and objects. Because RuPaul intentionally layers encoded Camp references throughout her performances, audiences experience the same performance differently depending upon their ability to decode the Camp reference.<sup>55</sup> In her autobiography *Lettin It All Hang Out*, RuPaul describes her detailed encoding process:

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<sup>55</sup> I continue to use Hall's term "encoded" here, despite RuPaul's performances not always being televised. While Hall's notion of "encoding" refers more specifically to televised mass media, I maintain this specific term (rather than employing the more general "coded") as a way to connect my argument throughout the chapter. Because RuPaul consistently uses the same process of inserting Camp references

The point about pop culture is that so much of it is borrowed. There's very little that's brand new. Instead, creativity today is a kind of shopping process—picking up on and sampling things from the world around you, things you grew up with. That's very much my modus operandi. *If you knew all the references, you could deconstruct one of my performances and place every look, every word, and every move.* I do. I know all the references, and watching myself on tape I love to sit with friends and unstitch (to their amazement) the patchwork of my performance, identifying this bit from here and this bit from there. I really see myself as a sampling machine. (RuPaul 1995:64, italics mine)

As this excerpt demonstrates, every RuPaul performance includes multiple encoded Camp references. RuPaul uses a cultural “shopping process” to build her reference archive. Through this process, Ru selects certain materials as culturally significant. Through Camp referencing, RuPaul confers a type of queer cultural status onto these referenced items: through her performances, Ru deems these materials worthy of knowing and remembering. While the referenced items achieve a queer cultural status by virtue of Ru's Camp referencing, the items themselves are not always specifically queer. As this quoted passage indicates, Ru often references cultural materials from the world around her and her childhood. Ru's vast cultural knowledge includes materials from specifically related to queer culture and history, as well as items from (predominantly U.S.) dominant heterosexual popular culture. By referencing these dominant cultural forms, RuPaul confers a certain queer cultural status onto them because she marks them as significant and worthy of remembrance. If audiences share the same queer cultural knowledge as RuPaul and decode the reference, then they affirm the item's queer cultural significance through the decoding process. In this instance, the referenced material is part of a collective Camp referential knowledge.

To “unstitch” (decode) Ru's Camp references, the audience must possess a shared queer

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into his performances (whether or not they are televised), I continue to use this language of encoding and decoding to maintain consistency and clarity. At the same time, I want to acknowledge that Hall's use of “encoding” and “decoding” applies most directly to mass media and television.

cultural knowledge of the source material. I want to suggest that this shared knowledge is a form of queer cultural capital. Here, I draw from Pierre Bourdieu's discussion of capital. In "The Forms of Capital," Bourdieu develops a concept of "cultural capital" as a way to understand how educational investment translates into different forms of non-monetary profit. Bourdieu suggests that academic investment translates into economic, social, and cultural capital. He defines *economic capital* as a command of economic resources (e.g., money and assets) and *social capital* as access to institutionalized networks and relationships (Bourdieu 2004:21). Bourdieu distinguishes *cultural capital* as knowledge and intellectual skills gained primarily through education (ibid 17).<sup>56</sup> In my later chapters, I utilize Bourdieu's definitions for economic and social capital to explore how the *Drag Race* phenomenon impacts drag performers. Here, I want to focus on his notion of cultural capital to suggest that shared Camp references are a type of queer cultural capital. As discussed, queer social groups use Camp as a form of queer social memory. Through Camp, older generations pass on the cultural customs and knowledge to younger generations. Camp references are one part of this queer cultural history that queer social groups pass on. Through friendships and mentorships, queer people transmit these Camp references to others. Therefore, these references are a type of knowledge that queer social groups gain through socialization and education (although the education here usually happens more

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<sup>56</sup> In his analysis, Bourdieu specifically identifies three "states" of cultural capital. The *embodied state* includes knowledge acquired through socialization to culture and history, the *objectified state* includes material objects that can be transmitted, and the *institutionalized state* includes an institution's formal recognition, often in an academic context (Bourdieu 2004:18-21). Because I am not conducting a specifically Bourdieu-ian analysis of cultural capital, I do apply all three states to my discussion of queer cultural capital. However, I do believe these states could be applied to my discussion of RuPaul. The body of Camp references shared between RuPaul and queer viewers could constitute "embodied cultural capital," since queer people attain this knowledge through socialization to queer culture and history. Episodes of *Drag Race* could represent "objectified cultural capital," since they are material objects transmitted through time. The praise RuPaul gives to people who are able to decode his references could be a form of "institutionalized cultural capital," in the sense that this approval comes from a queer mentor.

informally, with the exception of LGBTQ-specific college courses). The more Camp references a queer person knows, the more queer cultural capital they accumulate. When a queer person uses their cultural capital to decode a reference, they may receive praise from fellow queer people (e.g., another queer person who shares the same references will laud the astute decoding).

With this framework of queer cultural capital in mind, I suggest that RuPaul uses Camp references pedagogically to educate her “pupils” and to affirm their accumulation of queer cultural capital. In addition to producing different readings of the same performance for different viewers, Ru’s Camp encoding process also situates herself as the most knowledgeable source of queer and popular culture. To fully understand how RuPaul complexly stitches together (encodes) Camp references into her performances, the audience must possess the same queer cultural capital as RuPaul. As someone who has spent seven years studying RuPaul and *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, I can state with certainty that RuPaul’s knowledge of queer and popular culture is both vast and astounding. The majority of audiences will not be able to decode every single encoded Camp reference in RuPaul’s performances or reality television show. Most viewers will need help to unstitch (decode) the extensive references. This help could include RuPaul or another individual directly naming the references—or, as in my case, years of extensive research into Camp and Ru’s career. RuPaul delights in performing this role as Camp decoder because, I assume, the process reveals her vast knowledge and genius. In this scenario, RuPaul demonstrates how she is a gatekeeper of queer and pop cultural knowledge. She performs the role of queer pedagogue who teaches her students to decode the references. In the above referenced passage from RuPaul’s autobiography, Ru serves as the queer mentor who decodes the references for his friends. His friends then accumulate queer cultural capital: the ability to decode these Camp references in the future.

With my analysis of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, I want to suggest that the show uses encoded Camp references similarly to confer status and educate viewers. Specifically, *RuPaul's Drag Race* activates memories differently for viewers, depending upon their ability to decode the Camp references. From the show's inception, *Drag Race* parodies other popular reality television competitions. In one of the first promotional videos for *Drag Race's* first season, RuPaul states the following:

Hey Tyra, step back girl, the queen has returned. And you can tell Heidi, "Clear the runway." Hey Paula. Miss RuPaul is back to pump some realness into reality. With that shake? I'm searching for America's fiercest drag queen. You've gotta be an American Idol, a Top Model, and a fashion designer all rolled into one. Okay! And you've definitely gotta be smarter than a fifth grader. Oh, yeah, that's good TV. *RuPaul's Drag Race* is coming soon to Logo. I'm so excited about my new show. I'm really into it. It's gonna be a competition reality show like you've never seen before. Now, move that bus. Move that bus! Move that bus! (Timmons 2009)

By invoking these various reality shows—Tyra Banks from *America's Next Top Model*, Heidi Klum from *Project Runway*, Paula Abdul from *Hey Paula!*, the show *Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader?*, a catchphrase from *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*—RuPaul situates *Drag Race* within the reality TV pantheon while also humorously taking from and repurposing many of the other shows' titles and catchphrases. This process confers status onto the referenced shows because by naming them RuPaul asserts their significance within the landscape of reality television shows. Additionally, this referencing confers status onto RuPaul and *Drag Race*. By invoking the figures of Heidi Klum and Tyra Banks, RuPaul situates herself as a leader of reality television on par with these established hosts. However, RuPaul gives herself even more prestige by comparing herself to *all* the other hosts. Additionally, RuPaul frames *Drag Race* as even more challenging than these other shows because contestants need the multiple skillsets "all rolled into one."

How *Drag Race* confers queer cultural status varies depending upon whether the source materials come from dominant heterosexual U.S. popular culture, dominant cultural forms with an explicitly queer connection, or specifically queer histories/cultural forms. By referencing different aspects of dominant U.S. popular culture that do not have an explicitly queer connotation, *Drag Race* confers queer cultural status onto the source materials by highlighting them as having a significance for RuPaul. Just as Camp historically takes from and “queers” the products of dominant culture, so too does *Drag Race*. Throughout the series, *Drag Race*’s mini- and main challenges parody or pay homage to iconography from U.S. popular culture. For instance, beginning in Season Two, drag queen contestants must perform celebrity impersonations during the *Snatch Game* challenge, which parodies the 1960s-70s game show *The Match Game*. *Snatch Game* follows a similar format as *Match Game*, in that celebrity guest judges write down answers to a question, and the drag queen contestants (as celebrities) try to match the answers. Turning “Match” into “Snatch” queers the original program through Camp double entendre. By parodying *Match Game*, *Snatch Game* both highlights the original program as a significant aspect of U.S. popular culture and queers the original, thereby inserting queer subjectivities into a product from dominant white, heterosexual culture—a key aspect of Camp postmodern parody. This “queering” of dominant U.S. popular culture through Camp parody also upholds hegemonic ideologies. The majority of referenced materials on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* come from U.S. popular culture, specifically dominant white and heterosexual pop cultural forms. While *Drag Race* repurposes these forms into a queer context, the show simultaneously confers status onto the dominant culture through the referencing process. Just as Camp historically upholds the dominant system that it subverts, so too do *Drag Race*’s Camp references reify established popular culture.

By referencing items from U.S. popular culture that have a queer cult status and/or explicitly queer connection, *Drag Race* reaffirms their status as canonical works of queer culture.

Describing *Drag Race* on her podcast *What's The T?*, RuPaul states:

This has been true with drag and gay culture for years and years, that we have artistic license to sort of snatch a little bit here, a pinch of this, a pinch of that because it's all parody. It's all a way to sort of satire, an homage to what has come before. So when you watch our show you see *Mommie Dearest*, you see Faye Dunaway, you see Joan Crawford, you get to see *Rocky Horror*, you know, the movie *Grease*, everything I've ever seen. (RuPaul and Michelle Visage 2014)

As this quotation demonstrates, *Drag Race* features multiple Camp references to queer iconography from U.S. popular culture. By featuring references to *Mommie Dearest*, for example, *Drag Race* connects itself to this cult classic film, thereby situating both as significant parts of queer/Camp culture. These works already have queer cultural status because of their Camp value, so their being referenced on *Drag Race* solidifies this cultural legacy. Through this referencing process, *Drag Race* frequently frames Camp as a predominantly white gay male culture. All the works that RuPaul names in the above quotation feature primarily white actors and come from an arguably white, Western gay Camp canon. The Camp references on *RuPaul's Drag Race* do not draw exclusively from white gay male cultural forms, but a good number of references do come from this lineage.

By referencing different aspects of specifically queer culture and history, *Drag Race* both confers status onto the source material and legitimizes itself as a part of queer culture/history. In their study of how *Drag Race* references the documentary *Paris Is Burning*, Eir-Anne Edgar suggests that such references to historically situated drag icons and practices provide a queer legitimacy for viewers (Edgar 2011:136). Referencing *Paris Is Burning* allows *Drag Race* to establish a dialogue with the film, connecting the contemporary show to a queer historical continuum, as well as equating the two in terms of social value. On *Drag Race*, RuPaul

specifically names the documentary, thereby introducing audiences unfamiliar with *Paris Is Burning* to the film. For each the season's "reading" challenge, during which the contestants playfully insult one another, RuPaul introduces the segment with some version of, "In the grand tradition of *Paris Is Burning*, get out your library cards." By explicitly naming *Paris Is Burning*, RuPaul connects the practice of reading to the queer black and Latina/o ballroom subcultures. Because RuPaul situates the practice historically, she informs viewers that the cultural practices they witness on *Drag Race* come specifically from gay and trans people of color. If RuPaul did not cite *Paris Is Burning* during these reading challenges, then uninformed viewers could decontextualize the practices and unintentionally erase the histories of queer black and Latina/o individuals from whom the culture derives.

Even when *Drag Race* fails to explicitly name the source material, the Camp reference may still confer cultural status. In the case of "Excuse my beauty," RuPaul neither names Stephanie Yellowhair as the phrase's originator nor provides the historical context for her phrase. This failure to explicitly name Stephanie ruptures the direct connection between original speaker and speech act. Audiences unfamiliar with Stephanie's use of "Excuse my beauty" may erase her existence, a point that I develop in this chapter's final section. However, audiences who know the phrase's origin will experience memory activation when viewing *Drag Race* and will think of Stephanie—or a different iteration of "Excuse my beauty." This activation links Stephanie to *Drag Race*, and this association confers a type of queer cultural capital onto Stephanie. With RuPaul's use of "Excuse my beauty," *Drag Race* encodes Stephanie's history within its episodes, thereby connecting her individual lived experience to a larger queer historical continuum. From this perspective, the Camp reference to Stephanie identifies her as a significant figure in queer history who deserves remembrance and recognition.



## ***RuPaul's Drag Race: Securing Queer Cultural Legacy Through Camp Referencing***

Because Camp references confer queer cultural status onto the referenced materials, *RuPaul's Drag Race* incorporates this process self-referentially in order to establish both RuPaul and the show's queer cultural legacy. As discussed previously, the majority of the show's main and mini-challenges parody and/or reference something else. By referencing facets of RuPaul's career, these challenges establish an historical lineage that encompasses RuPaul's entire oeuvre, situate RuPaul's career trajectory as the ultimate desired goal for the contestants, and create a set of standards for judging the contestants based on RuPaul's abilities. These challenges utilize both explicit and encoded references. The explicit references clearly name for the audience the connection between the *Drag Race* challenge and the moment in RuPaul's career. The encoded references require knowledge of RuPaul's history in order to understand how the *Drag Race* challenge pays homage to the self-described supermodel of the world.

The initial challenges on *Drag Race* work to establish both the show's connection to other reality television programs and RuPaul's status as the pre-eminent drag queen. The very first episode's mini- and main challenges, which set the formula for the first challenges in every season, parody both *America's Next Top Model* and *Project Runway* ("Drag on a Dime" 2009). The first mini challenge involves a photo shoot, which positions contestants as models à la *America's Next Top Model*. For the series' first episode, the queens must pose on a car while being drenched with water, a reference to reality television star Paris Hilton's 2005 "I Love Paris" Carl's Jr. burger commercial. *Drag Race*'s first main challenge references a popular recurring challenge on *Project Runway*, which requires the designers to construct garments out of unconventional materials. On *Drag Race*, the queens must create drag looks using thrift store clothing materials and tchotchkes from the *99¢ Store*. With these initial mini- and main

challenges, *RuPaul's Drag Race* situates itself within the landscape of popular 2009 reality television shows. These parodic Camp references pay homage to *Drag Race's* reality predecessors by queering and restaging some of these series' most beloved challenges. As *Drag Race's* first season progresses, the challenges begin to reference aspects of RuPaul's drag career more directly. As RuPaul says in an interview on the queer YouTube series *Hey Qween*:

Initially the challenges were based on my career and all the things that I've done with marketing myself or being an MC or doing standup or doing whatever. But, you know, as the show's gone on we've exceeded all of the things that I've done, so we do twists on things. We can actually, because it's drag, we get to take a piece of another reality show and say, "Let's do a *Shark Tank* thing where the girls have to pitch an item or product or some type of idea to us." Or, we could take any idea and then run it through the drag filter and it becomes something completely different. (theStreamtv 2014)

As this quotation demonstrates, the show's initial formula for constructing challenges drew heavily from RuPaul's career. More often than not, these early challenges explicitly named the reference to RuPaul's history. For instance, during Season One, contestants had to create mock commercials for the MAC Cosmetics Viva Glam! Campaign, for which RuPaul was the first spokesperson ("MAC/Viva Glam Challenge" 2009). By having the contestants perform as stand-ins for RuPaul, the show frames RuPaul as the bar against which other drag queens are judged. These contestants must recreate RuPaul's iconic career in order to demonstrate their ability to become "America's Next Drag Superstar." The judges evaluate the contestants according to how well they perform the skills necessary to complete the challenge: skills that RuPaul above all others possesses. Beginning with the first season, the final challenge of the show requires contestants to perform in one of RuPaul's music videos, thereby situating the ability to perform with RuPaul as the ultimate prize and challenge ("Grand Finale" 2009). Additionally, during the second season's *Snatch Game*, contestant Jessica Wild impersonates RuPaul ("The Snatch

Game” 2010). By performing as the show’s host on a panel of celebrities, Wild affirms RuPaul’s status as the world’s most famous drag queen through a meta-commentary on RuPaul’s celebrity.

Other main challenges reference RuPaul’s film and television history in order to situate these moments into the historical lineage leading up to *Drag Race*. For instance, in the show’s second season, contestants must participate in a pole dancing challenge inspired by RuPaul’s film *Starrbooty* (“Starrbootylicious” 2010). The film, about a secret ops agent who goes undercover to rescue her niece, has seemingly little in common with the pole dancing on *Drag Race*. However, as part of this main challenge, contestants must also sell “Cherry Pie Gift Certificates” to strangers on Hollywood Boulevard. These gift certificates reference the “Mannerism Gift Certificates” from the film, which the villain Annika distributes to prostitutes in order to lure them to her factory for organ harvesting. The *Drag Race* main challenge restages this scene with people on Hollywood Boulevard, adding a subversive undertone to the challenge for *Drag Race* viewers familiar with *Starrbooty*. Similarly, a challenge during the sixth season requires the contestants to host a restaging of *The RuPaul Show*, RuPaul’s talk-fest with Michelle Visage that aired on VH1 from 1996 to 1998 (“Queens of Talk” 2014). Acting as surrogate hosts for RuPaul, contestants must interview Chaz Bono and his grandmother Georgia Holt. Unlike the autobiography challenge, *Drag Race* audiences are not able to then purchase the referenced product, as *The RuPaul Show* is currently unavailable. Therefore, this referencing primarily works to reestablish this 1990s talk show as a significant part of drag history by bringing it from the past into the present. *Drag Race* intentionally and humorously acknowledges this recirculation by having RuPaul’s song “(Here It Comes) Around Again” play as the theme music for a restaged *The RuPaul Show*.

In contrast to these previous examples, sometimes *Drag Race* includes encoded references that require prior knowledge of RuPaul's career to be fully understood. For example, during the third season, contestants must compete in a workout video challenge, and during the fifth season contestants must create perfume infomercials ("Totally Leotarded" 2011, "Scent of a Drag Queen" 2013). Both challenges restage skits from RuPaul's 1993 "Christmas Ball" special (frndlykiddo 2014). The first skit from the 1993 special features RuPaul selling a fake workout video and includes the tagline, "Start the insanity." This tagline parodies fitness instructor and personal trainer Susan Powter's catchphrase, "Stop the insanity," from her 1990s weight loss infomercials. Humorously, the *Drag Race* restaging of this workout routine includes Susan Powter as a guest judge. The second skit from the 1993 special features RuPaul selling her signature fragrance, "Whore." Earlier versions of this skit exist, so determining the exact origin is difficult; nevertheless, the 1993 special features the faux-infomercial. By having *Drag Race* contestants restage perfume infomercials, RuPaul adds a subversive element to the challenge, for those who possess the background knowledge.<sup>57</sup>

As *Drag Race* progresses, the show starts to become more self-referential with its use of Camp, thereby establishing the show itself as an emerging queer cultural institution. During the fourth season's episode of *Snatch Game*, contestant Sharon Needles performs as guest judge Michelle Visage ("Snatch Game" 2012). Similar to when Jessica Wild performed as RuPaul, Needles' performance secures Visage's status as a queer cultural icon. Because Visage is known

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<sup>57</sup> Many challenges on *RuPaul's Drag Race* also directly restage/reference skits from *The RuPaul Show*. Because *The RuPaul Show* is not available to purchase or view, I have not been able to watch the series and not all the references. Co-host of *The RuPaul Show* and *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Michelle Visage has uploaded to her YouTube channel some footage from *The RuPaul Show* (Visage 2016). This footage from the 1990s series includes a telenovela skit, news anchor skit, and outer space skit, all of which are referenced/restaged via *RuPaul's Drag Race* main challenges ("Drama Queens" 2013, "QNN News" 2011, "Queens in Space" 2011). I hope to eventually gain access to *The RuPaul Show*'s episodes so that I can identify all the references to this series that appear on *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

to many *Drag Race* viewers primarily from her role on the reality television show, this embodiment on Snatch Game also confers status onto *Drag Race*. For the main challenge of season five's second episode, contestants must lip sync to recorded audio from previous episodes of *RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked* ("Lip Synch Extravaganza Eleganza" 2013). The season five queens must perform as and embody former contestants from seasons two-to-four, while also memorizing some of the now infamous dialogue from the spin-off series. This challenge codifies *Untucked* as an integral part of the *Drag Race* franchise by bringing into the main series "iconic" fights from the spin-off.

By the show's sixth season, *Drag Race* showcases itself as gaining cultural recognition from specifically heterosexual audiences. In the season's tenth episode, contestants must perform makeovers, transforming heterosexual grooms into brides for a marriage ceremony held on the runway and officiated by RuPaul ("Drag My Wedding" 2014). The couples (supposedly) write their own vows for the ceremony, and one couple's vows consist almost entirely of references to popular lines from *Drag Race*:

Anna: Thirty-five years ago, I met you at Wonderland. I fell in love with you instantly. Bam!<sup>58</sup>

Damon: We've rolled through the punches like water off a duck's back,<sup>59</sup> and we weren't afraid to scream out, "Where my people at?"<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> A reference to Season Five contestant Roxxy Andrews, whose runway presentations frequently included a tear away costume. When Andrews would remove the piece, the judges would frequently exclaim, "Bam!"

<sup>59</sup> A reference to Season Five contestant Jinkx Monsoon, who would say "water off a duck's back" as a calming mantra.

<sup>60</sup> A reference to Season Five contestant Roxxy Andrews, who improvised the line, "Where my people at?" during the season's singing challenge ("Can I Get an Amen?" 2013).

Anna: If I've had it officially<sup>61</sup> and you see me frown, just drag it up and put on that sequins gown.<sup>62</sup>

Both: Hallelu!<sup>63</sup>

By including these various references in their wedding vows, Anna and Damon demonstrate their status as “superfans” through their vast knowledge of *Drag Race* lines. Furthermore, the recitation and recirculation of these references represents a larger acceptance of *Drag Race* by heterosexual audiences. This acceptance is particularly striking because the challenge revolves around weddings, and the episode was filmed and aired prior to the U.S. Supreme Court’s June 26, 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision that legalized same-sex marriages throughout the U.S. These Camp references display a celebration of *Drag Race* by straight couples, an act that fits into *Drag Race*’s politics of acceptance and love of everyone.

Through Camp referencing, the challenges in Season Seven further establish *Drag Race* as a significant site of LGBT culture. The Shakespearian challenge features queens performing in parodies of *Romeo & Juliet* and *Macbeth* (“ShakesQueer” 2015). The monologues for these performances are filled with references to soundbites from previous contestants.<sup>64</sup> Similar to the

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<sup>61</sup> A reference to Season Five contestant Detox, who frequently said, “I’ve had it officially” to express annoyance.

<sup>62</sup> A reference to Season Five contestant Roxxy Andrews, who referred to a sequined gown as a “sequins gown” during the season’s singing challenge (“Can I Get an Amen?” 2013).

<sup>63</sup> A reference to Season Two and Season Three’s contestant Shangela Laquifa Wadley, who would frequently say “Hallelu.”

<sup>64</sup> These references include: “RuPaul-ogize” [popularized by contestant Willam on the Season Four Reunion episode], “Calm down, Beyoncé” [said by contestant Bianca del Rio during the fourth episode of season six], “Back rolls” [said by contestant Alyssa Edwards during the season five episode five of *Untucked*], “How is she, though?” [said by contestant Gia Gunn during the first episode of season six], “Yes, God” [said by contestant Laganja Estranja throughout her time on the show], “Tuckahoe” [first used on the show in the episode “Queens Behind Bars,” which I discuss in more detail later], “Not on tonight” [said by contestant Alyssa Edwards during the thirteenth episode of season five], and “Byeeeeee” [a play on contestant Alaska Thunderfuck’s saying “hiiii,” which has become one of her signature sayings. Alaska’s performance of “hiiii” is a reference to Isis Mirage and Coco Ferocha’s use of the

heterosexual couple's vows, this self-referentiality helps to establish *Drag Race*'s status by recirculating previously spoken phrases. Audiences who have watched the show will recognize the lines and remember the previous episodes of *Drag Race*. This self-referential mnemonic activation confers status onto the show itself. The show's seventh season also included the restaging of previous contestants. During the Snatch Game challenge, two contestants portray previous drag queen contestants Sharon Needles and Alyssa Edwards ("Snatch Game" 2015). The queens featured on the show have now gained enough status and cultural capital to be parodied as celebrities on Snatch Game (just as RuPaul and Michelle Visage were parodied on previous seasons). Additionally, this season featured for the first time on *Drag Race* the return of previous contestants in supporting character bits. Throughout the season, Alaska Thunderfuck parodies Anna Wintour during a runway fashion show ("Born Naked" 2015), Latrice Royale returns as her character from the season four episode "Queens Behind Bars" to oversee a prison-themed fashion show ("Conjoined Queens" 2015), and Bianca del Rio returns in a filmed video to give contestants advice on how to excel at Snatch Game ("Snatch Game" 2015). These queens, who have all become fan favorites, have gained enough status within the *Drag Race* universe to reappear on the main show. Similarly, Merle Ginsberg, a judge on the show for its first two seasons, returns for the first time in an episode that parodies "True Hollywood Stories" ("Ru Hollywood Stories" 2015) During this episode, the queens film three different versions of how Ginsberg left the show to be replaced by current judge Michelle Visage.

After *Drag Race*'s fourth season aired and the show started to receive more mainstream attention/success, a new self-referential spinoff series began airing, *RuPaul's Drag Race*:

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catchphrase on their YouTube series ThrowinShade. Isis and Coco perform the phrase in reference to *RuPaul's Drag Race* Season One contestant Ongina, who uses the phrase during her tenure on the show].

*RuVealed*. The spin-off began when Logo re-aired the first season of *Drag Race* (billed as “The Lost Season”) in 2013, in-between the show’s fifth and sixth seasons. In late 2015 and early 2016, Logo re-aired seasons four and five of *Drag Race* in the *RuVealed* format. This series features commentary from RuPaul (who at times appears in the bottom left corner of the screen), along with pop-up text that gives additional information about the episode. Some of this additional information makes explicit the encoded Camp references by informing the audience of the source material. For instance, *RuVealed*’s pop-up text tells the viewer that the first mini-challenge of season four was inspired by Alexander McQueen’s 1999 Spring/Summer runway show (“RuPocalypse Now” 2015). In addition to being a brilliant strategy to re-market *Drag Race*, *RuVealed* demonstrates a type of meta-self-referentiality as the audience watches RuPaul watching and commenting on *Drag Race*. The supreme drag queen who knows all the Camp references gives “insider information” to viewers, thereby confirming herself as an all-knowing figure.

For the show’s 100<sup>th</sup> episode, *Drag Race* affirms its queer cultural status and legacy through Camp references. For the episode’s mini-challenge, RuPaul requires the season eight contestants to pose with the previous winners of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (“Keeping it 100!” 2016). This mini-challenge confers queer cultural status onto the previous winners and upholds them as legendary drag artists. Additionally, for the episode’s main challenge, the Season Eight contestants must design outfits based on a previous season’s design challenge. Former contestants walk the runway to present the different challenge options. Shannel presents the Season One “drag on a dime” challenge, Latrice Royale presents the Season Four pride float challenge, Violet Chachki presents the Season Three “money ball” challenge, Jinkx Monsoon presents the Season Five “sugar ball” challenge, Tyra Sanchez presents the Season Six “glitter



ball” challenge, Chad Michaels presents the Season Four “post-apocalyptic” challenge, Raja presents the Season Three cake challenge, Bebe Zahara Benet presents the Season Three hair challenge, Raven presents the Season Two “gone with the window” challenge, and Sharon Needles presents the Season Four “bitch ball” challenge. To determine which Season Eight contestant will assign the queens their looks, Season Two contestant Morgan McMichaels returns and stages a skit that references *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Through this hyper level of self-referentiality, *Drag Race* confirms the returning queens as legends who possess queer cultural status. At the same time, the show confirms its own legacy by restaging these challenges.

These various examples all demonstrate how *Drag Race* utilizes self-referentiality to build its own queer cultural legacy. The Camp references and character returns activate memories of prior seasons, thereby situating the source material (*Drag Race* itself) as worthy of remembrance. As each subsequent season builds upon the previous ones, the show becomes more multi-layered and complex in its self-referentiality. Audiences who have watched the show since its first seasons will recognize and remember these moments of recirculation, and audiences who have just started watching *Drag Race* will need to re-watch previous seasons in order to fully understand the show. Thus, both these explicit and encoded references operate in different ways to secure *Drag Race*’s legacy as a significant part of queer culture.

### ***Drag Race*’s Queer Pedagogy: Accumulating Queer Cultural Capital Through Camp**

In addition to conferring cultural status, the Camp references on *Drag Race* serve to educate younger queer audiences (and straight audiences) about queer culture. As discussed previously, queer social groups historically transferred Camp in its various forms to successive generations. Because non-normative queer kinship defies a heteronormative familial structure, information about Camp had to be learned through different channels. Queer mentorship is one

way to transfer Camp knowledge: mentors teach less “queer-educated” mentees about queer cultures/histories. In an interview on *Hey Qween*, RuPaul discusses the significance of this mentor-mentee relationship for transferring queer cultural knowledge. He says:

Growing up in the ‘70s, I always had gay mentors who taught me about Tallulah Bankhead and Tennessee Williams and, you know, Truman Capote or “Satyricon.” So *through our show we’ve tried to keep that mentorship going by teaching young people about our history...* For gay people, for so many years, we had to sort of have an underground dialogue to speak to one another because it wasn’t safe for us to be ourselves, so to have that sort of hidden, secret language through movies or whether you could say, “Darling you’re too short for that gesture,” or lines from movies or whatever, we’ve kept that going and that’s what we do on the show. All the producers are so gay, are really gay, so the ideas are really fun and they’re the world that I came from, and we want to pass that along to the younger kids. (theStreamtv 2014, italics mine)

RuPaul’s quotation speaks to the shift in how Camp operates among different generations, moving from a secret coded language to a (now) televisual form of queer communication.

RuPaul benefited from a mentor-mentee gay relationship, and he assumes this role for a wide audience through *Drag Race*. By displaying aspects of queer culture and history through *Drag Race*, RuPaul both identifies what counts as valuable queer culture and transfers this Camp canon to viewers. *Drag Race*’s pedagogical imperative functions as a sort of loving gesture from knowledgeable gay men to younger queers who may not benefit from a mentor-mentee relationship. In addition to introducing heterosexual audiences to (some) drag cultures, the show also educates queer social groups, passing down Camp to avoid queer cultural erasure.

This transference operates through both explicit and encoded references to queer culture. The explicit references inform the show’s audiences about queer history by naming outright the individual or event being invoked. For example, during the recap episode of season one, RuPaul presents viewers with a truncated version of drag history (“Extra Special Edition” 2009). In this episode, RuPaul says:

Next week we're gonna make history as we choose America's Next Drag Superstar. Now that's some change we can believe in, honey. And speaking of history, our contestants stand on the shoulders of those who came before them.

A black-and-white image of an unnamed drag queen being arrested by two police officers is juxtaposed with an image of the Season One queens standing in a row on the runway.

Queens who had something special to share with the world even when the world wasn't ready to receive it.

A black-and-white image of an unnamed queen in a sparkly bra and fringe skirt is shown.

*Their history is our history.* Don't forget, it was a drag queen that threw the first brick that started the Stonewall riots and ignited the Gay Liberation Movement. That's right, honey.

A color image of Marsha P. Johnson, along with her name, is shown on top of a pink background.

If you're out, proud, and living the gay life, you've got a drag queen to thank.

A montage of drag queens follows, which includes images of the named queens along with the following text: "1970 – Holly Woodlawn copulates with a soda bottle in *Trash*," "1972 – Divine eats doggie poo in *Pink Flamingos*," "1985 – Lady Bunny starts Wigstock," "1990 – Pepper LaBeija schools the children in *Paris Is Burning*," and "1997 – Lady Chablis appears in *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*."

Drag queens have continued to push the envelope and use their size thirteen pumps to prop the door open for a new generation of drag performers. I'm talking about legends.

A montage of named drag performers accompanies RuPaul's voiceover. These include (in order of appearance): Holly Woodlawn, Leigh Bowery, Dame Edna Everage, Tabboo, Sophia Lamar, Constance, Miss Guy, John Kelly, Lypsinka, Connie Girl, Varla Jean Merman, The Cockettes, Joey Arias, Kevin Aviance, Jackie Beat, Jer Ber Jones, Candis Cayne, Lahoma Van Zandt, Justin Bond, Cashetta, Lady Bunny and Jayne County, Mistress Formika, Kelly, Sherry Vine, Hedda Lettuce, Amanda Lepore, Flotilla Debarge, Princess Zoraya, Tobell, Flloyd, Miss Coco Peru, Perfidia, DeAundra Peek, and Linda Simpson. After Simpson, the montage shows still photographs of unnamed drag performers, including three members of The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence; Austin Young photography portraits of Peaches Christ, eventual Season Three winner Raja, Fade Dra, last image of Jeffrey Star.

Artists in high heels and lashes who've overcome discrimination to express themselves while entertaining us. They all deserve our applause and support for making the world a better place. ("Extra Special Edition" 2009, italics mine)

In this segment, the named drag artists receive cultural recognition as significant figures, while queens excluded experience potential cultural erasure. While this segment educates queer and straight viewers about certain aspects of drag history, the represented history is necessarily incomplete and more mainstream. For instance, the historical narrative put forward by this segment situates the 1969 Stonewall riots as *the* defining moment of Gay Liberation. While Stonewall is undeniably significant within queer history, earlier events such as the 1966 Compton's Cafeteria riots in San Francisco and the 1967 Black Cat protests in Los Angeles also play significant parts in this activist history. While viewers learn about Stonewall, they do not receive a fuller picture of queer history through *Drag Race's* pedagogy. At the same time, this montage situates *Drag Race* as a particularly noteworthy part of this historical lineage. RuPaul begins the segment by saying that the crowning of America's Next Drag Superstar is a history-making event, and she is absolutely correct, as the show has evolved into a queer cultural phenomenon and, more recently, a straight cultural phenomenon as well.

*Drag Race* also educates viewers by displaying mentor-mentee relationships among contestants. In the show's fourth season, the queens must decorate wooden boats according to the colors of the gay pride flag ("Float Your Boat" 2012). RuPaul introduces the challenge by once again invoking Marsha P. Johnson and her role in the Stonewall riots. During the accompanying episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked*, contestants Chad Michaels, Willam, and Sharon Needles educate contestant Jiggly Caliente about aspects of queer history ("Float Your Boat" 2012). After Caliente admits that she does not know her history, Michaels informs her that she must know this information in order to pass it down to successive generations. Michaels tells Caliente, "It's important to know where we came from, why we've done what we've done, and what we faced as not only drag queens but as gay men. It's our history" (ibid). The queens then

proceed to discuss forms of police harassment that drag queens historically faced and encourage Caliente to read the plaque outside The Stonewall Inn that commemorates the riots. This mentor-mentee relationship among contestants represents one explicit way that *Drag Race* utilizes queer pedagogy.

By contrast, because encoded Camp references require knowledge of the source material to be decoded, *Drag Race*'s pedagogy is not always a straightforward transmission from mentor to mentee. If the younger queer audiences/mentees do not possess queer cultural capital and fail to recognize a reference, then they potentially fail to identify the source material and learn the "lesson" being taught. For instance, in the show's third season, contestants perform in sci-fi trailers for the fake films, "Drag Queens in Outer Space: From Earth to Uranus" and "Drag Queens in Outer Space: Return to Uranus" ("Queens in Space" 2011). While these sketches restage skits from *The RuPaul Show*, they also pay homage to the 1991 drag film "Vegas in Space." However, *Drag Race* never names the two source materials. Viewers who are familiar with *The RuPaul Show* and *Vegas in Space* recognize how *Drag Race* references these parts of drag history. However, audiences who lack this knowledge fail to understand the references. When this mnemonic activation does not occur, the viewer fails to learn about *The RuPaul Show* and *Vegas in Space*. The original series and film fail to gain recognition from these viewers. Similarly, in the show's fourth season contestants must put together covers for their "dragazines," mock magazines ("Dragazines" 2012). This challenge pays homage to the Los Angeles-based drag-centric magazine, "Dragazine," which had a ten issue run beginning in April, 1991. As with the previous example, when viewers do not possess knowledge of this history, then the *Drag Race* challenge fails to activate remembrance of the source material.

When a queen lack queer cultural capital and fails to recognize a Camp reference, then *Drag Race* frames them as ignorant. For example, during the runway challenge of season seven's fifth episode, RuPaul asks contestant Miss Fame, "How is your head?" ("The DESPY Awards" 2015). This phrase is a reference to a call-and-response from the film *Elvira: Mistress of the Dark*. In the film, Elvira gets hit in the head by a marquee letter and is asked, "How's your head?" In response she says, "I haven't had any complaints yet." When RuPaul asks Miss Fame the question, judge Ross Matthews laughs because he recognizes the joke. Fame, however, answers the question by saying, "I'm thinking a lot, and I know you guys can see that. I don't even know how to turn off my thinker." In response to Fame's answer, guest judge Isaac Mizrahi and RuPaul both laugh, and judge Michelle Visage turns to RuPaul and says, "hasn't had any complaints yet." Miss Fame's inability to recognize this Camp reference becomes a running gag throughout the season, with RuPaul asking her the same question on multiple occasions and Fame continuously failing to answer correctly ("Ru Hollywood Stories" 2015). In the season's eighth episode, RuPaul asks Miss Fame the question again, and when Fame yet again fails to answer the call, RuPaul stops her mid-sentence and says, "You just missed that joke....I've said that to you several times....The answer's been roaming around, but you have to listen. So I'm going to ask you again. Miss Fame, how's your head?" ("Conjoined Queens" 2015). Miss Fame pauses, then answers, "Fine." RuPaul doubles over laughing. At this point in the show, Fame's naiveté becomes a joke in itself, and RuPaul's mentorship attempts to get her to answer correctly fail. When Miss Fame finally answers the call-and-response correctly during that episode's runway presentation, RuPaul congratulates her. This example demonstrates how *Drag Race's* pedagogy operates in an encoded manner. Rather than explicitly telling Miss Fame the answer to the joke, RuPaul repeats the call until Fame finally gets the response. How Fame ultimately ends

up learning the correct response is not shown; surely RuPaul, one of the other queens, or a crew member instructs her off-camera.

A similar pedagogical exchange occurs between RuPaul and Season Four contestant Jiggly Caliente. During the first episode of Season Four, RuPaul greets Jiggly during a workroom walkthrough by saying, “May I call you Jiggly?” (“RuPocalypse Now” 2012). Ru wants Jiggly to respond by saying, “Of course, darling, everybody does!” Ru is referencing the character Bubbles Devere from the UK television show *Little Britain*. On the show, Bubbles repeats the line, “Call me Bubbles, darling, everybody does!” Ru’s Camp reference here is not clear, and Jiggly understandably does not make the connection. Jiggly responds by saying, “Of course, mama, everything jiggles.” Like with Miss Fame, RuPaul continues to say “May I call you Jiggly?” throughout the season, but in this instance, Ru does not explicitly tell Jiggly that she is missing the reference. During the Season Four Reunion episode, Jiggly has been clued into the reference (“Reunion” 2012). When Ru asks Jiggly the phrase, Jiggly imitates Bubbles and responds, “Of course, darling, everybody does!” While Ru does not directly chastise Jiggly in the same manner as Miss Fame, Ru does acknowledge Jiggly’s lack of references. In one of her introductory videos during *RuPaul’s Drag Race All Stars* Season One, RuPaul says, “Just remember, she who laughs last probably didn’t get the joke in the first place. Sorry, Jiggly” (“RuPaul’s Gaff-In” 2012). Similar to the example with Miss Fame, Ru’s back-and-forth with Jiggly here serves a pedagogical function and demonstrates Jiggly’s lack of queer cultural capital (the shared knowledge of Bubbles Devere).

At times, the show’s pedagogical Camp references operate both to explicitly educate audience members and to confirm certain individuals as cultural insiders/outsideers. In the ninth episode of Season 7, “Divine Inspiration,” the queens must perform in musical adaptations of

scenes from John Waters' films *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble*. For this episode, John Waters guest stars on the judging panel. The inclusion of Waters and his oeuvre in this episode clearly identifies both the director and his films as having queer cultural significance. *Drag Race* not only establishes a connection between itself and Waters' works but also confers status onto the referenced source materials. Additionally, Waters' presence bestows Camp cultural status onto the show, as he is a renowned Camp figure and queer icon. Audiences unfamiliar with Waters ought to (and now will) know him and his work, thereby securing Waters' place within the timeline that *Drag Race* constructs of queer history through explicit references. This episode also features multiple encoded references to Waters' works, which activate remembrance of the director's films if the audience knows the source material going into the episode (Chart 1). The show's deployments of these encoded references also serve to confirm cultural insider/outsider status.

Prior to explicitly naming the John Waters main challenge, RuPaul includes references to Waters' films *Hairspray* (1988), *Female Trouble* (1974), *Crybaby* (1990), *Polyester* (1981), and *Pecker* (1998) in the episode's introductory video. In her video message, RuPaul says, "Good morning, Baltimore. Having female trouble? Well, don't be a Crybaby because all you need to become *America's Next Drag Superstar* is *Hairspray* and *Polyester*. Oh, and don't forget to hide your *Pecker*." The footage of contestants reacting to this string of references to Waters' works frames certain contestants as more knowledgeable than others about queer culture. As RuPaul says "Well don't be a crybaby," the camera focuses on a close-up of contestant Katya as she raises her eyebrows and closes her mouth in what reads as surprise and recognition. The camera then cuts to a close-up of Trixie Mattel as she places her hands over her cheeks, smiles, and tilts her head, followed by a shot of Ginger Minj as she opens her mouth and eyes wide, in what reads



as recognition. When RuPaul says "Hairspray," Katya lurches forward laughing. After RuPaul says "Pecker," the camera cuts to rapid shots of contestants' excited reactions: a close-up of Ginger Minj holding her hands over her mouth, gasping in excitement, and clapping, as well as a close-up shot of Katya clapping and Trixie smiling open-mouthed. The segment ends with a close-up of Katya clapping, moving up-and-down, and nodding her head while saying, "I love Steven Spielberg." Katya's intentional misidentification of Waters as the decidedly not Camp Steven Spielberg makes both Violet Chachki and Trixie laugh and lurch forward. In the episodes prior to this one, *Drag Race*'s narrative framed Katya, Trixie, and Ginger as knowledgeable campy queens. Their ability to recognize and place the encoded references to Waters' films identifies these queens as having superior queer cultural knowledge. By contrast, some of the younger queens seemingly fail to recognize the references. During this video message, the camera cuts to contestant Miss Fame, who stares at the screen with what reads as a blank stare or confusion. Fame, whom the show has already framed as lacking queer cultural knowledge, once again fails to "get" the references. She requires an explicit explanation of the week's challenge that the more knowledgeable contestants do not.

Similarly, RuPaul uses references to Waters' films during her introduction of the judges in order to create a hierarchy that affirms certain judges as queer cultural insiders. When RuPaul introduces Michelle Visage and Carson Kressley (Chart 1), she cites characters from the John Waters film *Hairspray*. As established queer "icons" on *Drag Race*, both Visage and Kressley have enough queer cultural capital to warrant their inclusion in these encoded references. By contrast, when RuPaul introduces guest judge, pop star Demi Lovato, she does not make any references to Waters' works. This seemingly innocuous exclusion actually works to confirm Visage and Kressley as queer cultural insiders and Lovato as a cultural outsider. While she has a

## Chart 1 – List of Camp References, “Divine Intervention” Episode

Time	Context	Reference Description	Source Material
3:32	RuPaul’s voiceover for the Ruvideo Message	“Ooh, girl. She done already done had herses.”	A saying RuPaul overheard a fast food worker speak
3:35	Start of the Ruvideo Message	“Good morning, Baltimore...”	Title of a song from the 2007 Broadway musical <i>Hairspray</i> , based on John Waters’ 1988 film of the same name
3:37	Continuation of the Ruvideo Message	“...having Female Trouble?...”	Title of the 1974 John Waters film <i>Female Trouble</i>
3:40	Continuation of the Ruvideo Message	“...well, don’t be a Crybaby...”	Title of the 1990 John Waters film <i>Crybaby</i>
3:46	Continuation of the Ruvideo Message	“...because all you need to become America’s Next Drag Superstar is Hairspray and Polyester...”	Titles of the 1988 John Waters film <i>Hairspray</i> and the 1981 film <i>Polyester</i>
3:50	Last part of the Ruvideo Message	“...oh, and don’t forget to hide your Pecker.”	Title of the 1998 John Waters film <i>Pecker</i>
4:16	Reading Mini-challenge	“Now, in the great tradition of <i>Paris Is Burning</i> , the library is about to be open”	Reference to the 1990 documentary <i>Paris Is Burning</i>
6:30	Trixie’s read of Katya	“Katya, where do you get your outfits? American Apparently not?”	Reference to the clothing store American Apparel
6:36	Trixie’s read of Ginger Minj	“Girl, did you ever save Carol Anne from the Poltergeist in the TV?”	Reference to the 1982 film <i>Poltergeist</i>
6:43	Trixie’s read of Violet Chachki	“Violet, I don’t believe the rumors. I don’t believe you took Sharon Needles’ crown. I don’t believe you’re taking this one either”	Reference to the controversy that Violet allegedly stole Sharon’s Season Four crown
7:40	RuPaul introducing the Main Challenge	Verbally mentions <i>Pink Flamingos</i> , <i>Hairspray</i> and shows cast photos of John Waters, Divine, and the cast of <i>Pink Flamingos</i> , as well as a video clip of Divine from the 1970 film <i>Multiple Maniacs</i>	Cites many John Waters films
8:30	John Waters Main Challenge	Three musical scenes: <i>Eggs</i> , <i>Cha Cha Heels</i> , and <i>Poo</i>	Based off scenes from the films <i>Pink</i>

			<i>Flamingos and Female Trouble</i>
13:05	<i>Cha Cha Heels</i> Skit	Kennedy Davenport playing Dawn Davenport and Katya playing Dawn's mom	Recreation of a scene from <i>Female Trouble</i>
13:29	Line from Katya during <i>Cha Cha Heels</i>	"Good girls don't wear Cha Cha heels"	Direct line from the film <i>Female Trouble</i>
13:32	Line from Katya during <i>Cha Cha Heels</i>	"But it's Christmas. Please, Dawn"	Direct line from the film <i>Female Trouble</i>
14:50	<i>Eggs</i> Skit	Ginger Minj playing "The Egg Lady" and Trixie Mattel playing "Babs Johnson"	Recreation of a scene from <i>Pink Flamingos</i>
15:40	<i>Poo</i> Skit	Pearl playing "Good Divine," Miss Fame playing "Bad Divine," and Violet Chachki playing "Babs Johnson"	Recreation of a scene from <i>Pink Flamingos</i>
20:10	RuPaul's entrance onto the runway	RuPaul wears a large white afro, pink hoop earrings, and a full-length gown with an image of her nude with a large white afro and large golden hoop earrings riding a black panther painted on the front	Homage to RuPaul's outfit in the film <i>Starrbooty</i>
20:30	RuPaul's introduction of Michelle Visage	"Our very own Mother Mouth Maybelle, Michelle Visage"	Reference to a character from <i>Hairspray</i>
20:33	Michelle's response to RuPaul's introduction	"I can see all your female trouble from here"	Reference to <i>Female Trouble</i>
20:38	RuPaul's introduction of Carson Kressley	"And the reigning Miss Baltimore Crabs, Carson Kressley"	Reference to a character from <i>Hairspray</i>
20:40	RuPaul's introduction of Carson Kressley	"Are you a fan of polyester?"	Reference to <i>Polyester</i>
22:00	RuPaul's commentary as Katya walks the runway	"Crochet, you stay"	Play on RuPaul's catchphrase, "Shantay, you stay"
22:43	Carson's commentary as Trixie walks the runway	"Molly ringworm"	Play on actress Molly Ringwald
22:44	John Waters' commentary as Trixie walks the runway	"Baby Jane as a young girl"	Reference to the 1962 film <i>Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?</i>
22:46	Michelle's commentary as Trixie walks the runway	"Romy and Mattel's high school reunion"	Reference to the 1997 film <i>Romy and Michele's High School Reunion</i>

23:04	Carson's commentary as Pearl walks the runway	"It's very toddlers and tequila"	Play on the reality TV show <i>Toddlers and Tiaras</i>
23:23	John Waters' commentary as Violet walks the runway	"She looks a little like Connie Marble"	Reference to Mink Stole's character from <i>Pink Flamingos</i>
25:46	RuPaul's introduction of the <i>Eggs</i> skit	"Your country breakfast is ready"	A line from RuPaul's film <i>Starrbooty – The Mack</i>
35:27	RuPaul's line to end the judging	"Bring back my pussywillows"	A line from the 1994 John Waters film <i>Serial Mom</i>

queer following (particularly among some younger queer people), Lovato lacks the queer cultural status necessary for inclusion in these encoded references. Similarly, when RuPaul introduces John Waters, she does not include any references to his works. Instead, the two have the following exchange:

RuPaul: And the man of the hour, legendary filmmaker and author John Waters! Welcome.

John Waters: Well, thank you, Miss RuPaul. It's obvious which category you fit into: the best.

RuPaul: I prefer the scat-egory category.

RuPaul does not introduce Waters using references to his films; however, the two have a campy exchange between them that includes a double entendre referencing feces. This exclusion of encoded references is not a slight, so much as it confirms Waters' status as the guest of honor during the show's proceedings. The inclusion of a campy exchange between the two still works to establish Waters' status as an ultimate Camp icon.

### **Camp Oblivescence: The Potential Erasure of Stephanie Yellowhair**

Having demonstrated some of the ways in which *Drag Race* utilizes Camp referencing pedagogically and self-referentially, I now return to the show's quoting of "Excuse my beauty" in order to unpack what happens when audiences fail to decode Camp. Because these references encoded throughout *Drag Race* enmesh the past (the source material) and the present (the speech acts, gestures, and performances on the show), they require memory activation in order to be disentangled. The past and present remain enmeshed when audiences unable to decode the references forego remembrance and "forget" the source material. Because "forgetting can be the selective process through which memory achieves social and cultural definition," this oblivescence makes *Drag Race* itself the defining medium through which cultural outsiders

remember the references (Küchler & Melion 1991:7). When audiences believe that these references originate on *Drag Race*, they unintentionally erase the bodies and historical legacies alluded to through Camp. As Moe Meyer asserts, in Camp postmodern parody the relationship between texts indicates power relationships between social agents. With *RuPaul's Drag Race*, the reality show itself is the dominant text, and the referenced source materials represent the subordinate texts subsumed within *Drag Race* and hailed through Camp. However, *Drag Race* is not always the dominant social agent with the most power in this relationship. When the show references materials from mainstream (heterosexual) U.S. popular culture, the referenced materials have more mainstream cultural status than the queer reality show. If the *Drag Race* audience fails to decode these references and “forgets” the referents, the materials from mainstream heterosexual U.S. popular culture do not lose money, status, or power. In contrast, sometimes *Drag Race* uses Camp to reference more obscure social agents who have less mainstream status and power than the reality television show. In this situation, *Drag Race* functions as the dominant social agent that hails subordinate social agents through Camp. If audiences fail to decode these references, then this erasure raises significant concerns because individuals who have less social privilege, economic capital, and power are forgotten.

To demonstrate the significance of this disparity, I analyze the *Drag Race* episode “Queens Behind Bars” and contrast the effects that forgetting has on references to U.S. popular culture and references to Stephanie Yellowhair’s resistive speech act “Excuse my beauty.” The episode’s main challenge parodies the show *Maude*, the 1970s sitcom starring Bea Arthur as an outspoken, politically-liberal feminist living in Tuckahoe, West Chester County, New York. For the *Drag Race* challenge, contestants must act in the fake sitcom “Hot in Tuckahoe” (“Queens Behind Bars” 2012). The queens perform “classic sitcom character types,” whose names

reference characters from well-known U.S. sitcoms and films (Chart 2). At the episode's beginning, RuPaul introduces the week's challenge via video message with a humorous string of references to these shows, and during the runway presentation and judge's critiques, RuPaul references additional mainstream sitcoms (Chart 2). If the audience is able to decode these encoded Camp references, then *Drag Race* confers queer cultural status upon the mainstream shows, distinguishes them as popular among queer audiences, and situates them as part of a shared cultural discourse. However, even if audiences fail to decode these references, the sitcoms and cultural producers associated with them do not suffer from the erasure. Because the shows are canonical and successful in the pantheon of U.S. television/filmic history, they retain their historical/cultural legacies and economic gains even if audiences fail to identify them. If the audience's "forgetting" erases the original actors and replaces them with contestants from the show, the original actors retain their established social status, economic privileges, and power. Regardless of whether they activate remembrance or not, these Camp references to mainstream (heterosexual) U.S. popular culture only benefit the source materials from their inclusion on *Drag Race*.

By contrast, *Drag Race*'s appropriation of Stephanie Yellowhair's phrase—"Excuse my beauty"—depoliticizes and trivializes the speech act's history, erases Stephanie's marginalized identity, and denies her appropriate cultural and economic capital. As discussed, the phrase originates from an episode of the show *Cops*, when Navajo transwoman Stephanie Yellowhair speaks back to a white police officer (Miro 2010). In its original context, the phrase functions as a form of witty resistance directed at oppressive systems of power by a poor woman of color being filmed and exploited by the show *Cops*. When it appears on *Drag Race*, Stephanie's phrase becomes a depoliticized joke and erases her marginalized identity. The phrase appears

## Chart 2 – List of Camp References, “Queens Behind Bars” Episode

Time	Context	Reference Description	Source Material
1:15	Dida Ritz’s exclamation upon entering the workroom	“Category is...Cheesecake!”	A phrase popularized by <i>Paris Is Burning</i>
1:57	The Princess’ message left on the mirror	“This is the beginning. The (only) beginning.”	Reference to RuPaul’s song “The Beginning”
2:58	Start of the Ruvideo Message	“Friends...”	Title of the 1990s US sitcom <i>Friends</i>
3:02	Continuation of the Ruvideo Message	“...you stand on the shoulder pads of a long line of Designing Women...”	Title of the 1980s US sitcom <i>Designing Women</i>
3:04	Continuation of the Ruvideo Message	“...Golden Girls who have traveled down the road and back again...”	Title and part of the theme song to the 1980s US sitcom <i>The Golden Girls</i>
3:09	Continuation of the Ruvideo Message	“...so, whether you’re looking for Mr. Big...”	Character from the 1990s US sitcom <i>Sex &amp; the City</i>
3:11	Continuation of the Ruvideo Message	“...or just working for Mr. Jefferson...”	Character from the 1970s US sitcom <i>The Jeffersons</i>
3:16	Continuation of the Ruvideo Message	“...America’s Next Drag Superstar needs the Will and Grace...”	Title of the 1990s US sitcom <i>Will &amp; Grace</i>
3:19	Continuation of the Ruvideo Message	“...to do whatever it takes to be Absolutely Fabulous...”	Title of the 1990s UK sitcom <i>Absolutely Fabulous</i>
3:22	End of the RuVideo Message	“...now, kiss my grits!”	Catchphrase from the 1970s US sitcom <i>Alice</i>
4:16	“Memorable Mugshot” Photo Shoot	Contestants are required to dress as arrestees and pose for “prison mug shots”	Parody of the Season 19, Episode 8 Mug Shot challenge from <i>America’s Next Top Model</i>
4:41	RuPaul’s Instruction to the Pit Crew	“Book ‘em, boys”	Play on the catchphrase “Book ‘em, dano” from <i>Hawaii Five-O</i>
5:33	RuPaul poses for the Mug Shot	RuPaul holds a sign that reads, “Tuckahoe City. Women’s Penal Facility. Ladyboi-4eva”	Name of the town in which the 1970s US sitcom <i>Maude</i> is set



6:00	RuPaul's exclamation as Madame LaQueer poses for her Mug Shot	"Honey, you got me scared straight"	Title of the 1970s US documentary <i>Scared Straight</i>
6:08	Sharon Needles' statement while getting ready to take her Mug Shot	"It's not my first time at the rodeo"	Line from the 1981 US film <i>Mommie Dearest</i>
6:10	RuPaul's exclamation as Sharon Needles poses for her Mug Shot	"Deliverance"	Name of the 1972 US film <i>Deliverance</i>
6:14	RuPaul's exclamation as Chad Michaels poses for her Mug Shot	"Attica"	Location of a 1971 US prison riot, about which a 1980s TV movie of the same name was made
6:16	RuPaul's exclamation as Chad Michaels poses for her Mug Shot	"Excuse My Beauty"	Line from Stephanie Yellowhair's arrest on the US show <i>Cops</i>
6:22	RuPaul's exclamation as Jiggly Caliente poses for her Mug Shot	"May I call you Miss Misdemeanor?"	Reference to the rapper Missy Misdemeanor Elliot
6:41	RuPaul's exclamation as Milan poses for her Mug Shot	"Bad boys. Whatchu gonna do?"	Line from the theme song to the 1980s US show <i>Cops</i>
6:49	RuPaul's exclamation as Latrice Royale poses for her Mug Shot	"If the wig don't fit, you can't acquit"	Play on a line from the OJ Simpson trial, said by defense attorney Johnnie Cochran
8:55	Madame LaQueer distributes the roles to her team	Roles include Rose, Marge the guard, Julia, Charlotte, and Karen	Roles are references to Rose Nylund from <i>Golden Girls</i> , Large Marge from the <i>Pee Wee Herman</i> movie, Julia Sugarbaker from <i>Designing Women</i> , Charlotte York from <i>Sex &amp; the City</i> , and Karen Walker from <i>Will &amp; Grace</i>
13:53	"Hot in Tuckahoe" sitcom challenge	The queens play four best friends who are arrested	Parodies the 1970s US sitcom <i>Maude</i> , specifically the fifth episode of season 3 in which Walter and Arthur go to jail

24:41	RuPaul's introduction of Michelle Visage	"Hey, it's that girl, Michelle Visage"	Title of the 1960s US sitcom <i>That Girl</i>
24:45	Michelle's response to RuPaul's introduction	"You spin me right 'round, baby"	Title of the 1985 Dead or Alive song
24:48	RuPaul's introduction of Billy B	"Hey Billy B, what's happening?"	Title of the 1970s US sitcom <i>What's Happening?</i>
25:50	RuPaul's commentary as Latrice Royale walks the runway	"I see the Beverly Hills, Billy"	Play on the title of the 1960s US sitcom <i>The Beverly Hillbillies</i>
26:18	Michelle Visage's response to Nicole Sullivan's comment that Dida Ritz looks like she has somewhere to go	"She's got a meetin in the ladies' room"	Title of a 1984 song by Klymaxx
26:20	RuPaul's commentary as Madame LaQueer	"Madame LaQueer as Folk"	Title of the 1990s UK/2000s US sitcom <i>Queer as Folk</i>
27:10	Max Mutchnik's commentary about Chad Michaels after RuPaul says she looks "very Florence and the Machine"	"The dog days are over"	Title of a 2009 song by Florence and the Machine
27:30	RuPaul's commentary as Jiggly Caliente walks the runway	"It's always Jiggly in Philadelphia"	Play on the title of the 2000s US sitcom <i>It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia</i>
27:55	Michelle Visage's commentary as Sharon Needles walks the runway	"Here's to the ladies who lunch"	Line from the song "Ladies who lunch" from the 1970 musical <i>Company</i>
28:04	Sharon Needles' response to Nicole Sullivan's comment, "I think Carol Burnett found her diva"	Sharon Needles tugs on her ear	Gesture by Carol Burnett used at the end of her live performances and her US TV show
28:07	RuPaul's commentary as Sharon Needles walks the runway	"I'm so glad we had this time together"	Line from the theme song to the 1960s US sitcom <i>The Carol Burnett Show</i>
28:10	RuPaul's commentary welcoming the queens back to the runway	"Welcome back, bosom buddies"	Title of the 1980s US sitcom <i>Bosom Buddies</i>

28:11	RuPaul's introduction of team Madame LaQueer's main challenge video	"Let's tune in to an all-new episode of <i>Hot in Tuckahoe</i> . You know, the one with the beaver"	Episode titles from the 1990s US sitcom <i>Friends</i> begin with, "The One With..."
30:23	RuPaul's introduction of team Willam's main challenge video	"It's time for another episode of <i>Hot in Tuckahoe</i> . You know, the one with the nuts"	Episode titles from the 1990s US sitcom <i>Friends</i> begin with, "The One With..."
32:05	RuPaul's commentary declaring the winning team	"One team was, in a word, a dy-no-mite"	Catchphrase from the 1970s US sitcom <i>Good Times</i>
32:26	RuPaul's commentary declaring the challenge winner	"One queen in particular was serving must-see TV"	Advertising slogan used by NBC in the 1990s to brand its prime time shows
33:05	RuPaul's commentary declaring the losing team	"Team Madame LaQueer, you've got some 'splainin to do"	Catchphrase from the 1950s US sitcom <i>I Love Lucy</i>
36:57	RuPaul's commentary ending judging deliberations	"Silence. I've made my decision. Bring back my girls"	Imitation of Maggie Smith from the 1960s UK film <i>The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie</i>
41:28	RuPaul's commentary at the episode's conclusion to the queens who move on	"My primetime nine, condragulations. You are all kings of queens."	Title of the 1990s US sitcom <i>The King of Queens</i>

once on “Queens Behind Bars,” once on the accompanying episode of “Untucked,” and once during the Season Four “Reunion” show. During the mini-challenge in “Queens Behind Bars,” the show parodies *America’s Next Top Model* and features a “Mugshot Photo shoot.” Contestants pose in front of a fake booking background while RuPaul shouts out references to prison-related items from popular culture. As contestant Chad Michaels poses for her photograph, RuPaul shouts, “Excuse my beauty.” Similarly, contestant Latrice Royale shouts the phrase while viewing her photograph in the accompanying “Untucked” episode. This new context erases Stephanie’s suffering body and replaces her with caricatures of individuals under arrest. Whereas Stephanie faces real harassment, marginalization, and oppression, RuPaul and *Drag Race* contestants operate in a safe space and are free to mock the violent penal system. In this context, audiences consume the phrase not as subversive resistance but as pure humor.

This erasure further marginalizes Stephanie when her appropriated speech act generates income. In August of 2013, queer designer Jason Wu<sup>65</sup> launches a signature makeup collection for Lancôme that featured an eyeshadow palette called “Excuse My Beauty” (Rapkin 2013). In interviews, Wu cites RuPaul as the phrase’s originator and gives Stephanie neither public recognition nor monetary compensation. When “Excuse my beauty” fails to activate remembrance of Stephanie’s identity, the resulting palimpsest memories erase Stephanie’s history and experience as a marginalized transwoman of color. Because archived *Drag Race* episodes become *lieux de mémoire* and official-ize a constructed history, they have the ability to exclude these already marginalized political queer histories. By understanding Camp referencing as a form of queer social memory and using this framework to analyze *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, I

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<sup>65</sup> Jason Wu is a huge fan of and frequent collaborator with RuPaul. Having drawn his early inspiration from RuPaul and Barbie, Wu has created a limited edition number of RuPaul Barbies (Spargo 2014). To date, he has designed a total of six RuPaul dolls.

seek to make explicit Stephanie's history and contribute a productive method for analyzing how Camp operates historically and contemporaneously. As *RuPaul's Drag Race* demonstrates, Camp has not "died;" on the contrary, Camp is constantly in flux as different generations of queer social groups utilize the practice for their own means. Camp has been and will continue to be an integral part of queer cultures, and analyzing the practice mnemonically ensures that marginalized histories do not get lost in the referencing.

## Chapter Two

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### “Available on iTunes” Camp Capitalism and RuPaul’s Commercial Drag Economy

As they do at the beginning of each episode, the queens gather around a television screen waiting for RuPaul’s video message to appear. Wearing her trademark blonde wig and a black strapless dress, Ru addresses the contestants with a cryptic string of references to her own discography.<sup>66</sup> She says, “Listen up, ‘Glamazons.’ America’s Next Drag Superstar is no one-hit wonder, so if you want to ‘Live Forever,’ you’ve got to be a ‘Champion.’ And with ‘A Little Bit of Love,’ even a ‘LadyBoy’ can be a ‘Cover Girl.’ And, for the record, those are all available on iTunes.” After RuPaul says “iTunes,” the camera cuts to a shot of contestant Kenya Michaels as she bends forward laughing. The footage then returns to RuPaul as she looks directly at the camera/audience. With her head tilted slightly downward, Ru smiles and winks. When she winks, an accompanying “cha-ching” sound effect plays. While the contestants do not yet know exactly what the week’s challenge will entail, these Camp references to RuPaul’s music imply that her discography will somehow be incorporated.

After entering the workroom and greeting the contestants, RuPaul relays the main challenge. Working in two teams, the contestants must produce and star in infomercials for RuPaul’s albums *Champion* and *Glamazon*. The queens each receive a different song from their respective album, and they must create a character and narrative to sell the music. Before

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<sup>66</sup> The songs “Glamazon” and “Live Forever” come from RuPaul’s 2011 album *Glamazon*. The songs “Champion,” “LadyBoy,” and “Cover Girl” come from RuPaul’s 2009 album *Champion*. While these two albums will be the focus of the week’s challenge, RuPaul also references her song “A Little Bit of Love,” which comes from her 1996 album *Foxy Lady*. While this song predates *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, RuPaul will remake the song for her 2017 album *Remember Me*.

departing the workroom, RuPaul delivers a spin on one of his now signature catchphrases, “Gentlemen, start your engines, and may the best woman win!” This time, RuPaul changes the declaration by saying, “may the best *seller* win!” As Ru says “seller,” he raises the pointer finger of his right hand into the air.

Later in the episode, after the contestants film their infomercials and walk the runway, the two teams stand before the judging panel. RuPaul introduces the “RuCo records infomercials,” starting with “Team *Glamazon*.” The team’s video advertises six songs from Ru’s album, and the infomercial concludes with the queens declaring, “Get *Glamazon* on Amazon!” The video for “Team *Champion*” plays next and plugs five songs from the album. At the infomercial’s conclusion, the contestants shout, “Available on iTunes!” After screening the second infomercial, the footage cuts back to a smiling RuPaul. Addressing the contestants, RuPaul says, “That was dragnificent ladies! If I were watching back at home, I would place my order right now.” RuPaul laughs and throws her head back, as the camera cuts to contestant Jiggly Caliente smiling and laughing on stage. When the footage cuts back to RuPaul, she looks directly into the camera. No longer smiling, Ru lowers her voice and looks the camera/viewer up-and-down. Speaking with faux annoyance, Ru says, “I mean, really, do it. Now.”



Six queens stand on the runway facing RuPaul and the panel of judges. To each queen’s left is a white rectangular stand branded with the 2015 RuPaul’s DragCon logo. Atop each stand sits an object, on display for the judges and *Drag Race* audience. For this week’s main challenge, the queens must create merchandise representative of their drag brand. The contestants must design a product and shoot an accompanying commercial that markets their commodities. The top two queens earn the prize of having their items manufactured and sold at the 2017 RuPaul’s

DragCon event in Los Angeles. The contestants' prototypes vary considerably in quirkiness and utility. Most of the queens design commodities that sell a campy image or aesthetic more so than an actual good. Known for her wig reveals during high energy performances, Roxxy Andrews sells a "Wig Tricks" instructional DVD and accompanying wig glue. Outspoken about her struggles with depression and anxiety, Katya Zamolodchikova designs a calming "Thorazine-filled" moisturizing body spray. A masterful dancer known for her over-the-top energy and signature tongue pop, Alyssa Edwards sells an energy drink labeled "DDG: Drop Dead Gorgeous." Known for her witty catchphrases and love of plastic surgery, Detox creates a "trash-talking trash receptacle." A queen known for designing plastic outfits, Alaska Thunderfuck 5000 markets duct tape adorned with images of her face. A queen well-versed in the art of "spilling tea," Tatianna bedazzles mugs and sells them as a designer tea set.

The judges evaluate each product and commercial according to how well they match the queen's "brand" and how well they could sell. Speaking to Alyssa Edwards, RuPaul expresses approval of the energy drink concept. At the same time, however, Ru proposes a different marketing strategy. Speaking to Alyssa, RuPaul says, "I think it will sell. I think you should've called it *Tongue Pop*, though. Give me some of that Tongue Pop, baby. I'm a marketing genius. I marketed subversive drag to 100 million motherfuckers in the world. I'm a marketing motherfucking genius over here."



These two scenes from *RuPaul's Drag Race* Season Four and *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars* Season Two, respectively, represent key moments in the development of what I call "Camp Capitalism." I coin this term to describe the process by which *RuPaul's Drag Race* creates and expands RuPaul's commercial drag empire through Camp. As I demonstrated in the previous



chapter, *RuPaul's Drag Race* uses Camp references to confer queer cultural status and capital. I now build on this argument by demonstrating how the show similarly deploys Camp for economic gains. I suggest that, through *RuPaul's Drag Race*, RuPaul and World of Wonder use Camp to create a *Drag Race*-centric economy. While the *Drag Race* phenomenon started as a single television show with a small fan following, the franchise now includes multiple television series and interactive live events (including internationally touring shows). The fan base has increased exponentially to include both LGBTQ and heterosexual viewers, and the franchise itself has gained massive mainstream recognition (both through critical accolades and social visibility).

This new economy provides participating drag performers and corporations with opportunities to accrue economic and social capital. As I did in Chapter One, I incorporate Pierre Bourdieu's definitions for capital here. Bourdieu defines *economic capital* as a command of economic resources (e.g., money and assets that directly convert into money). Bourdieu defines *social capital* as, "resources which are linked to a possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu 2004:21). One's amount of social capital directly relates to levels of access to collective social intuitions. The *RuPaul's Drag Race* franchise creates heretofore nonexistent opportunities for drag performers to accrue economic and social capital. The *RuPaul's Drag Race* brand, organized by World of Wonder, is now an institutionalized social/economic network. Through their participation on *Drag Race*, some drag performers gain access to this social network that provides them with different opportunities to accumulate wealth and status. Fans of the show invest time and money into the *Drag Race* economy: they spend money at interactive events (such as the RuPaul's DragCon weekend), and they purchase *Drag Race* contestants'

merchandise. The *RuPaul's Drag Race* phenomenon has created a hierarchy, wherein drag queens lucky enough to compete on the show become part of RuPaul and World of Wonder's international corporate brand. Association with the show *can* translate into increased opportunities for accumulating wealth and social status.<sup>67</sup>

With this chapter, I lay the theoretical groundwork for understanding how Camp plays an integral role in *Drag Race's* economy. Through content analysis of the show's aired episodes, I trace the development of Camp Capitalism on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Having meticulously studied *RuPaul's Drag Race*, I suggest that Camp Capitalism operates in two overarching "phases." During these two phases, RuPaul employs different Camp marketing strategies. Through these phases of Camp Capitalism, RuPaul defines his distinctly queer brand of Camp consumerism and markets Camp commodities through his *Drag Race*-based economy. Understanding how Camp Capitalism operates on the show allows me to then evaluate how these consumer practices both operate at RuPaul's DragCon and impact Los Angeles-based drag performers. Throughout this chapter, I discuss how RuPaul uses Camp marketing strategies on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. I base my arguments on how the figure of RuPaul, as depicted on *Drag Race*, uses Camp. While I reached out to RuPaul and World of Wonder, they did not respond to my requests for interviews. Because I do not know their personal marketing plans, I base my arguments on the Camp strategies as depicted on *Drag Race*.

I divide this chapter into three sections that explore different aspects of Camp Capitalism and its relationship to RuPaul's drag empire. In the first section, I theorize Camp Capitalism as a form of consumerism both related to but distinct from traditional forms of Camp. I begin by

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<sup>67</sup> However, even among *Drag Race*-affiliated performers, a hierarchy exists wherein the "fan favorite" *Drag Race* contestants tend to gain more opportunities. While the *Drag Race* brand brings an increased amount of social status and potential economic gains, these benefits are not equally distributed among all participants. I address this issue more directly in Chapter Four.

discussing my analysis of capitalism, consumerism, and commodities as an intervention into Camp scholarship. After defining my theoretical engagement, I then demonstrate how Camp Capitalism is not an inherently oxymoronic concept. While some (queer) scholars might argue that queer Camp cannot be commodified and must always be a subversive tactic, I suggest that the success of *RuPaul's Drag Race* proves the ineffectiveness of this binary framework. By putting into conversation historical analyses of Camp with more recent scholarship on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, I demonstrate how RuPaul's Camp Capitalist enterprise does in fact align with queer Camp practices. I end this section by clarifying exactly how my framework of Camp Capitalism is useful for analyzing the different, shifting ways that *Drag Race* utilizes Camp.

In my second section, I trace the development of Camp Capitalism's first phase, which encompasses *RuPaul's Drag Race* Seasons One through Four (2009-2012). During this phase, RuPaul slowly and strategically introduces Camp elements into his marketing strategies. This technique builds the audience's tolerance for Camp consumerism, which allows RuPaul to then embrace an explicitly "shameless" form of self-promotion. By redefining the concept of "shamelessness" with a positive Camp valence, RuPaul differentiates his Camp consumerism from corporate consumerism. RuPaul can then shamelessly sell his commodities to the audience while coming across as flirty and fun rather than desperate. This chapter's first opening scene from *Drag Race* Season Four represents the culmination of Camp Capitalism's first phase. This example demonstrates how RuPaul is able, by Season Four, to shamelessly sell his music through both the episode's main challenge and a campy call-to-buy explicitly directed at the audience.

My third section explores the development of Camp Capitalism's second phase, which encompasses *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars* Season One to Season Two (2012-2016). Having

built a foundation for Camp consumerism, *Drag Race* then increasingly markets Camp commodities and builds an interactive Camp-based economy. On the show, RuPaul exponentially increases the shameless marketing of his own commodities, and the show itself begins to sell original content featured during the challenges. RuPaul also teaches the contestants to brand themselves by adopting shameless Camp consumerism. The *Drag Race* brand also expands to include live events in which fans can participate—for a price. Through these different processes, RuPaul and *Drag Race* create an entire commercial drag economy rooted in RuPaul's brand, as well as the sale and consumption of Camp. While decidedly capitalist in nature, this emerging economy differs significantly from typical heterosexual forms of consumerism because Camp determines the value of commodities. This chapter's second opening scene from *All Stars* Season Two represents the culmination of Camp Capitalism's second phase. This example demonstrates how RuPaul and World of Wonder effectively connect the show to RuPaul's extended economy by selling products from the show at RuPaul's DragCon. The *Drag Race* contestants now market themselves by creating campy products, which accumulate economic value as Camp commodities. I end this chapter by discussing the potential impacts of Camp Capitalism's emerging third phase.

### **Theorizing Camp Capitalism**

To develop my concept of Camp Capitalism, I must first situate my argument within the current body of *RuPaul's Drag Race* scholarship. As I discussed in my Introduction, the majority of these texts analyze the show in terms of identity politics. Through primarily content analysis of the show's episodes, these texts investigate issues including how *Drag Race* represents/stereotypes gendered, racialized, and queer identities (Anthony 2014, Chernoff 2014, Gamson 2013, Hernandez 2014, Jenkins, Kohlsdorf 2014, Marcel 2014, Mayora 2014, Morrison

2014, Norris 2014, Rodriguez y Gibson 2014, Strings and Bui 2014, Zhang 2016); how the show depicts “successful” drag (Edgar 2011, Collins 2017); how *Drag Race* creates a shared queer space (Hicks 2013, Simmons 2014); and how the show comments on reality television (de Villiers 2012). This focus on representation within the scholarship makes sense, given the show’s significance as a representation of queer and drag cultures/histories. When these texts do address *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and capitalism, the majority do so only in passing. These scholars tend to make a broad claim about RuPaul’s commodification and selling of drag for mainstream audiences, without providing a thorough analysis of *how* the show markets drag (Gamson 2013, Kohlsdorf 2014). While these authors accurately assess that RuPaul, through *Drag Race*, commodifies and sells a certain representation of drag, they make this argument without fleshing out in enough detail exactly how this process works.

As of this writing, four articles more directly study *RuPaul’s Drag Race* in relationship to capitalism. David Gudelunas argues that *Drag Race* subverts corporate advertising through a process called “culture jamming,” Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns suggests that *Drag Race*’s mini- and main challenges subvert the logic of global capitalism, and Alyxandra Vesey analyzes *Drag Race*’s relationship to the recording industry in terms of neoliberal and post-racial politics. While these three authors all present brilliant analyses of the show, I focus here on Lori Hall-Araujo’s study of RuPaul’s parodic consumerism. This particular analysis develops an insightful framework for understanding *Drag Race* and its relationship to Camp. In a relatively short six-page article, Hall-Araujo examines how RuPaul uses parody to both participate in and critique consumer culture (Hall-Araujo 2016:233). She begins the article by demonstrating how drag is both an ambivalent and parodic practice. Citing Judith Butler, Hall-Araujo asserts that drag expresses ambivalence about social norms and can, therefore, simultaneously subvert and

conform to normative expectations (ibid 235). Drawing on theories of intertextuality from dress and performance studies, Hall-Araujo defines parody as a method for inserting one's voice into an existing discourse, thereby playing with intertextual gaps for comedic effect and to create new meanings (ibid 236). Drag, then, is both an ambivalent and parodic practice. Through parody, drag comments on identity and ideology, and because drag is ambivalent by nature, the commentary can both subvert and conform to norms. Hall-Araujo then addresses RuPaul's ambivalent parody in relationship to capitalism. First, Hall-Araujo suggests that, in selling products to mass consumers, RuPaul includes, "insider messages to queer followers," which create different responses to the same commodity (ibid 236). My first chapter proves this passing assertion in detail by demonstrating how RuPaul uses Camp referencing to activate memory differently for audiences with and without queer cultural knowledge.

Then, Hall-Araujo addresses how RuPaul uses parodic consumerism to both participate in and subvert capitalism. Because *Drag Race* showcases drag (an ambivalent practice) and emphasizes parody, the show provides contestants and judges with the ability to both subvert and participate in consumerism. Therefore, Hall-Araujo asserts, "*Drag Race* reflects ambivalence about the consumer culture it parodies and from which it profits" (Hall-Araujo 2016:235). She locates this ambivalence in how RuPaul uses a form of parodic consumerism that differentiates himself and his consumers from standard forms of consumption. She argues that *Drag Race* brands parodic drag identities and circulates them through television and other media platforms, including podcasts, streaming services, *YouTube* channels, and live performances (ibid 235). This widespread circulation facilitates audience participation in a global capitalist marketplace. In a lengthy passage, Hall-Araujo lays out exactly how RuPaul uses parody to simultaneously comment on and participate in consumerism:

RuPaul Charles has made a considerable fortune from drag brand product sales and his music, which he unapologetically promotes. Yet his shameless merchandising and marketing, which includes regularly announcing his music's iTunes availability, has become a running joke on *Drag Race*. In parodying his own commercialism, he profits from fans' consumerism while mocking the capitalist system. Unlike the products he disparages for being designed to persuade consumers they are imperfect unless they consume, his products are designed to reinforce a sense of perfect imperfection and self-acceptance among anyone who feels marginalized....In a sense, purchasing RuPaul products (and those he endorses on his podcast and show) allows buyers to participate in consumerism with a sense of being above ordinary vulgar consumerism—an uneasy, ambivalent position to say the least. (ibid 239)

Hall-Araujo makes some brilliant observations in this passage. RuPaul absolutely distinguishes his form of consumerism as different from “vulgar consumerism,” and the primary distinguishing factor revolves around the question of lack. As Hall-Araujo suggests, traditional forms of advertising identify a lack within a target audience that then must be filled by consumption (e.g., buy our makeup to fix your skin and make yourself better). RuPaul's consumerism does not take this approach, and I agree with Hall-Araujo's assertion that Ru's consumerism embraces a kind of self-acceptance. However, as I demonstrate in Chapter 3, despite this approach, RuPaul's consumerism ultimately does create a lack within the fan base that must be filled by consumption. Hall-Araujo also accurately suggests that RuPaul turns his consumerism into a parodic joke, particularly through his marketing strategies and catchphrases.

While this passage wonderfully identifies some aspects of RuPaul's consumerism, Hall-Araujo's argument must be developed in more detail with more attention paid to Camp. RuPaul's parody is, specifically, Camp. Identifying the practice as Camp is crucial because Camp scholarship provides the necessary background and analytical frameworks for understanding how RuPaul's parody operates. For instance, my analysis of Camp referencing provides a more thorough perspective on how RuPaul includes multiple messages for different audiences in the same commodity. Similarly, understanding RuPaul's parodic consumerism as specifically Camp

Capitalism is crucial for tracking exactly how RuPaul uses Camp marketing to create a queer, Camp-based economy. While Hall-Araujo correctly asserts that RuPaul frames his consumerism in contrast to “vulgar consumerism,” she does not emphasize the queer differences in these practices. RuPaul uses a specifically queer form of parody, Camp, to create a specifically queer form of marketing and Camp-based economy. The distinction is not just between parodic and vulgar, but also between queer and heterosexist. Additionally, although Hall-Araujo accurately identifies RuPaul’s consumerism as “shameless,” her discussion does not provide enough analysis to show how exactly shamelessness operates in this consumerism. As my chapter demonstrates, RuPaul’s consumerism because specifically “shameless” at a particular moment in the development of Camp Capitalism. RuPaul redefines the concept of shamelessness in order to give his consumerism a specifically Camp-based value system. While I agree with Hall-Araujo’s claim, I want to demonstrate how RuPaul’s consumerism evolves over time. The shameless quality arrives at an integral moment in Camp Capitalism’s development.

While I identify areas for further study in my analysis of Hall-Araujo’s article, I laud her for providing this framework to understand Ru’s consumerism. In her article, Hall-Araujo states how she writes this piece for the journal *Film, Fashion & Consumption*’s “Short Cuts” section, which encourages shorter analyses that spark discussion across disciplines. Because of this shortened context, Hall-Araujo encourages interdisciplinary scholars to build on her framework. In her abstract, she writes, “it is my hope that experts in other fields, including queer theorists who study drag culture, will further enrich the conversation with their contributions” (ibid 233). Challenge accepted. My goal in developing a concept of Camp Capitalism is to show how RuPaul’s parodic consumerism is a specifically queer and Camp phenomenon. I want to trace the development of Camp Capitalism through a chronological, content-based analysis of the show’s



episodes in order to show how Camp Capitalism evolves over time. RuPaul does not immediately embrace shameless marketing; instead, he and World of Wonder incorporate a scaffolding process into *Drag Race*. By slowly and strategically introducing Camp elements into the show's marketing strategies, RuPaul lays the groundwork for creating a queer, Camp-based economy. My analysis provides a more thorough investigation into RuPaul's consumerism that, I hope, highlights the nuances of this ambivalent and parodic practice.

Before starting my analysis of the show, I must first prove why such a concept of Camp Capitalism can exist. Some queer scholars may find my use of the term "Camp Capitalism" off-putting and/or oxymoronic. For many of these scholars, Camp must be a specifically queer, radical practice that cannot be commodified—when commodification occurs, Camp ceases to exist and becomes a lesser form (e.g., a camp effect, lowercase "camp," or pop camp). Because many queer scholars sought to reclaim Camp after Susan Sontag's supposed appropriation and de-gaying of the practice, these authors understandably want to celebrate Camp's queer, radical roots. However, defining Camp in such a static manner fails to consider how Camp necessarily changes over time as (certain) queer people gain more civil rights and economic access. As I have discussed in my Introduction and Chapter One, Camp ought to be understood as an ever-evolving practice that queer people utilize in a variety of ways when responding to their changing social, cultural, and political positions. For me, then, Camp is not incommensurate with capitalism. On the contrary, RuPaul's Camp Capitalism is actually an extension of Camp's existing relational history to commodities and capitalism. Before moving into my analysis of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, I demonstrate how Camp Capitalism fits into this lineage, as described in Camp scholarship. Specifically, I look at Camp and the use of codes, Camp and queer value, and Camp and marketing strategies.

One recurring aspect in Camp's relationship to dominant cultural commodities is the use of Camp codes. Historically, queer people would often hide Camp codes within seemingly heterosexual products from dominant culture (Chauncey 1994:288, Tinkcom 2002:45-46). During this time period, queer people had no and/or limited access to positive cultural representations in mainstream media and dominant cultural commodities. Because closeting was a mode of survival, queer producers of dominant cultural commodities often could not outright represent themselves without fear of retribution. Instead, queer people would hide Camp codes within "straight" commodities. Queer consumers could identify these codes and read a queer meaning or narrative into the commodity, which would remain hidden-in-plain-sight from straight audiences. In this situation, the product had to remain "closeted" because taking on an overtly queer identity would prevent the product from having any value in a heterosexist economy. The product would not receive circulation if the queer identity was too overt. As a result of this situation, queer artists would sometimes have to "de-gay" themselves in order to have value within dominant heterosexual capitalism.<sup>68</sup> While *RuPaul's Drag Race* explicitly embraces queer identities (most often gay men and, to a lesser extent, trans women), the show still incorporates Camp codes. As my first chapter demonstrates, the show maintains this queer legacy in using Camp codes to activate memory differently for viewers with queer cultural knowledge. The show exists in a completely different, no-longer-closeted context, but the practices are still distinctly Camp.

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<sup>68</sup> Margaret Thompson Drewal demonstrates this point in her analysis of a 1980s performance by Liberace and the Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall. Drewal suggests that because Camp is a counter hegemonic gay signifying practice, it "undermines the very foundations on which democratic capitalism was built. The signifying subject of Camp, then, must be concealed when in the service of the corporate world lest capitalism itself be called into question" (Drewal 1994:177-178). For Drewal, when "corporate capitalism" appropriates Camp and detaches the practice from gay subjects, the remaining product is a depoliticized form of residual camp or a camp trace (ibid 150).

Historically, Camp provides ways for queer consumers to value dominant products and for straight corporations to target queer audiences. Because heterosexual capitalism marketed so few distinctly LGBT commodities, queer consumers would often appropriate objects from dominant heterosexual culture and give them a queer value (Britton 1999:140, Bronski 1984:41, Cresap 2004:187-188, Dyer 1986:178, Farmer 2000:111, Kates 1997:133, Padva 2000:237, Smelik 1998:141, Wolf 2013:289, Zimmerman 2012:142). This process often involves a recirculation of older styles and/or a celebration of “bad taste.”<sup>69</sup> In both instances, queer consumers claim commodities with seemingly no value in a dominant heterosexist capitalist economy. By then mocking the objects and/or celebrating the commodities, these audiences create a distinctly Camp taste for valuing the products. An object that has no value for straight people can have Camp value for queer people. Once heterosexual corporations began to see LGBT audiences as potential consumers, they would often use Camp as a marketing strategy (Gluckman and Reed 1997, Piore 1997, Strub 1997). By appropriating a straight version of Camp into their marketing strategies, these corporations attempt to turn certain queer audiences (predominantly white and wealthy cis men) into consumers.

With *Drag Race*, RuPaul and World of Wonder adopt both techniques in order to build his own queer, Camp-based economy and consumer fan base. Instead of appropriating objects from dominant heterosexual culture, RuPaul markets his own products. Instead of redefining

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<sup>69</sup> In their respective writings on Camp, Susan Sontag and Andrew Ross argue similar points about Camp’s relationship to commodities/objects in terms of re-circulation. Ross suggests that Camp, “generates its own kind of economy” through the “re-creation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labor,” and Sontag argues that Camp sensibility gravitates toward objects from old-fashioned time periods (Ross 1989:151, Sontag 1964:524). For both Ross and Sontag, Camp repurposes objects and imbues them with a specific Camp value (frequently in opposition to dominant economies). I spend less time engaging with Ross and Sontag’s discussions of Camp commodities and value because these authors de-emphasize the significance queer producers/consumers play in this economy. Nevertheless, their arguments support the assertions made by queer scholars on Camp commodities and economy.

heterosexual commodities according to Camp taste, RuPaul reframes heterosexual marketing through a Camp valence. Whereas historically queer people redefine straight commodities by embracing “bad taste,” RuPaul redefines straight marketing by embracing shameless self-promotion. RuPaul queers consumerism to create his own form of Camp marketing, going on to sell Camp commodities, and to build a Camp-based economy. RuPaul builds this consumerism squarely on the queer tradition of creating Camp value out of seemingly valueless commodities. Tracing how RuPaul’s consumerism has come center stage provides us a prime example of the powers of both capitalism and drag performance.

### **Phase One: Introducing *Shameless* Consumerism Through Camp Marketing**

Camp Capitalism’s first phase gradually and strategically introduces Camp as a queer marketing strategy. While *Drag Race* sells RuPaul’s products from the show’s first episode, these strategies evolve over time into “shameless” Camp consumerism. Through gaystreaming, the show promotes drag and Camp to both queer and straight audiences. Because this mixed audience does not necessarily understand Camp, *Drag Race* cannot immediately market RuPaul’s products through parodic consumerism. Doing so could risk isolating the audience who misinterprets Camp Capitalism as desperate, unintentionally shameless marketing. The show must gradually bring the audience “in on the joke” of RuPaul’s consumerism so that consumers understand how RuPaul’s over-the-top marketing is intentionally parodic. Through a scaffolding process, *Drag Race* introduces Camp more and more into its promotional strategies, pushing the boundaries of parodic consumerism. By the end of Phase One, RuPaul embraces a full-on “shameless” Camp Capitalism that both mocks corporate consumerism and instructs the audience to buy RuPaul’s products. This stage sets the framework for RuPaul’s emerging Camp economy, which Phase Two then expands on exponentially.

As I discussed in Chapter One, *Drag Race*'s first season uses Camp primarily to situate the show within both drag history and the 2009 reality television landscape. While Season One of *Drag Race* introduces some of the show's foundational marketing opportunities, these moments often work more to establish RuPaul's legacy rather than to sell RuPaul's products. Additionally, these strategies do not yet directly incorporate Camp. The first episode begins with RuPaul reciting a voiceover excerpt from his autobiography, *Lettin' It All Hangout*, played over photographs of young RuPaul ("Drag On A Dime" 2009). The shot transitions into various clips from his iconic music video "Supermodel," his 1990s VH1 talk show, *The RuPaul Show*, and various print advertising campaigns and magazine covers from his career (including L.A. Eyeworks, *Paper Magazine*, and MAC *Viva Glam*). Over these various images, RuPaul voiceovers, "As the original supermodel of the world, I've had all my dreams come true. And now, it's time for me to share the love. I'm looking for America's Next Drag Superstar." The opening then transitions into shots of the Season One contestants, along with footage from the season.

Rather than imploring the audience to purchase products, this opening sequence serves more to establish RuPaul's legacy by acknowledging his cultural impact. RuPaul is the "supermodel of the world" because she has accomplished these various commercial feats. Her iconic status within popular culture, represented here by these contributions to music, television, and advertisement campaigns, marks her as the preeminent drag figure in whose heels the contestants hope to follow. While this opening does market "Supermodel" by including the song, the voiceover does not tell the audience to purchase the music and/or music video. The song's inclusion functions more as legacy work and less as a direct call-to-buy. The opening does promote L.A. Eyeworks, *Paper Magazine*, and MAC *Viva Glam* because these companies are

official sponsors for Season One. This inclusion, thus, markets these corporations by tying them to RuPaul's career. The winner of *Drag Race* Season One earns the privilege of starring in ad campaigns for these companies. In essence, being America's Next Drag Superstar means emulating RuPaul's legacy by contributing to these corporation's economic gain. Still, the opening does not direct audiences to invest monetarily these different promotional campaigns.

The first episode's "lip sync for your life" further establishes RuPaul's legacy and introduces a recurring marketing strategy for selling RuPaul's music. At the episode's climax, the bottom two contestants must perform RuPaul's hit 1992 single "Supermodel." Representative of her iconic drag career prior to *RuPaul's Drag Race*, "Supermodel" reminds viewers that Ru's queer cultural status is also intrinsically tied to her heretofore unprecedented commercial success as a mainstream recording artist. Ru introduces this lip sync by citing the song's legacy and commercial success. Ru tells the bottom two contestants, "Prior to tonight, you were asked to prepare a lip sync performance of a song that is near and dear to my heart, and is paying the mortgage on several homes around the world: "Supermodel" ("Drag On a Dime" 2009). This introduction both provides a campy commentary on RuPaul's financial success vis-à-vis "Supermodel" and (re)introduces the single to viewers. The song's inclusion, thus, both reestablishes RuPaul's cultural legacy and potentially leads to future sales for audience members who go on to purchase the song. This first lip sync functions as a transitional moment between RuPaul's pre- and post-*Drag Race* career. After this episode, *Drag Race* no longer features the song "Supermodel," most likely because World of Wonder does not own the song's copyright.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *Drag Race* almost never features songs from RuPaul's earlier discography because playing this music requires additional licensing fees. As I discuss later in this chapter, RuPaul smartly remixes his early songs so that his current production company and World of Wonder gain access to different version of this pre-*Drag Race* discography.

This one-time use of “Supermodel,” then, serves more as a transitional moment in RuPaul’s career than as a marketing strategy for RuPaul’s full back catalogue.

In Season One, challenges that reference RuPaul’s career also serve to establish her legacy by having contestants fill her heels. In the fourth episode, contestants must create screen tests for a MAC *Viva Glam* ad campaign, for which RuPaul was the original spokesperson (“MAC/Viva Glam Challenge” 2009). This challenge pays homage to Ru’s advertising legacy without directly selling any of her products. Successfully emulating RuPaul becomes the ultimate goal for this challenge, even though RuPaul herself does not necessarily benefit monetarily from the screen test. However, the screen tests do benefit the MAC *Viva Glam* campaign by providing video advertisements.<sup>71</sup> While this particular challenge is more about honoring Ru’s legacy and following in her footsteps, the season’s final challenge requires contestants to market a RuPaul product (“Grand Finale” 2009). Contestants must write and perform a solo rap verse that will be included on a remix version of RuPaul’s new single, “Cover Girl.” Additionally, the queens must perform choreography for the song’s music video, ultimately serving as RuPaul’s backup dancers/guest stars. This challenge sets the standard for the final task of subsequent seasons: contribute to a RuPaul music single and video, which will be marketed to *Drag Race* audiences (“Grand Finale” 2010, “Grand Finale” 2011, “Grand Finale” 2012, “The Final Three Hunty” 2013, “Sissy That Walk” 2014, “And the Rest is Drag” 2015, “The Realness” 2016, “Category Is” 2017). For Season One, RuPaul smartly releases a remix version of “Cover Girl” that features the winning contestant’s rap verse. Fans who wish to purchase this version of “Cover Girl” must spend additional money on the remix. Here, RuPaul displays her marketing savvy by creating multiple remixes of the same song, thereby giving fans

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<sup>71</sup> Although MAC *Viva Glam* does not air these different screen shots for their official campaign, the videos function on *Drag Race* as advertising.

additional opportunities to spend money. With this challenge, contestants move from emulating RuPaul's career to expanding her commercial enterprise.

This remix strategy plays a significant role in how *Drag Race* incorporates RuPaul's music during Season One. Following Season One, RuPaul tends to release a new album or EP in conjunction with each new *Drag Race* season.<sup>72</sup> Each season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* thus becomes an opportunity for RuPaul to sell her latest music venture; the show itself serves as a marketing platform for Ru's music career. The seasons then promote RuPaul's accompanying newly released album, while also including songs from RuPaul's larger discography. For Season One, however, the majority of songs come from a single remix album, *Cover Girl – The RuMixes*. RuPaul releases the "Cover Girl" single on January 5, 2009 and the remix album on February 3, 2009. *Drag Race* Season One premieres on February 2, 2009, so RuPaul releases the remix album in conjunction with the series' premiere. RuPaul does not release her first full-length album from the *Drag Race* era, *Champion*, until February 24, 2009. As a result of this album timeline, most episodes of *Drag Race* Season One feature songs from the "Cover Girl" single and remix releases. The "Cover Girl" single serves as both the runway theme and end credits song. At different times throughout the season, *Drag Race* episodes feature remix versions of "Cover Girl" (Appendix A). Because these versions all remix the same single, the

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<sup>72</sup> An EP is a record that contains more tracks than a single but does not constitute a full album. For Season One, RuPaul releases the EP *Cover Girl – The RuMixes* and the album *Champion*. For Season Two, he releases the EP *Jealous of My Boogie The RuMixes* and the album *Drag Race*. For Season Three, he releases the albums *Glamazon* and *Super Glam DQ*. RuPaul does not release an album or EP specifically in conjunction with Season Four. For *All Stars* Season One, he releases *Responsitrannity Remixes*, *Sexy Drag Queen Remixes*, *Live Forever Remixes*, *(Here It Comes) Around Again Remixes*, and *If I Dream Remixes*. For Season Five, he releases the EP *I Bring the Beat Remixes*. For Season Six, he releases *Born Naked* and *Born Naked Deluxe*. For Season Seven, he releases *Realness* and *Greatest Hits*. For Season Eight, he releases *Butch Queen* and *Butch Queen: Ru-Mixes*. For *All Stars* Season Two, he does not release an accompanying album or EP. For Season Nine, he releases *Remember Me: Essential vol. 1*, *American*, and *Essential vol. 2*.



different songs sound almost identical. *Drag Race* typically does not directly identify these remixed versions in the show's credits.

Tracking RuPaul's music used throughout Season One proved particularly difficult because I had to study these remixes over and over in order to identify their very minute distinguishing features. For instance, the sixth episode's main challenge requires contestants to wear three different outfits for a ball challenge ("Absolut Drag Ball" 2009). Each runway segment features a different version of "Cover Girl," but the casual viewer who has not studied these songs may find them indistinguishable.<sup>73</sup> While this episode uses three different versions of RuPaul's music, the show fails to market the different songs explicitly. Because the show does not specifically name these remixes, their inclusion on *Drag Race* is a less direct form of marketing. The average viewer may not know that they are listening to different versions of the same song and, therefore, may not purchase the remixes. Nevertheless, these songs do create the soundtrack for the season and, by virtue of being the episode's background music, market RuPaul's discography to viewers.

Season One also introduces into the franchise's format a Retrospective and Reunion episode, both of which later become marketing extravaganzas. The Retrospective episode generally includes RuPaul moderating different individual segments, such as season highlights, outtakes, and top moments. The Reunion episode typically includes RuPaul moderating individual and group interviews with the season's contestants.<sup>74</sup> For Season One, the

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<sup>73</sup> Each season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* features a ball episode wherein contestants must dress according to multiple themed categories. For Season One, each category uses a different RuPaul song for the runway. Seasons Two, Three, and Four do not continue this practice and instead use that respective season's runway song for every ball category. Seasons Five to Nine do use different RuPaul songs for each category.

<sup>74</sup>For the first three seasons, these Reunion episodes were pre-recorded on a closed sound stage. The season's winner, crowned in the previous episode, was known by the Reunion. After an Internet troll

Retrospective episode serves more to establish the show's cultural legacy than to market RuPaul's commodities ("Extra Special Edition" 2009). As I discussed in Chapter One, this episode features a historical segment wherein RuPaul directly names various drag icons. This cultural work via-a-vis Camp referencing situates the show within a larger drag lineage and queer history. Season One's Retrospective also features segments including never-before-seen footage, season outtakes, a Top Ten fashion moments countdown, audition tape footage, and featurettes for the Top Three contestants. These various components confer queer cultural status onto the show through fun retrospective segments, but the episode does not directly employ marketing strategies to sell RuPaul's merchandise.

By contrast, the Reunion episode introduces one of RuPaul's key marketing catchphrases, "Available on iTunes!" This Reunion episode markets multiple songs from RuPaul's recently released album *Champion* because the Reunion airs on March 23, 2009, almost one month after *Champion*'s February 24, 2009 release. RuPaul's songs "Lady Boy," "Jealous of my Boogie," "Champion," and "Devil Made Me Do It" play throughout the episode, often when the contestants first enter and walk the runway ("Reunited!" 2009). After contestants Ongina, Shannel, and Rebecca enter to RuPaul's song "Lady Boy," RuPaul directly plugs his music for the first time in the show's history. While addressing the queens (and not looking directly at the camera/audience), RuPaul says, "Now, the song that you all came out to was from my album *Champion*, which is of course available on iTunes. The song is called 'Lady Boy,' and it was inspired by Ms. Ongina" ("Reunited!" 2009). RuPaul plugs his music in a very matter-of-fact

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spoiled the winner of *Drag Race* Season Three, the show began filming live Reunion episodes in front of a studio audience. This live Reunion kept the overall same format, but the show filmed a crowning for each of the final three contestants. The top three contestants would not know the season's winner until the Reunion aired, at which point the winner's crowning aired. For Seasons Four and Five, the live audience consisted of invited guests only. For Seasons Six, Seven, Eight, and Nine fans could purchase tickets to the live Reunion taping.

way, without any hints of Camp irony. He neither directly addresses the audience nor winks at the camera when making this statement. Instead, RuPaul markets his music by simply informing the audience of the album's availability on iTunes. RuPaul makes a similar statement after Nina and Bebe enter to his songs "Jealous of My Boogie" and "Champion." Once again addressing the contestants and not the audience/camera directly, RuPaul says, "Now, of course, the music that you walked out to is *Champion*, inspired by all of you. My new album available on iTunes." Once again, RuPaul markets his music through a straightforward, matter-of-fact style that does not yet employ Camp parody. RuPaul plugs his products by conversing with the contestants and suggesting that they inspired his music. This conversation frames RuPaul's music as a product of intra-group queer inspiration: a drag queen's musical commodity inspired by other drag queen performers. This process emphasizes the queer nature of the product and performers but does not necessarily queer the marketing strategy.

Indeed, the techniques RuPaul uses during Season One to sell his products do not represent a specifically queer form of Camp marketing. Rather than immediately subverting consumerism through Camp, RuPaul first claims a queer space within heterosexual capitalism through straightforward (pun intended) marketing. As a black gay male drag queen, RuPaul enters into a reality television landscape and capitalist economy not intended for him. By adopting the straightforward marketing techniques of heterosexual businessmen/reality television show shows, RuPaul queers these practices by claiming them. RuPaul demonstrates that he too can be a black gay male drag queen businessman in an economy that marks him as an outsider. While Ru does not subvert these marketing strategies through Camp, his claiming these strategies never intended for him does represent an act of subversion. His "available on iTunes" plug during Season One may not yet be Camp, but the marketing strategy is still queer. When

RuPaul makes these pitches in Season One, he wears a male suit and does not Camp his consumerism as a drag figure. He presents the “available on iTunes” catchphrase as a straightforward marketing appeal from a gay male businessman. Through repetition of this phrase, RuPaul claims a space for his own economic gain within the iTunes platform: a market not explicitly designed to benefit a black gay male drag queen. The Season One marketing strategies do not yet embrace Camp subversion because Ru must first carve out a space for himself within these economies. Once Ru successfully adopts straightforward consumerism, he then strategically introduces Camp into capitalism.

Season Two of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* both expands on these foundational marketing strategies and infuses them with Camp. With regard to the mini and main challenges, Season Two maintains the same final challenge: having contestants contribute to RuPaul’s music video for the season’s single, “Jealous of my Boogie.” This season, contestants do not contribute original verses to the track; however, RuPaul uses a remix version of the song, “Jealous of my Boogie Gomi & RasJek edit,” for the music video and final lip sync (“Grand Finale” 2010). Because RuPaul selects this remix version, he still markets an additional product to the fan base. This trend continues for Season Three and *All Stars* Season One, using “Champion DJ Bun Joe’s Olympic Mix” and “Responsitrannity Matt Pop’s edit,” respectively. By Season Two’s second episode, *Drag Race* begins to market RuPaul’s products through explicitly campy methods. The episode’s mini challenge requires contestants to give “tramp” makeovers to various RuPaul dolls, from “The RuPaul doll” collection (“Starrbootylicious” 2010). While RuPaul does not instruct the audience to purchase the dolls, he does feature the dolls in an overtly campy and ridiculous makeover challenge. By seeing the products in the mini challenge, consumers learn that the products exist and may go on to purchase the items. Inspired by RuPaul’s film series

*Starrbooty*, this same episode's main challenge requires contestants to perform burlesque routines to RuPaul's song "Tranny Chaser." RuPaul once again does not directly sell his single or film to the audience, but he introduces consumers to these items through the challenges.

While this episode markets RuPaul's merchandise through campy challenges, other episodes advertise RuPaul's products through more traditional marketing strategies. The season's sixth episode requires contestants to sing RuPaul's song "Lady Boy" live ("Rocker Chicks" 2010), and the eighth episode includes a choreographed routine to RuPaul's song "Main Event" ("Golden Gals" 2010). In both episodes, RuPaul refrains from telling the audience that the songs are "available on iTunes." The music's inclusion on the show functions as straightforward promotion, and RuPaul chooses not to plug the music directly with the iTunes call-to-buy. Similarly, episode seven requires the queens to create autobiographies inspired by RuPaul's recently released book *Workin' It* ("Once Upon a Queen" 2010). When introducing the main challenge, RuPaul mentions his book as the episode's inspiration. RuPaul does not plug the book as "available on Amazon," and he does not directly look into the camera or address the audience when mentioning the product. Although an image of the book does appear on screen while RuPaul speaks, the overall marketing strategy is not yet shamelessly over-the-top in its Camp quality. In these different examples, RuPaul chooses not to repeat the phrases, "available on iTunes" or "available on Amazon." Such repetition could give the marketing strategies an over-the-top quality, essentially making them too parodic and Camp. While RuPaul uses the campy challenges as opportunities to advertise his products, he does not yet inject Camp directly into his spoken sales pitches.

However, RuPaul does embrace spoken Camp strategies more overtly in the season's Retrospective and Reunion episodes. This season's Countdown retrospective, titled "The Main

Event Clip Show,” functions in part as a giant sales pitch for Ru’s single (“The Main Event Clip Show” 2010). The episode opens with RuPaul, dressed in full female drag, lip syncing to the song, for no apparent reason other than to market the music. While RuPaul does not explicitly tell the audience to purchase “Main Event,” the musical montage serves as a campy music video for the song. Overall, this season’s Retrospective reproduces the format from Season One, with segments that include audition footage, unseen workroom shots, season catchphrases, and the top fashion moments. After a feature that highlights the top three contestants, RuPaul directly plugs his products to the audience through spoken Camp strategies. Looking directly into the camera, RuPaul says, “If you’ve been groovin’ to any of my songs this season, you can find them all on my album *Champion*, available on iTunes. Or, read my book *Workin’ It*, on sale everywhere.” Unlike last season’s Retrospective, this episode features RuPaul directly marketing her merchandise to the audience. Ru now looks directly into the camera, connecting one-on-one with the consumer fan base through an explicit call-to-buy.

At the episode’s conclusion, RuPaul embraces Camp marketing even more. RuPaul concludes the episode with a play on one of her standard catchphrases, “Remember, if you can’t love yourself, how in the hell are you gonna love somebody else?” Speaking to the consumer audience, RuPaul says, “Remember, if you can’t love yourself, how in the hell are you gonna buy my album and my book? Alright, now let the music play.” As RuPaul says, “if you can’t love yourself,” the camera films her sitting in a chair and staring past the camera rather than looking directly at the camera/viewer. The footage then cuts to a closer shot of RuPaul who now stares directly into the camera and says, “how in the hell are you gonna buy my album and my book?” When RuPaul says “album,” her eyes dart left-to-right, and as she says “book,” she leans forward in the chair, moving closer to the camera/audience. The footage then cuts back to the

wider shot of RuPaul sitting in the chair, as she smiles and ends the episode. These camera cuts and RuPaul's exasperated expression work to emphasize the ridiculous quality of this Camp marketing strategy. No longer straightforward, this appeal to purchase presents a playful interaction with the audience. Now, RuPaul alters her catchphrase with a campy call-to-buy and exaggerates her gestures and facial features to emphasize the humorous context. These strategies inject Camp into the spoken marketing by exaggerating the consumer quality. The audience can laugh at how RuPaul campily plugs her products, but the consumer still knows that RuPaul wants them to spend money. With this bit, RuPaul frames herself as clearly "in on the joke." A decidedly queer form of playful Camp consumerism, this plug represents a shift in RuPaul's marketing strategies. Having laid the groundwork for selling her products in Season One, RuPaul now begins to include a more overtly Camp quality to her consumerism.

Season Two's Reunion episode also utilizes these more overtly Camp marketing strategies ("Reunion" 2010). As with the first season's Reunion, this episode showcases RuPaul's expanding music catalogue. As Appendix A shows, this episode features a different RuPaul song each time a contestant or set of contestants enter the stage. The songs chosen for this episode come from RuPaul's remix album *Drag Race*, released just under a month before this episode airs. This strategy promotes RuPaul's most recent album and encourages viewers to purchase even more RuPaul products. Because the songs are remix versions of the material from *Champion*, viewers must spend additional money in order to add this new music to their collections. To emphasize this new discography, RuPaul explicitly names one song as a remix. After the second set of queens enter, RuPaul (speaking to the contestants) says, "The song you just sashayed out to is the Bangkok Booty Mix of 'Lady Boy,' available on iTunes." When RuPaul says, "iTunes," he raises his voice and extends the "s" for a few seconds. Here, RuPaul

Camps his typical catchphrase by altering how he names “iTunes.” This playful exaggeration imbues the catchphrase with a Camp quality. Additionally, at the episode’s end, RuPaul once again employs an overtly Camp marketing strategy. After naming contestant Pandora Boxx the season’s “Miss Congeniality,” and while standing next to Pandora, RuPaul says, “Ladies, this is it. The time has come for you to lip sync for your lives to the new remix of my song ‘Main Event,’ available on iTunes.” As RuPaul speaks, he looks directly into the camera/at the audience. When he says, “available on iTunes,” the camera cuts to a close-up shot of Pandora, who turns her head to the right, stares directly into the camera, and smiles. As with RuPaul’s plug in the Retrospective episode, this marketing strategy directly Camps RuPaul’s consumerism. RuPaul and Pandora present themselves as “in on the joke,” evidenced by the camera’s directly cutting to Pandora’s smiling face when RuPaul repeats his catchphrase.

From Season One to Season Two, *Drag Race*’s marketing moves from straightforward plugs to Camp-infused practices. The show utilizes a type of scaffolding process in building Camp marketing practices. This season introduces smaller elements, including campy challenges that promote products and calls-to-buy given directly to the camera/audience. These characteristics bring the audience “in on the joke” without outright mocking or parodying consumerism. At this stage in the show’s development, a full-on parody or mockery of capitalism could offend viewers unfamiliar with Camp. *Drag Race* and RuPaul need the audience to laugh at Camp consumerism while still investing time and money in the show and RuPaul’s products. Season Two drags capitalism into a space wherein full-on Camp parody can occur.

With Season Three, *Drag Race* pushes Camp Capitalism into the realm of the ridiculous and redefines the value of “shamelessness.” This season includes a standalone Casting Special



that airs the week prior to the season premiere episode. This Casting Special introduces the Season Three cast and new members of the Pit Crew (the show's hunky male models), and the episode also features audition footage from submitted videotapes and live footage from an open casting call in Hollywood. Dressed in male drag (a striped suit adorned with an oversized flower), RuPaul introduces the videotape audition footage from drag contestants not chosen to compete on Season Three. The audition footage shows wannabe contestants promoting themselves to RuPaul and *Drag Race* producers. Wanting RuPaul to choose them, these potential contestants market themselves and try to stand out from the crowd. After this segment airs, RuPaul looks directly into the camera and says, "Those queens ain't too proud to beg, and I applaud them for their *shameless* self-promotion. Oh, did I mention my book *Workin It: RuPaul's Guide to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Style* is available on Amazon? I didn't think so" ("Casting Extravaganza" 2011). As RuPaul says "shameless," he raises his voice and widens his eyes. Without skipping a beat, he then abruptly transitions his demeanor into one of faux-seriousness and introduces his book. After an image of *Workin It* appears on screen, the footage cuts back to RuPaul. When he says "Amazon," RuPaul smiles and a chime noise plays. With this plug, RuPaul embraces over-the-top Camp marketing. By making eye contact with the camera, RuPaul directly plays to the audience. His comedic facial expressions, knowing smile, and the added chime effect frame this plug as a clear Camp joke. The added sound effect and smile inject the aura of ridiculousness into the marketing strategy, and in so doing frame the plug more explicitly as parodic. And yet, the plug remains utterly serious, as RuPaul wants to sell books.

By using the stock phrase "shameless self-promotion," RuPaul redefines the notion of "shamelessness" and gives the concept a positive Camp value. In colloquial usage, the term

“shameless” has a distinctly negative connotation and indicates lack or failure.<sup>75</sup> By this standard definition, then, shameless self-promotion indicates a failed form of advertising. Successful marketing in heterosexual consumer culture requires the promotion or self-promotion of a commodity so that consumers purchase the product. Successful self-promotion becomes *shameless* self-promotion when the practice verges into excess, hubris, self-indulgence, and/or conceit. When a self-promoter exceeds the guidelines for acceptable advertising, then they become shameless in their strategies. Because they lack shame, the self-promoter displays no restraint in marketing themselves and, in so doing, exceeds acceptable notions of respectable advertising. In this situation, shameless self-promotion can read as desperate and off-putting to consumers. In heterosexual consumer culture, then, shameless self-promotion is counterproductive to successful advertising. In a Camp context, however, shamelessness (a quality usually considered “in poor taste”) becomes a valued marker of success. As I discussed in my Introduction, Camp in its various forms consistently upends heterosexist standards of respectability. Camp values parody, excess, and “bad taste” in deconstructing normative categories of art (Bronski 1984:42, Babuscio 1980:44, Shugart and Waggoner 2008:34). Camp also presents a queer way of combating “shamefulness,” in how Camp turns an identity laden with “shame” into a positive subjectivity (Bérubé 1990:86-7, Halperin 2012:186, Newton 1972:110). This ability to redefine what heteronormative society deems a lack or failure is one of Camp’s guiding attributes. Thus, when applied to heterosexual consumerism, Camp would only naturally use parody to turn shameless self-promotion (a supposed failure) into a celebrated quality.

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<sup>75</sup> The online *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term as, “lacking shame,” “destitute of feelings of modesty,” and “free from disgrace.”

In this Casting Extravaganza segment, RuPaul first redefines shamelessness as Camp success and then applies this redefined concept to his own marketing strategies. RuPaul first uses the phrase “shameless self-promotion” when commenting upon how the wannabe contestants market themselves in their audition footage. Importantly, these potential contestants do not engage in anything inherently shameless, according to the terms’ dictionary definition. To the contrary, the contestants simply follow the show’s guidelines for submitting their audition videos. In my research, I have reviewed the audition criteria for multiple seasons of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. While the criteria vary each season (and becomes more regimented as the show progresses), the instructions consistently present specific guidelines for submitting an audition video.<sup>76</sup> While wannabe contestants choose different ways to showcase/highlight their unique personalities, they all must follow a rather specific set of guidelines on what materials to include and how best to market themselves. With these audition videos, the potential contestants fulfill the requirements dictated to them by RuPaul and *Drag Race*’s producers. In this situation, then, shameless self-promotion represents a successful fulfillment of the marketing guidelines: the potential contestants adeptly follow the show’s rules for promoting themselves. RuPaul redefines the contestants’ otherwise standard forms of self-promotion as “shameless self-promotion,” which he frames as valuable.

RuPaul then goes on to tie shameless self-promotion directly to his own excessive Camp marketing strategies. When RuPaul calls the contestants’ audition footage “shameless self-promotion,” he raises his voice and widens his eyes. With these gestures, RuPaul indicates that he is using Camp. As I said, the joke here is that the contestants do not actually engage in

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<sup>76</sup> Guidelines often include instructions on how to introduce oneself, what specific segments to include (e.g. a closet tour, a lip sync performance), what questions to answer, and advice on how to make their personalities shine and stand out from the pack.

shameless self-promotion. However, RuPaul then goes on to shamelessly self-promote his products using the Camp elements of his smile and the added chime. Importantly, RuPaul does not directly define his marketing here as “shameless self-promotion.” Instead, he redefines the contestants’ not-actually-shameless marketing as shameless before then presenting an actually shameless plug. In this segment, Ru employs a standard Camp tactic: take on a quality heterosexual society defines as negative and then amp it up to the nth degree. RuPaul essentially says, “You think *that’s* shameless self-promotion? Let me show you shameless self-promotion.” The joke here is that RuPaul does not name his marketing as shameless self-promotion, but the added Camp effects inform the audience that Ru is shamelessly self-promoting. He embraces over-the-top shameless self-promotion via marketing because, now, excess means success. RuPaul now makes himself part of the punchline and gives the audience permission to laugh at his embrace of Camp Capitalism. After introducing his audience to two seasons of Camp parody, RuPaul has now laid the necessary groundwork to make himself a punchline without damaging his own brand of queer consumerism. The audience may laugh, but they will still buy his products because Camp is now a valuable aspect of Ru’s consumerism.

Following this casting special, Season Three continues to mock RuPaul’s brand of Camp consumerism while simultaneously marketing his products. As with the previous two seasons, Season Three once again incorporates RuPaul’s products into the season’s mini and main challenges following now established tropes. In the ninth episode’s mini challenge, contestants play a version of musical chairs (entitled Ru-sical chairs) during which RuPaul’s songs play and, after the music stops, queens must recite the correct song lyrics (“RuPaul-a-Palooza” 2011). That same episode’s main challenge requires the queens to record themselves singing RuPaul’s

“Superstar” in different music genres before then lip syncing to their own track.<sup>77</sup> This season also includes an additional marketing opportunity for RuPaul’s music by having a different song played during the runway presentation (“Champion, DJ Bun Joe’s Olympic Mix”) and the end credits sequence (“Main Event, Matt Pop’s 80s Tribute”). This trend of having two different songs continues throughout the series.<sup>78</sup>

While these aforementioned challenges expand RuPaul’s established marketing strategies, other mini and main challenges more directly mock consumerism through Camp. The fifth episode’s mini challenge features the game “Shit RuPaul Says,” which requires contestants to complete phrases that RuPaul says as individual letters appear on the screen (“The Snatch Game” 2011). For the category “Shit RuPaul Plugs,” contestant Shangela guesses the correct answer, “Available on iTunes.” This mini challenge mocks RuPaul’s shameless consumerism by turning his now canonical consumerist catchphrase into a Camp punchline. While this challenge mocks RuPaul’s Camp Capitalism, the mini and main challenges for episode twelve queer capitalism more generally (“Make Dat Money” 2011). In setting up the mini challenge, RuPaul tells the contestants, “To be America’s Next Drag Superstar, you need to make your moolah by selling it to the masses.” The mini challenge requires contestants to create infomercials that pitch products from their drag wardrobe on the “RuVC” shopping channel. A parody of the

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<sup>77</sup> While recorded, these different versions of “Superstar” are not released for fans to purchase. Such a level of consumerism does not yet fit into Camp Capitalism, at this point in the process’s evolution.

<sup>78</sup> Season Four uses “Glamazon” for the runway and “The Beginning” for the credits. *All Stars* Season One uses “Sexy Drag Queen dootdoot ‘doot-swift’ mix” for the runway and “Responsitrannity Matt Pop’s edit” for the credits. Season Five uses “I Bring the Beat” for the runway and “The Beginning” for the credits. Season Six uses “Sissy That Walk” for the runway and “Dance With U” for the credits. Season Seven uses “Sissy That Walk” for the runway and “Fly Tonight” for the credits. Season Eight uses “The Realness” for the runway and “Die Tomorrow” for the credits. *All Stars* Season Two uses “Sexy Drag Queen dootdoot ‘doot-swift’ mix” for the runway and “Throw Ya Hands Up” for the runway. Season Nine uses an unreleased remix of “Category Is” for the runway, “Be Someone Matt Pop edit” for the episodes 2 and 3 credits, and “Kitty Girl” for episodes 4 to 12 credits.

mainstream shopping network QVC, this challenge rewards queens for turning corporate consumerism into Camp. Raja advertises her gaff (a covering drag queens use to tuck their genitals) as having aromatherapeutic healing powers; Manila markets her Man-ila spray as a cleaning solution and makeup finisher; Alexis sells her drag padding; and Yara showcases her Pop-it-on hair extension as a cleaning product and beauty accessory. Each infomercial embraces varying levels of Camp humor. The pitched products have no real value in a heterosexual capitalist economy; indeed, their value on *Drag Race* comes entirely from their being Camp products. At this point in RuPaul's Camp Capitalist enterprise, an extended Camp economy vis-à-vis the DragCon convention does not exist. Therefore, the products and their Camp value circulate only on the show during the mini challenge.

Nevertheless, this same episode's main challenge further mocks consumerism by creating a RuPaul-centric Camp economy. For this season's ball challenge, contestants must put together three different looks, one of which must be made entirely from \$2.5 million Ru-dollars (garish colorful \$1,000 bills featuring RuPaul's face). After selecting contestant Yara Sofia's "Pop-it-on" as the mini challenge winner, RuPaul tells Yara that she wins "one million dollars." After Yara screams in excitement, RuPaul clarifies by saying she wins an additional one million Ru-dollars for her outfit creation. In a confessional video, Yara expresses disappointment at this development. This Camp gag both mocks consumerism and extends Camp value onto the technically valueless paper money. RuPaul emphasizes this Camp value by framing the main challenges as, "The most expensive challenge in *RuPaul's Drag Race* history." A complete Camp joke, this line further emphasizes how this parody of consumerism redefines the notion of commodity value through a Camp economy. In a further display of Camp Capitalism, RuPaul challenges the queens to perform an opening number while holding giant fake quarter-like coins

that feature the writing, “The United States of RuPaul,” as well as an image of RuPaul’s face complete with a dollar sign in her hair. This episode’s ridiculous, over-the-top display of Camp Capitalism represents the first time that *Drag Race* queers consumerism without the direct goal of selling RuPaul’s products. The show can now freely mock capitalism because these Camp jokes in no way threaten capitalism. By Season Three, RuPaul’s consumerism is so well established that he makes his own shamelessness a punchline. The audience now ought to clearly know that RuPaul and *Drag Race* are commercial enterprises and are “in on the joke,” so this parody of capitalism is Camp subversion without any threatening attacks against the economic system.

In a reiteration of his commitment to Camp consumerism, RuPaul once again uses the Countdown and Reunion episodes to plug his merchandise. This year’s Countdown retrospective amps up the Camp factor through an homage to the film *Burlesque* starring Cher and Christina Aguilera (“Superstar Edition” 2011). The episode opens with RuPaul, obscured by dim lighting, entering a sound stage. Dressed in a jacket and sweatpants, she pulls a roller suitcase and “talks on the phone” to someone. Ru says, “Oh, but baby, you know how I feel. I mean, you really want me to say it? Oh, this is silly. Okay, here goes: (in Cher impersonation) wagon wheel watusi!” RuPaul’s Cher impersonation accompanied by “wagon wheel watusi,” a direct line from the movie *Burlesque*, immediately marks this opening as a Camp reference. Off camera, Chaz Bono (Cher’s son) calls to Ru and says he has the song “Superstar” ready for Ru to rehearse. After informing Chaz that she has been “too busy selling the air rights to *RuPaul’s Drag Race*,” RuPaul agrees to rehearse the number. A spotlight hits RuPaul, who now appears in a full high drag and a gorgeous sequin gown. RuPaul proceeds to lip sync her song “Superstar,” providing another music video similar to the opening of Season Two’s Countdown episode. This music

video, however, incorporates Camp more in the marketing process. This opening interaction between RuPaul and Chaz Bono is a direct reference to and restaging of Cher's "You Haven't Seen The Last of Me" number from *Burlesque*. RuPaul now not only markets her song through a campy music video but also takes the Camp aspect to a higher level, through both Camp referencing of *Burlesque* and a restaging with Cher's son. RuPaul's ability to get a Chaz Bono cameo for this Camp scene demonstrates the show's increasing queer cultural capital, and the high Camp marketing for RuPaul's song displays the increasing importance of Camp to Ru's sales strategies. Interestingly, this year's Countdown episode does not feature additional plugs for RuPaul's products. I assume this change occurs because this episode, which aired on April 18, 2011, showcases RuPaul's lead single "Superstar" from the album *Glamazon*, released a few days later on April 25, 2011. Because the album is unreleased when the episode airs, RuPaul cannot (at this point) plug all the songs during the retrospective.

Nevertheless, the Reunion episode continues this tradition of shameless plugs ("Reunited" 2011). This year, the contestants all enter to the same song, "Glamazon." This focus on "Glamazon" occurs, I assume, to plug RuPaul's most recent album, released one week before this episode aired. As with the Countdown episode, RuPaul technically cannot feature all the tracks from *Glamazon* on this episode because the marketing serves to advertise a just-released product. Nevertheless, RuPaul plugs this album using an increased level of Camp marketing. After the first set of queens enters to "Glamazon," RuPaul says to the contestants, "Now, I've dedicated the song you've just heard to you and all my girls, and it just so happens to be the title track off my new album *Glamazon*, available on iTunes." When initially speaking, RuPaul addresses the contestants directly. However, as he says, "new album," the camera cuts to RuPaul looking directly into the camera/at the audience. RuPaul smiles as he says, "*Glamazon*, available



on iTunes,” and the camera lingers on RuPaul smiling directly at the audience for a few moments. RuPaul’s direct eye contact with the camera, along with his lingering smile, frame this plug as a Camp marketing strategy. RuPaul directly engages with the consumers, smiling at the shared knowledge that this marketing is shameless. Whereas RuPaul directly uses the word “shameless” during this season’s Casting episode, here RuPaul does not invoke that term because the concept is implied by his actions and smile. RuPaul has set the stage for consumers to understand the Camp nature of his consumerism, and his directly engaging with the camera/audience reiterates this playful and parodic dynamic.

These increasingly Camp strategies for marketing his products and parodying consumerism culminate in Season Four. This season continues the show’s now established marketing trends: the final challenge requires contestants to perform in RuPaul’s newest music video for “Glamazon,” mini challenges such as a wet t-shirt contest incorporate RuPaul’s songs as background music, and the season showcases different songs for the runway and end credits sequences (“Glamazon” and “The Beginning,” respectively). In addition to maintaining these elements, Season Four ups the level of shameless Camp consumerism. Beginning in the second episode, the opening credits sequence features the recently eliminated contestant holding a giant paper check, wearing a crown, and sadly gazing directly at the camera. The losing queens, adorned with the oversized check and crown they will not receive, emphasize the monetary prizes afforded to the season’s winner. Additionally, queens’ playfully forlorn looks directed at the camera/audience emphasize the pitiful status for the losing contestants in a Camp context. The segments do not necessarily shame the queens, outside filming the inherent disappointment that comes with elimination. Instead, these ridiculous segments make a spectacle of losing that emphasizes the coveted economic prize that comes from winning. Because the brief segments are

unapologetically Camp, they emphasize ridiculousness over sentimentality. This mockery of economic gain and shameful loss queers the very tangible effects of winning and losing *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

The main challenge in Season Four's third episode presents the culmination of Camp Capitalism's first phase ("Glamazons vs. Champions" 2012). Whereas previous challenges require contestants to promote one or two RuPaul products, this challenge enlists contestants to market mini-infomercials for RuPaul's two albums *Glamazon* and *Champion*. In so doing, the queens end up selling a whopping thirteen songs: "Glamazon," "Superstar," "Responsitrannity," "The Beginning," "Get Your Rebel On," "Click Clack," "If I Dream," "Champion," "Lady Boy," "Main Event," "Never Go Home Again," "Jealous of My Boogie," and "Cover Girl." This challenge marks a significant turning point in Camp Capitalism because now the queens shamelessly sell multiple RuPaul products. Importantly, the contestants now promote RuPaul's music using the catchphrase, "available on iTunes!" This performance brings the queens into the fold of Camp consumerism, and they become an extension of Ru's shameless self-promotion. Ru need not shamelessly self-promote his music; now, she makes the queens take on that role.

RuPaul pushes the bounds of his shameless consumerism to an absurd level, and the challenge works because RuPaul successfully redefines this consumerism in a Camp context. The audience is not threatened by this level of shameless self-promotion because the actions are distinctly Camp. After informing the audience that her music is available on iTunes, Ru now looks directly at the camera and tells the audience, "I mean, really, do it. Now." By this point in the show's history, Ru fully establishes the joke of his parodic Camp consumerism, such that she can now playfully threaten consumers. While the audience faces no actual threats of violence, consumers still understand Ru's underlying seriousness—she wants album sales.

## Phase Two: Building a Camp Economy through Camp Commodities

In Camp Capitalism's second phase, RuPaul and World of Wonder expand on their Camp marketing strategies, build a *Drag Race*-centric economy, and emphasize the importance of branding to contestants. Phase Two builds on *Drag Race* and RuPaul's foundational Camp marketing techniques through a type of hyper extension. RuPaul sells more products through the show, and *Drag Race* starts to build challenges around creating and marketing original commodities. During Phase Two, World of Wonder creates paid events for fans to engage in the *Drag Race* franchise, such as live premiere parties, finale tapings, and the DragCon weekend extravaganza. *Drag Race* contestants participate more in Camp marketing strategies on the show, as RuPaul encourages them to brand themselves and to market products that reflect their image. This phase begins and ends with two attempts at bringing *Drag Race* contestants into Camp Capitalism's fold through the *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars* spin-off. This show maintains the key features of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, except the contestants consist of all veteran *Drag Race* queens.<sup>79</sup> In this section of my chapter, I trace the chronological development of Phase Two, beginning with the failure of *All Stars* Season One and culminating in the DragCon challenge from *All Stars* Season Two (one of the two scenes that opened this chapter).

Largely considered one of the franchise's weakest seasons, *All Stars* Season One presents a transitional moment in Camp Capitalism's development.<sup>80</sup> Half the season's challenges promote RuPaul's own products, without directly marketing the commodities. This truncated six

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<sup>79</sup> For *All Stars* Season One, the cast includes contestants from Season One to Four, and *All Stars* Season Two includes contestants from Season Two, Four, Five, Six, and Seven.

<sup>80</sup> I base this assessment of the season's unpopularity on my engagement in *Drag Race* online fan communities, including Reddit. Fans frequently discuss their favorite contestants and seasons, and they frequently identify *All Stars* Season One as a weak season.

episode season does not include a Retrospective or Reunion episode, thereby removing prime opportunities for RuPaul to sell her products. However, in the fourth episode, contestants must pair with a music legend's celebrity daughter and perform lip sync choreography to a cover version of RuPaul's "Cover Girl," "Jealous of my Boogie," or "Glamazon" ("All Star Girl Group" 2012). Inspired by RuPaul's film *Starrbooty*, the fifth episode requires contestants to create superhero hero and villain personae, along with the characters' backstory ("Dynamic Drag Duos" 2012). The winning team earns the chance to have their characters turned into a comic book: a prize that promotes RuPaul's just-released *Female Force* comic. The season's final challenge breaks from the franchise's tradition and does not require contestants to perform in RuPaul's music video. Instead, the queens must complete three tasks to demonstrate their "All Star" status: write and perform a standup comedy routine, conduct an interview with reporter Marc Malkin, and make a public press appearance at Hamburger Mary's West Hollywood ("The Grand Finale" 2012). During this press appearance, Ashley Wright, co-owner of Hamburger Mary's International, presents each queen with a signature hamburger, and West Hollywood Major John Duran gives a public proclamation declaring the day, "RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars Day." This cross-promotional challenge does not sell RuPaul's products, but the final aspect does emphasize RuPaul's legacy. The public proclamation demonstrates the show's contribution to queer culture in West Hollywood, and the Hamburger Mary's tie-in presents a tangible expansion of the *Drag Race* brand. The Hamburger Mary's locations in West Hollywood and Long Beach that I attended during my fieldwork sold these *Drag Race* burgers. I, and potentially other patrons, spent money at Hamburger Mary's specifically because of these *Drag Race*-related products. This season finale, then, expands RuPaul's brand and the show's capitalist economy through the queer, drag-friendly Hamburger Mary's franchise.

While *All Stars* Season One expands RuPaul's Camp marketing strategies, the season fails to give these same opportunities to the contestants. *All Stars* presents a unique opportunity for the queens to expand their brands because they enter the season with a fan base and established persona. Contestants' presentations during their original seasons establish their drag "brand," so their coming onto *All Stars* allows them to develop and expand their characterization. Season One, however, fails to provide this opportunity in part because the show puts contestants into teams of two.<sup>81</sup> The queens now must focus on working with a partner instead of marketing their individuality. Team Rujubee (the combined name for contestants Raven and Jujubee) benefit the most from this season, in terms of becoming fan favorites, because their personalities complement each other. They work together well and can therefore market themselves as a dynamic duo: after this season, Raven and Jujubee consistently work together and refer to themselves as "Rujubee."

By contrast, Season Five provides ample opportunities for both RuPaul and the contestants to market themselves through Camp. The second episode's mini-challenge requires contestants lip sync to RuPaul's new song "Peanut Butter," and that episode's main challenge requires the queens to lip sync three *Drag Race* mashup tracks "Reading Is Fundamental," "Runway Girl," and "The Shade of It All" ("Lip Synch Extravaganza Eleganza" 2013).<sup>82</sup> These performances on the show serve to promote the tracks' releases on iTunes. Season Five re-starts the trend from Season One of using different RuPaul songs for each category during the ball challenge ("Sugar Ball" 2013). This practice continues in the ball challenges for Seasons Six,

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<sup>81</sup> Fans who participate in the *RuPaul's Drag Race* subreddit forum often identify the team aspect as Season One's major failure.

<sup>82</sup> While the lip syncs for these tracks are largely cut from the main episode, snippets of the performances are included in the accompanying episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked*.

Seven, Eight, and Nine (“Glitter Ball” 2014, “Hello, Kitty Girls!,” “RuPaul Book Ball” 2016, and “Gayest Ball Ever” 2017). One of the campiest marketing moments comes during the season’s first episode, when contestants must travel from the Werkroom to the Marco Marco Store for their main challenge. The queens board a StarLine double-decker Hollywood Tour bus (adorned with RuPaul’s face), and their trip becomes a makeshift music video for RuPaul’s song “Hollywood U.S.A.” (“RuPaulllywood or Bust” 2013). Sitting on the bus’s top deck, contestants lip-synch the song and perform choreography. Through hilariously bad computer effects, the queens “wave at the season’s celebrity guest judges”: these celebrities are very obviously edited to appear as if they are on the sidewalk waving to the contestants as the bus passes.

Season Five also present opportunities for contestants to promote their own drag personas through marketing. In the season’s eighth episode, contestants must create signature scents and commercials to market their perfumes (“Scent of a Drag Queen” 2013). While this challenge does not actually manufacture products to sell, the episode provides queens with the opportunity to brand and market themselves. RuPaul encourages contestants to incorporate their drag persona into the product development and marketing. Whereas previous seasons challenge contestants to use their personas to sell RuPaul’s brand or products, this season marks a turn toward teaching queens to become marketing geniuses for their own career developments. Additionally, this season introduces main challenges that sell original music. In the sixth episode, contestants must write and record original lyrics for RuPaul’s “Can I Get An Amen?” song (“Can I Get An Amen?” 2013). While the first season includes a similar challenge where contestants must incorporate an original rap into a RuPaul song, this challenge now requires more than just the final three queens to contribute to and market RuPaul’s song. RuPaul releases the single to iTunes shortly after the episode airs, thereby providing fans with an opportunity to immediately

purchase tie-in products. This formula continues in Season Six, when queens must contribute original raps to RuPaul's song "Oh No She Betta Don't" ("Oh No She Betta Don't" 2014). These challenges benefit both RuPaul and the contestants. RuPaul benefits by having the queens contribute to market her product, and the contestants benefit by showcasing their personalities and talent. By incorporating their personalities into their written lyrics and performances, contestants can brand themselves through the challenge. With this season, the challenges become more mutually beneficial in benefitting RuPaul through monetary gain/advertising and the contestants through branding/exposure.

With Season Five's Retrospective episode, RuPaul directly teaches her contestants the ways of Camp marketing. As with the previous Retrospectives, this episode presents prime opportunities to sell products ("Countdown to the Crown" 2013). Near the episode's end, RuPaul promotes the newly released *Drag Race* computer game. After a segment featuring footage from *RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked*, the camera cuts back to RuPaul. She looks at her phone and plays the game, while RuPaul's voiceover from the game plays. The camera zooms in closer on RuPaul, cropping out the phone, and she looks up and addresses the audience directly. Ru says, "Oh! You caught me playing with myself." RuPaul holds up the phone, adorned with a *RuPaul's Drag Race* logo. Ru continues, "I mean, playing my fabulous new game (an image of the game's title screen appears), the *RuPaul's Drag Race* edition of *Dragopolis*. (Shots from the game play as Ru continues speaking) Available May 6<sup>th</sup> for iPhone and iPad on the App Store." RuPaul hits a button on the phone, and her voice from the game exclaims, "Fierce!" RuPaul smiles widely, looking into the camera. This segment presents RuPaul's now-standard Camp marketing tactics and does not necessarily represent a shift in Camp Capitalism. However, a segment with Season Four winner Sharon Needles marks a crucial shift in how RuPaul teaches her contestants the

strategies of shameless Camp marketing. During a one-on-one interview with Sharon, RuPaul asks Sharon why contestant Alaska Thunderfuck 5000 should win the season (Sharon and Alaska were dating at the time). At this segment's end, RuPaul and Sharon have the following exchange:

RuPaul: Oh, I almost forgot. Do you have anything to shamelessly plug?

(The screen cuts to Sharon who looks directly into the camera)

Sharon: You can buy my album *PG-13* (an image of the album appears on screen), now available on iTunes. Oh, and make sure to check out all the fabulous music that the *RuPaul* [sic] *Drag Race* girls have been making.

(The screen cuts back to RuPaul who looks off-screen at Sharon)

RuPaul: Like what?

(The screen cuts back to Sharon who looks directly at the camera)

Sharon: Like these.

(The screen cuts to images of the various album/single covers as Sharon gives the titles)

Sharon: Tammie Brown's "Love Piñata," "Rock the Beat" by Nina Flowers.

(Sharon's voice speeds up to a ridiculous level with computer effects).

Sharon: Bebe Sahara Benet, "Dirty Drums," Raja "Sublime," "You Like It Wild" by Jessica Wild, Shangela's "Werqin' Girl," "I Wanna Have Some Fun" by Pandora Boxx, Tatianna's "Losing Control," "Look at Me" by Tyra Sanchez, Manila Luzon and Latrice Royale's "The Chop," "Major!" by Milan, "It's Honey" with Honey Mahogany

(The screen cuts back to Sharon, who looks off-camera and speaks at her normal pace)

Sharon: Honey Mahogany has a song?

(The screen cuts to RuPaul as she turns her head to the left, looks off-screen, and laughs. The screen then cuts back to album covers as Sharon continues speaking with a sped-up voice)

Sharon: Willam and Detox's "Boy is a Bottom," Mimi Imfurst and Xelle "Party Girl," Venus D'Lite's "I'm Not Madonna," and many, many more

(The screen cuts back to RuPaul)



Ru: Wow! That's the best mother-tucking playlist ever!

(The screen cuts back to Sharon who looks at RuPaul but says nothing. The screen cuts back to RuPaul who stares off-camera at Sharon, pauses, turns her head and looks directly at the camera. During this footage, no sounds play. RuPaul now addresses the camera/audience directly)

RuPaul: But on a serious note, today you can vote with your pocketbook, so get off your ass, go to a club, and support your local drag queens.

By directly asking Sharon if she wants to “shamelessly plug” products, RuPaul invites Sharon and, by extension, the other *Drag Race* contestants into shameless Camp consumerism.

Importantly, Sharon does not use Camp marketing to shamelessly plug RuPaul; instead, she shamelessly plugs herself and other *Drag Race* queens. This segment marks a key shift in Camp Capitalism wherein RuPaul's protégé take up Ru's Camp marketing for their own brand expansion and economic gain. Sharon emulates RuPaul by looking directly at the camera and listing her own products. The over-the-top list of *Drag Race* contestant music that follows brings the contestants into RuPaul's parodic consumerism. Camp infuses every aspect of this shameless stream of plugs. Sharon's altered, fast-paced voice emphasizes both the breadth of the contestants' expanding commercial enterprises and the self-reflexive quality of parody. The show turns this extended plug into a joke at which the audience should laugh—and then buy the music.

While Sharon's plug brings *Drag Race* contestants into Camp consumerism, the marketing is simultaneously exclusive. Sharon's comedic dig at Honey Mahogany emphasizes the expanding *Drag Race* commercial enterprise, while also slightly rudely singling out Honey as seemingly unmemorable. The joke promotes the notion that so much music now exists that Sharon cannot keep track of all the singles, but at the same time, the dig at Honey comes across as slightly cruel. Additionally, Sharon only names the *Drag Race* contestants when marketing

the music. Sharon names Season Four contestant Willam and Season Five contestant Detox when plugging “Boy is a Bottom,” but she leaves out Los Angeles-based performer Vicky Vox. Detox, Willam, and Vicky released several songs together as the trio DWV, but Sharon’s plug does not verbally acknowledge Vicky’s status within the group (even though her image appears on the album cover). RuPaul’s ending line ties the *Drag Race* commercial market to a political economy: money equals political power, and spending money on *Drag Race* makes a political statement. In this formulation, RuPaul ties *Drag Race*’s queer politics directly to capitalism and market spending. By encouraging the audience to support local drag queens and LGBT establishments, RuPaul expands this political/economic prerogative beyond *Drag Race*. However, the statement remains limited in its queer political scope because RuPaul mentions only “drag queens” and, thereby, does not encourage the audience to contribute monetarily to drag kings or non-queen performers.

Throughout Season Five’s Reunion episode, RuPaul uses Camp marketing to promote this music and video game (“RuPaul’s Drag Race: Reunited” 2013). She first enters lip syncing her song, “Can I Get An Amen?” Later in the show, while interviewing contestant Ivy Winters, RuPaul brings LaToya Jackson onto the stage. Throughout Season Five, RuPaul pronounces “Ivy Winters” with an elongated first and last name. This pronunciation, Ru explains, is a reference to how LaToya pronounced “Edgar Winters” during her 1989 Pay Per View concert, “A Sizzling Spectacular.” RuPaul asks LaToya to say “Edgar Winters” multiple times to demonstrate the reference. Before cutting to commercial, RuPaul asks LaToya if she would like to hear a snippet from their new duet, “Feel Like Dancin.” RuPaul takes this opportunity to both explain a Camp reference and to campily sell her musical collaboration with LaToya.

Similarly, RuPaul embraces parodic Camp to promote her song “Peanut Butter.” After

interviewing Detox, RuPaul addresses the camera/audience directly and says, “Now, before I go any further, I’d like to take this moment to say something I’ve actually never said on national television before. Can you bring the camera closer?” The camera zooms in slightly. Ru says, “Closer.” The camera zooms in slightly closer. Ru responds, “Now back the fuck up, not that close.” The audience laughs as the camera zooms back. Ru sighs and looks to her right, before returning her gaze to the audience/camera. She continues, “Due to the fact that her thighs spread just like...” RuPaul’s song, “Peanut Butter” begins playing, as shirtless, underwear clad men storm the stage and start dancing. Ru uses this queer spectacle of muscular men and twerking to plug her own song. Finally, similarly plugs her video game when moving into the last commercial break, by saying, “Can’t get enough of my girls? Then, have I got a mobile game for you. *RuPaul’s Drag Race: Dragopolis*, available now on iTunes.” While Ru consistently uses these techniques in the Retrospective and closed-stage Reunion episodes, this Reunion marks the first time Ru deploys Camp marketing during a Reunion filmed in front of a live audience. Now, RuPaul uses Camp marketing to engage with both the at-home viewers and the live audience. At this point in the show’s development, Ru has established Camp consumerism as parodic and, therefore, does not risk being mocked by the live audience.

Between the end of Season Five and the end of Season Six, the *Drag Race* commercial economy expands exponentially. By Season Five, the *Drag Race* franchise has grown considerably in popularity, so RuPaul and World of Wonder smartly decide to re-release the little-watched Season One before Season Six premieres. Titled “RuVealed: The Lost Season,” this repackaged format includes commentary by RuPaul and behind-the-scenes factoids presented through text.<sup>83</sup> This remixed version of *Drag Race* continues beyond Season One; as

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<sup>83</sup> The RuVealed format is similar to the VH1 music video series “Pop-Up Video.” Throughout the episode, text appears on the screen and gives the viewer information. A smaller image of RuPaul, dressed

of this writing, the franchise includes RuVealed versions of Seasons Four, Five, Six, Eight, and Nine. After Season Six premieres, RuPaul launches a podcast with *Drag Race* co-host Michelle Visage called “RuPaul: What’s The Tee?,” as well as a pop-up shop at Sweet! Hollywood and a line of RuPaul candy bars. Ru also started to co-host the body painting reality-competition show *Skin Wars*, expanding his own hosting opportunities. Additionally, the *Drag Race* franchise began selling tickets for live events, including Season Six live premiere parties in New York City and Los Angeles, as well as a Season Six live finale taping in Los Angeles. At the premiere party, each Season Six queen performs a number. The live finale taping allows any fans to purchase tickets for the Reunion episode filming. I attended the live finale filming for Season Six, Seven, and Eight, as well as the premiere parties for Season Seven and Eight. Through these different endeavors, RuPaul and World of Wonder expand RuPaul and *Drag Race*’s influence and money-making potential. The live parties/filming provide fans with interactive opportunities to immerse themselves in *Drag Race* culture—for a price. This period of Camp Capitalism expands the show’s economic growth and starts to create a full-on immerse *Drag Race* economy.

This push toward economic expansion extends into the marketing for and episodes of Season Six. To promote the season *and* contestants, RuPaul releases the compilation album, *RuPaul Presents: The CoverGurlz*. The album consists entirely of cover versions of Ru’s songs, performed by the Season Six contestants and Pit Crew. By singing Ru’s music, the contestants promote their own varying vocal abilities, contribute to RuPaul’s musical legacy, and make RuPaul money. This release represents the next phase of the Season Four challenge that requires contestants to promote RuPaul’s two albums through campy commercials. Now, however, the

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in male drag, often appears on screen to present a catchphrase or short commentary about the episode. Sometimes other former contestants and/or judges such as Michelle Visage appear on screen to provide commentary.

queens contribute to an actual commodity that will make RuPaul money. This trend continues in Season Seven, with the release of *RuPaul Presents: CoverGurlz 2*. RuPaul and Michelle Visage contribute a track to this second album. Season Six also alters how the franchise markets RuPaul's music. The franchise now names the final challenge episode after the RuPaul song being promoted. The episode titles for seasons Six, Eight, and Nine are all the song names, and the Season Seven title comes from the song's lyrics ("Sissy That Walk" 2014, "The Realness" 2016, "Category Is" 2017, "And The Rest Is Drag" 2015). Additionally, this season marks a significant increase in the use of RuPaul's music. As Appendix A shows, *Drag Race* starts to incorporate RuPaul's songs more often as background music.<sup>84</sup> This trend continues for Season Seven, Eight, and Nine. In particular the Retrospective and Reunion episodes start to play multiple RuPaul songs as background music, most often when moving into or coming back from a commercial break. RuPaul rarely acknowledges the songs when they feature as background music, so their usage becomes a sort of backing track. Despite RuPaul's not directly naming or selling the songs, this increase translates to more marketing opportunities: the show uses and promotes the songs more, thereby exposing viewers to the discography in the hopes of monetary purchase.

This season also uses challenges to promote RuPaul's recently released perfume and cosmetics line, RuPaul's *Glamazon* by Colorevolution ("Glamazon by Colorevolution" 2014). This challenge is unique in that now RuPaul markets a product that is in collaboration with a

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<sup>84</sup> I use the term "Background Music" to describe the use of Ru's music not in the context of a mini/main challenge and/or a "Lip Sync For Your Life." The Background Music category includes such moments as walking a runway, entrance segments, transitions to and from commercial breaks, and mini-challenge segments when the song is not the focus of the challenge (e.g., the challenge does not require a lip sync to the song, but the song is played in the background). As Appendix A shows, Season Six incorporates Ru's songs as background music for six episodes; Season Seven for seven episodes; Season Eight for four episodes; and Season Nine for eight episodes.

major corporation.<sup>85</sup> Ru serves as a spokesmodel for the company, so her marketing strategies reflect not only her own image but also the corporation's brand. This added layer of corporate consumerism impacts how RuPaul uses Camp marketing. During the runway presentation, RuPaul embodies and advertises the campaign through her outfit: she wears the same dress and makeup from the ad campaign. Ru does not incorporate parodic Camp consumerism into her own presentation. Because she represents Colorevolution, Ru cannot directly parody or mock this corporation's consumerism—doing so would risk actual financial loss. Therefore, Ru walks a fine line between encouraging Camp marketing in the contestants' commercials and presenting herself as a serious spokesperson. In talking with the contestants, Ru reveals the contours to how Camp Capitalism must operate in this situation. The episode's main challenge requires contestants to work in pairs, as they film commercials for RuPaul's makeup line. Contestants create 30-second commercials that target different demographics: Mean Girls, Hot Mamas, Glamorous Working Girls, and Mature Ladies. During her walkthrough, RuPaul speaks with contestants Darienne Lake and Ben De La Crème, who have the Mature Ladies demographic. RuPaul, Darienne, and Ben have the following exchange:

Ben: We're marketing to the modern cougar, and the cougar's body as a temple that has probably undergone some renovations.

Ru: Sure.

Ben: That could use a fresh coat of paint to cover some of the newly reworked foundation.

Ru: Okay. This product is very, very near and dear to my heart, so I want you to respect the product.

Ben and Darienne: Yeah.

Darienne: I'm absolutely positive that it's gonna turn out fantastic.

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<sup>85</sup> Colorevolution is a company that specializes in mineral makeup.

Ru: Alright, good. Just sell my makeup.

This exchange reveals important contours of Camp Capitalism in a more corporate context. Darienne and Ben want to adopt a full-on Camp parody of cougars as plastic surgery-loving women who need makeup to touch-up their foundation. Ru responds negatively to this idea, I propose, for two reasons. First, the parody risks alienating the potential customers. Even though these campy commercials will not be used as actual advertisements, this commercial's approach outright mocks the demographic. Camp humor here verges on harsh parody, and Ru does not want to risk losing customers through this type of alienation. Second, this commercial utilizes the traditional advertising tactic of identifying a fault within the customer. As Ben says, the cougar's plastic surgery-riddled face needs renovation: the customer has something wrong with them. RuPaul's makeup line provides the necessary fix. RuPaul's Camp marketing strategies consistently avoid telling consumers that they need to purchase Ru's products in order to fix themselves. This rhetoric aligns more with traditional heterosexual forms of advertising, from which RuPaul distances his own Camp consumerism. While Ben and Darienne's commercial concept absolutely utilizes a Camp approach to marketing, their reliance on mockery and misogynist advertising give RuPaul concern. Unfortunately for Ben and Darienne, they stick with their original concept and produce the following commercial:

“The signs of age. Cosmetic surgery can help you rebuild your foundation. But no renovation is complete without a fresh coat of paint...

The commercial opens with Ben and Darienne standing next to each other in front of a background that features surgical instruments. Their faces are partially wrapped in gauze, and two pit crew members remove the wrap. As the wrap comes off, Ben and Darienne stare at the camera, purse their lips, and elongate their mouths. The facial movements read as expression of stupidity. When Darienne says, “foundation,” RuPaul's *Glamazon* product moves up in the frame, and the background changes to pink sequins.

Shhh. Your secret is safe with...

The screen cuts to a solo shot of Darienne who looks directly into the camera and puts her finger in front of her overly plump lips.

*RuPaul's Glamazon by Colorevolution...*

The screen cuts to a close-up of four boxes of RuPaul's product.

Feel sassy with shadows that accentuate that newly lifted lid...

The screen cuts to a solo shot of Ben as she applies eyeshadow and makes exaggerated faces by pursing her lips and raising her brows.

Get the most kick out of your collagen with a high gloss lip shine...

The screen cuts to a solo shot of Darienne as she applies lip gloss and purses her lips, raises her brows, closes one eyelid, and gives an uneven smile.

Blush helps to accentuate cheekbones and distract from unsightly scars...

The screen cuts to a solo shot of Ben as she gestures at her cheekbones. She then raises her wig by her right temple, revealed fake stitches across her eyebrow and down her cheekbone.

Your body is a temple. Now, prey, cougar, prey."

The screen cuts to a shot of Ben and Darienne holding martinis in their hands. They rub against Pit Crew members Jason Carter and Simon Sherry-Wood. The footage ends with a shot of Darienne and Ben holding RuPaul's product, looking directly into the camera, and making exaggerated faces (pursed lips and raised brows).

Throughout this commercial, Ben and Darienne utilize Camp humor to mock women. By elongating their lips, raising their brows, and closing one eyebrow, they perform facial expressions that read as unintelligent. Ben paints fake scars onto her forehead to emphasize the plastic surgery, thereby reiterating a lack within the customer that needs to be fixed with makeup. Their presentation reads a mockery, and the judges respond negatively to the commercial. Expressing confusion as to what the commercial advertises, judge Michelle Visage says, "I feel like it's more of a PSA for plastic surgery." Guest judge and actress Lainie Kazan reiterates this point by saying, "I thought it was about either surgery or drugs. I thought you were definitely stoned." During the judges-only deliberation, Lainie goes on to call the commercial a, "very strange attack on the product. In fact, I didn't know what the product was. It was a



butchering.” Similarly, Michelle Visage reiterates her point by saying, “I didn’t know they were selling makeup. I felt like it was all about the surgery. The faces they were pulling were not attractive at all. We love those faces, but now when you’re trying to sell cosmetics.”

These reactions reveal significant contours to Camp Capitalism. When using Camp to sell a RuPaul product (in collaboration with a large company), contestants must not mock the target demographic.<sup>86</sup> Michelle and Lainie both identify the performances as overly ridiculous and confusing, with Michelle acknowledging that such Camp facial expressions do not work in the context of selling makeup. The judges also reiterate the importance of using Camp to sell a product. Both Lainie and Michelle find the commercial confusing and more an advertisement for plastic surgery than RuPaul’s makeup. This confusion arises because Ben and Darienne use Camp marketing to parody cougars more than to sell RuPaul’s makeup. They fail because they do not maintain Camp Capitalism’s main focus: using Camp to sell RuPaul’s commodities. Ru and the judges respond well to uses of Camp humor in the other commercials because these commercials do not mock the commodity. As a spokesperson, Ru cannot embrace Camp humor that mocks her business venture, and she must also discourage the contestants from doing the same action. This challenge presents the contours of Ru’s Camp Capitalism: one should embrace shameless consumerism but absolutely cannot interfere with Ru’s business expansion.

The Season Six retrospective episode presents a hyper-expansion of RuPaul’s Camp consumerism (“Countdown to the Crown” 2014). While RuPaul enlists Sharon Needles’ help during the Season Five Retrospective, now Ru brings multiple *Drag Race* contestants into the

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<sup>86</sup> The judges do not specifically address the question of misogyny in how Ben and Darienne portray their clientele. To me, the queens’ presentation of these women comes across as sexist in how they portray the “cougars” as incredibly dumb. While the judges do not directly raise the issue of misogyny in Camp humor, I want to acknowledge how this sexist presentation plays a significant role in the commercial’s failure.

marketing fold. During the episode's end, before premiering her new music video for "Sissy That Walk," RuPaul and multiple contestants present a Camp-infused plug for multiple products.

Looking directly into the camera, RuPaul and various queens perform the following exchange:

RuPaul: This season, I've been criticized for promoting too many of my products, so tonight, I will not be plugging my...

As RuPaul continues speaking, the camera cuts to different *Drag Race* alumni holding RuPaul's products.

RuPaul: Number one album, *Born Naked*

Sharon Needles, Manila Luzon, Tammie Brown, and Jinkx Monsoon hold the album. Text on the screen reads, "available on iTunes."

RuPaul: I will make no mention of my signature fragrance, *RuPaul's Glamazon*

Jujubee, Alaska, and Sharon Needles display the perfume. Alaska sprays herself all over with the perfume. Sharon Needles, dressed as judge Michelle Visage, holds the perfume in her breast plate. Text on the screen reads, "available at Colorevolution.com."

RuPaul: And my final vow, you will not hear a peep out of me about the new RuPaul candy bar. Not a peep. I won't mention it

Shangela, Raven, and Alaska hold the bar. Raven and Alaska wear blindfolds and sniff the candy bar. Text on the screen reads, "available at sweetlosangeles.com. \*Portion of proceeds go to charity.

RuPaul: Even though it is made with delicious milk chocolate, sea salt, and..."

RuPaul's song "Peanut Butter" begins to play, while she lip syncs the lyric "peanut butter." Shots of Jujubee, Tammie, Alaska, Raven, Sharon, Shangela, Manila, and Latrice eating the candy bar appear on screen.

Latrice Royale: Oh, right! (after taking a bite of the chocolate bar)

Jinkx Monsoon: Oh, my god! (after taking a bite of the chocolate bar)

(The screen cuts back to RuPaul who laughs maniacally and looks directly into the camera)

RuPaul: That shit is good!

This segment represents a hyper form of shameless, collaborative Camp consumerism. RuPaul enlists the different queens as co-performers in the plug. Now part of the *Drag Race* upper echelon, these included fan favorite queens gain the ability to present Camp marketing alongside

RuPaul. They are now both extensions of RuPaul's commercial drag brand and Camp marketers themselves. RuPaul starts this string of plugs by identifying audience criticism toward her shameless Camp consumerism. While I am sure some viewers do criticize RuPaul's Camp marketing strategies, this particular critique named by RuPaul does not refer to a specific incident. RuPaul essentially invents a critique against her shameless consumerism in order to present her shameless consumerism, thereby using Camp to introduce Camp marketing. By advancing a faux-critique and then immediately performing the supposedly critiqued action, RuPaul uses Camp to parody and mock any backlash against her Camp consumerism. She then enlists her queens to present a hyper-plug of her album, perfume, chocolate bar, and music single. The *Drag Race* contestants use different Camp strategies to advertise Ru's products, including Sharon Needles-as-Michelle Visage holding the perfume in her breastplate. The episode's on-screen text becomes a part of the Camp advertisement by providing links to purchase Ru's products, including her catchphrase, "available on iTunes." With this segment, RuPaul presents a hyper version of Camp consumerism that combines her previous strategies and enlists the contestants, as they shamelessly sell Ru's commodities.

With Season Seven, the franchise's Camp economy expands further with live performances, interactive events, and in-episode parodic product placement. Season Seven offers five live premiere parties, an increase in the previous season's two parties in Los Angeles and New York City. These added venues and touring dates expand the *Drag Race* economy and provide fans with additional opportunities to spend money. In addition to featuring live performances from the full Season Seven cast, these premiere parties also screen parts of the season's first episode. Fans who pay for these events gain access to the queens' performances and a "sneak peek" of the new season. This strategy continues with the Season Eight touring

premiere parties. During Season Seven's airing, the *Drag Race* franchise introduces the most expansive element of the emerging economy: RuPaul's DragCon. This weekend-long convention, which I discuss in detail during Chapter Three, provides fans with opportunities to meet RuPaul their favorite *Drag Race* queens, to attend panels on various topics, and to purchase items from hundreds of vendors. With DragCon, RuPaul, World of Wonder, and the events co-sponsors, create a full-on *Drag Race*-related economy that provides fans with ample opportunities for attendees to spend money. As of this writing, DragCon continues to be a yearly event in Los Angeles. Within the Season Seven episodes, *Drag Race* adopts a form of parodic product placement by including a RuPaul maquette figure. The show now features a wall of these miniature RuPaul statuettes in the workroom. After a contestants' on-stage eliminations, they return backstage, pick up a RuPaul statuette, and conduct their interview holding the figurine. These maquette figures serve as campy consolation prizes, even though the queens do not keep the figures.<sup>87</sup> Whereas Season Four includes the campy intro segment wherein queens hold a giant fake check and look sad, Season Seven now has the contestants advertise a product during their eliminations that audiences can then purchase for \$200. This shift in Camp Capitalism's Phase Two represents an increased focus on selling Camp commodities.

The Season Seven challenges present two significant opportunities for *Drag Race* contestants to utilize forms of hyper-Camp consumerism. Prior to Season Seven's premiere, World of Wonder produces a one-off special that promotes former *Drag Race* contestants ("15 Fan Favorite Queens"). This special features a countdown of fan favorites, determined via fan votes, and each segment promotes the performer's best moments from *Drag Race* and their recently released merchandise. With this special, World of Wonder creates an opportunity for

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<sup>87</sup> Multiple *Drag Race* contestants confirm in various interviews that they are not allowed to keep the RuPaul maquette following their elimination.

fans to increase their engagement in the franchise, and for *Drag Race* contestants to sell their products. During the Season Seven's fourth episode, contestants must write and film music videos for parody versions of RuPaul's songs, "Dance With U," "Let the Music Play," and "Sissy That Walk" ("Spoof! There It Is" 2015). The team consisting of Kennedy Davenport, Ginger Minj, Mrs. Kasha Davis, and Kandy Ho use the opportunity to comment on RuPaul's consumerism by turning "Let The Music Play" into "I Got Paid." The lyrics reference RuPaul's marketing successes and setbacks, including a line that deems RuPaul's short-lived spin-off series *Drag U* a, "rough spot." RuPaul and Michelle Visage oversee the music video's filming and provide contestants feedback. Their reaction to the *Drag U* line demonstrates the limits of Camp parody. After hearing the line, RuPaul calls for a cut in the commercial. Addressing the contestants Ru says, "Now, what was that *Drag U* lyric again?" Michelle chimes in by saying, "What you say about *Drag U*?" Kennedy repeats the line, "That was a rough spot." Looking downward and with a lowered voice, RuPaul responds by saying, "Alright, alright. Well, yeah, it was one of my favorite jobs, so—It did change peoples' life, you know." Here, RuPaul critiques the queens not for parodying her consumerism but for identifying a failure in her marketing history. Ru's lowered gaze and tone, combined with her justification that *Drag U* changed lives suggests that she takes this slight seriously. Because the contestants recorded the vocals before filming the music video, they cannot take out the lyric. Despite the inclusion of this line, the finished music video presents an effective hyper-parody of RuPaul's Camp consumerism. The song's lyrics and music video's images include:

"Here's a story of a star named Ru...

Image of RuPaul's *Glamazon* cosmetics appears on screen, advertised as "Limited Edition Set \$\$\$." The bottom of the screen features the logo, "RuVC: All Ru-All the time!" Throughout the video, text scrolls along the Chyron that reads, "Call Now! 1-900-555-RuPaul – You can own EVERYTHING! – Qualify for a RuVC RuCharge Credit Account – 20% APR Financing for New Customers – Don't let

the bargains sashay away! – Queens are standing by to take your calls!

A simple gal who started like me and you...

Image of RuPaul's *Glamazon* perfume appears on screen, advertised as "Now Shipping \$\$\$"

First she sold a wig then a lash or two...

Image of RuPaul's book *Workin It* appears on screen, advertised as "Autographed \$\$\$"

Absolutely!...

Contestant Ginger appears on screen pointing to her right closed eye

Now she hosts her show and sells her perfume...

Image of The RuPaul Doll appears on screen, advertised as "Only 10 Left \$\$\$"

Stunt juice!...

Contestant Kennedy appears on screen holding RuPaul's *Glamazon* perfume

But it didn't take long for her brand to really take off. Except for *Drag U*. Girl, that really was a rough spot. But she bounced right back up with an album and a t-shirt, and a t-shirt, album and a t-shirt. Album and a t-shirt...

During this segment, the contestants perform choreography. No RuPaul products appear.

To be a famous TV host, be the hostess with the most. Products...

An image of RuPaul holding her Maquette appears on screen, advertised as "Now Available \$\$\$"

Slapping your face on a candy bar, letting the world know you're a superstar. Then say, yay, hey bitches, I got paid!...

The queens each hold a RuPaul chocolate bar

But it didn't take long for her brand to really take off. Only thirteen years, girl...

Image of RuPaul's chocolate bar appears on screen, advertised as "Now in Stock \$\$\$"

Except for *Drag U*...

An image of the *RuPaul's Drag U* logo appears on screen, advertised as "Drag U Season 1 Available on iTunes"

Girl, what Lady Bunny gonna do now?...

An image of drag legend Lady Bunny appears on screen, advertised as "Free to a good home!"

But she bounced right back up with an album and a t-shirt...

An image of RuPaul's *Glamazon* t-shirt and album appear on screen, advertised as "Album & a T-shirt. You can own EVERYTHING"

And a t-shirt, album and a t-shirt. Hey, bitches, I got paid! Ain't nobody got time for that!"

The four contestants hold different RuPaul products, including two *Starrbooty* t-shirts, the *Glamazon* album, the *Champion* album, and RuPaul chocolate bars. The pit crew "make it rain" on the contestants with dollars bills

With this parody, the contestants perform RuPaul's shameless Camp consumerism in order to mock RuPaul's shameless Camp consumerism. They include every element of Ru's marketing strategies, amped-up to a hyper-level. They sell RuPaul's *Glamazon* perfume and cosmetic set, book *Workin It*, doll collection, maquette, chocolate bar, albums *Glamazon* and *Champion*, t-shirts for *Glamazon* and *Starrbooty*, and Season One of *Drag U*, available on iTunes. They reference the Season Three "RuVC" marketing network, and the products' accompanying on-screen text presents various calls-to-buy that emphasize commodity exclusivity ("Limited Edition Set," "Only 10 Left," and "Autographed"). The scrolling chyron mocks corporate consumption strategies found on heterosexual networks such as *QVC* through drag versions of standard marketing techniques ("20% APR Financing," "Qualify for a RuCharge Credit Account," and "Queens are standing by to take your call"). The *Drag U* line elicits a laugh from RuPaul because the queens smartly mock drag legend Lady Bunny, who served as a "Dean" on the show. This music video parody demonstrates how the queens can effectively mock RuPaul's shameless Camp consumerism by taking on her marketing strategies and pushing them to a hyper-level, all while encouraging *Drag Race* viewers to purchase the Camp commodities.

While Season Eight does not include key developments of Camp Capitalism (such as this parody) within the show's episodes, the season does manage to expand the *Drag Race* economy through Camp commodities. Prior to Season Eight's premiere, RuPaul releases a Christmas album, *Sleigh Belles*, and an accompanying special on Logo ("RuPaul's Green Screen

Christmas”). This special includes music videos for select songs from Ru’s album, often performed by *Drag Race* alumni and World of Wonder-affiliated celebrities. RuPaul also launches and hosts a game show, *Gay For Play Game Show Starring RuPaul*, on Logo. This trivia-based show features two guests who try to win prizes by posing pop culture questions to a panel of six celebrities. These guests and panelists consist almost entirely of *Drag Race* judges and alumni, as well as figures associated with World of Wonder and RuPaul’s other shows (such as Rebecca Romijn, who hosts the show *Skin Wars* for which RuPaul is a judge). This show provides additional opportunities for the aforementioned *Drag Race* franchise affiliates to expand their media presence and monetary opportunities.

During Season Eight, World of Wonder releases a *RuPaul’s Drag Race: The Rusical* album, which consists of content created for the franchise by Lucian Piane. The album features music used throughout the series in episodes that feature choreographed numbers, main challenge lip syncs, and content for which contestants provide original vocals (“All Star Girl Group” 2012, “Bitch Perfect” 2016, “Divine Inspiration” 2015, “Dynamic Drag Duos” 2012, “Glamazonian Airways” 2015, “Glitter Ball” 2014, “Reunited!” 2015, “Shade: The Rusical” 2014, “Sugar Ball” 2013, “The Diva Awards” 2010, “The Fabulous Bitch Ball” 2012). With this release, the franchise effectively monetizes the series’ back catalogue. While Season Eight loses marketing opportunities by removing the Retrospective episode (a change that remains in Season Nine), the Reunion episode includes additional methods to market products. The episode includes a commercial for the *Rusical* album, and RuPaul includes a cross-promotional moment by featuring the “Gay For Play” dancers. Additionally, after the episode airs, the Top Three performers’ lip sync numbers become available to purchase on iTunes. By the end of Season Eight, RuPaul and World of Wonder exponentially expand the *Drag Race* franchise’s Camp



economy and market multiple Camp commodities through hyper-versions of shameless Camp consumerism.

Camp Capitalism's second phase culminates in *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars Season Two*, a successful redo of the failed first season. Season Two succeeds where Season One fails because the structure provides contestants with multiple opportunities to market their characters. With the exception of contestants Tatianna from Season Two and Phi Phi O'Hara from Season Four, this set of queens originally participate on *Drag Race* during the show's second phase of Camp Capitalism. They benefit from the show's increased focus on teaching contestants to effectively brand and market themselves through Camp. The majority of participants join *All Stars Season Two* with established drag personas/brands and Camp marketing skill sets. Therefore, Season Two provides them with opportune moments to demonstrate the lessons they have learned from RuPaul. This time, *All Stars* smartly does not pair the queens in pairs—doing so would limit their Camp marketing potential. Instead, *All Stars* adopts a different structure that provides contestants with even more screen time: the Top Two contestants each episode earn the right to eliminate a queen from the bottom performers. This move creates additional drama amongst the group and gives the performers more opportunities to shine as stars.

The season's challenges both incorporate RuPaul's expanding economy and provide opportunities for monetary gain. During the final episode, contestants participate in an interview with RuPaul and Michelle Visage for their podcast, "RuPaul: What's The Tee?" ("All Stars Supergroup" 2016). Previous seasons, except Season Eight and *All Stars Season One*, feature one-on-one interview segments between RuPaul and the Final Three/Four contestants. Now, however, the show incorporates the podcast in order to increase subscribers. This same episode also requires the Top Four queens to write and record original verses for RuPaul's new single,

“Read U Wrote U.” This challenge provides the contestants with opportunities to create catchphrases through the lyrics, and multiple contestants (most notably Katya) lip sync the song during their live performances after the season. After the episode’s airing, RuPaul releases the single for purchase on iTunes. The third episode similarly monetizes the main challenge (“HERstory of the World” 2016). This challenge requires contestants to perform as famous women from history, in a lip sync to the track “The Baddest Bitches in Herstory.” After the episode’s airing, the song’s producer Lucian Piane releases it on iTunes.

Camp Capitalism’s culminating event occurs during the sixth episode, when contestants must create products representative of their drag brand (“Drag Fish Tank” 2016). This episode and challenge demonstrate how RuPaul and World of Wonder, through *Drag Race*’s Camp Capitalism, have effectively created an entire Camp economy. The queens must not only devise a product but also film an accompanying commercial that effectively markets their commodity. Before the contestants settle on a product and film their commercials, RuPaul gives them individual feedback during a walkthrough segment. For this episode’s walkthrough, RuPaul enlists the help of Marcus Lemonis, the CEO of Camping World, Good Sam Enterprises, and Gander Mountain, as well as the host of CNBC’s *The Profit* (a reality television show about saving small businesses). A financially successful multimillionaire, Lemonis, presumably, can provide insightful feedback for the contestants. Introducing Lemonis to contestant Roxxy Andrews, RuPaul emphasizes this point by saying, “On this challenge, where you are going to market your product, this is the man you need to run it by to figure out if it’s gonna work or not.” Although he earns financial success from heterosexual capitalism, Lemonis absolutely fails to understand Camp Capitalism. During the walkthrough, Lemonis praises Tatianna’s tea set and provides encouraging feedback for Roxxy Andrews’ wig glue. Both products end up in the

bottom three. By contrast, Lemonis detests Katya's product. During the walkthrough, Lemonis and Katya have the following exchange, as Katya explains her concept:

Katya: It's called "Katya's Krisis Kontrol," and it's a refreshing body mist, and it also packs the right amount of Thorazine to protect from anxiety, fear, hallucinations, or ghosts.

Marcus: So, you're selling... (Marcus purses his lips and moves his eyes up-and-down, seemingly studying Katya)

Katya: I'm selling a feeling, a sensation of, like, umm...

Marcus: You know, that's the first way to kill a brand

(Katya sighs and sinks her body downward)

Marcus: Is to sell something that doesn't have value.

(Katya makes an exaggerated open-lipped frown and scrunches her forehead down)

Marcus: So, I think you have a little bit of branding identity crisis.

Katya: Okay. Well, that's very on-brand for me. (Contestant Detox laughs from across the room)

Marcus: I think, right now, the only crisis here is the product. I want to have something that somebody actually wants to buy. Just lose the bottle and the whole idea. Start Over.

Katya creates a completely Camp commodity. During her tenure on Season Seven of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Katya speaks openly about her struggles with depression and anxiety. She owns these experiences in a positive way, and her anxiety becomes part of her drag identity. With this product, Katya capitalizes on her anxiety by creating a Camp product. She has no intention of creating a Thorazine-filled refreshing body spray; indeed, her pitch here demonstrates how the entire commodity is rooted in a Camp joke. In response, Lemonis deems the product valueless and suggests that no one will want to spend money on the commodity. Lemonis fails to understand Camp. The product has *Camp value* because of the concept and association with Katya's drag persona. Consumers who value Camp want to purchase the product not because it

actually contains Thorazine and protects against ghosts but because the concept is hilarious. The product's value comes from its Camp factor and connection to Katya. A heterosexual businessman with no appreciation for Camp cannot fathom the commodity's value because the product is valueless according to heterosexual capitalist standards.

Katya smartly ignores Lemonis' valueless advice and produces an accompanying campy commercial. This presentation further establishes the commodity's Camp value. The commercial opens with a voiceover from Katya and the accompanying filmed footage:

“Riddled with anxiety?...

Katya's commercial opens with standing in front of a black-and-white “hypnotic swirl” background. She performs an exaggerated look of terror: her wide-open eyes scan the room and her mouth opens and closes. She grasps her wig and moves her knees back-and-forth as if shaking in fear.

Crippled under the burden of existential pain?...

The footage cuts to Katya standing in front of a background consisting of different paintings of torture, burning cities, and Christ's crucifixion. She pulls her chin down into her neck and purses her quivering lips, giving off the appearance of pain. Slowly, she sinks downward and groans. RuPaul laughs as Katya sinks out-of-frame.

Hello, my name is Katya Zamolodchikova...

The footage cuts to medium-wide shot of Katya wearing a black-and-white hound's-tooth robe and standing in front of a kitchen background, and holding a giant uncooked turkey. RuPaul and guest judge Graham Norton laugh as Katya holds the turkey. The camera zooms out as Pit Crew member Miles Davis Moody wants into the frame, Katya hands him the turkey, and he departs.

You know, these days, being a woman is tough. When I'm not struggling with my weight or worried about wrinkles, I am bombarded by a cacophony of demonic voices in my head telling me...

After Miles leaves the shot, the camera focuses on a medium shot that frames Katya's upper body. When she mentions her weight, Katya moves her arms down her midsection. When she mentions wrinkles, she places her hands onto her cheeks. The camera then zooms out to a full-bodied shot of Katya in the kitchen.

*You're not good enough!* (Katya speaks with a digitally-altered deep, demonic voice)

As Katya says, “you're not good enough,” the camera zooms into a close-up of her face. The background turns into fire, and her eyes glow red. RuPaul bursts out laughing. Immediately after saying “enough,” the background switches back to

the kitchen, as Katya cocks her head to the side and smiles while a chime noise plays.

That's why I created Krisis Kontrol...

The footage cuts to a close-up of Katya's spray bottle, in front of a black, sparkling background. The bottle features a red label adorned with Katya's face and the text, "Krisis Kontrol by Katya." Katya moves her hands erratically around the product.

A moisturizing body spray that provides relief...

In front of a waterfall and rain forest background, Katya furiously sprays her face with the bottle. She keeps her mouth wide-open. The footage then pans down to her midsection, and Katya sprays her crotch. Katya thrusts her black panties forward, clearly visible underneath her red top. Graham Norton laughs out loud.

While heavy doses of Thorazine shield the psyche from pain...

The footage cuts to Katya sitting on a regal-looking chair, in front of a sunset-on-the-water background. Katya leans to her left side, appearing to be passed out. The footage then cuts to a picnic background. Katya now lies on the chair with her left leg propped onto the chair back, her right leg straddling an arm rest, her head dangling off the chair, and her right arm pointed toward the ground. Katya keeps her mouth wide-open and her eyes rolled back into her head. RuPaul laughs out loud. The background. The scene then cuts to the Great Wall of China. Katya now places the upper-half of her body on the floor and leans her legs onto the chair's right arm. She bends her left leg toward her head and extends her right leg fully. She appears fully passed out, with her mouth open.

So go ahead, control yourself."

The footage cuts back to Katya in front of the kitchen background, as she holds the spray bottle with its label visible to the audience. She sprays the bottle once, flutters her eyelids, and slowly falls backward. RuPaul laughs out loud. The shot cuts to Katya now lying on the ground, as she raises her left arm and holds the bottle upward. The footage then cuts to a close-up of Katya's extended arm, holding Krisis Kontrol with the label directed at the camera.

By embracing Camp humor, Katya's commercial marks her product as an unapologetically Camp commodity. Her over-the-top performances of terror accompanied by her Thorazine-induced unconsciousness effectively market her drag persona. She presents herself as someone who uses humor to combat self-doubt, anxiety, and depression. The product itself in no way actually and effectively relieves these conditions, but the Camp commodity need not fulfill these expectations. In a Camp economy, the item has value because of its Camp qualities and

association with Katya's drag character. The judges provide Katya and her product with an overwhelmingly positive response. Two gay men on the panel, guest judge Graham Norton and regular judge Carson Kressley, deem the product "gen-i-us" and "on brand," respectively. Because these gay men understand Camp, they value the product as a Camp commodity. Along with contestant Alaska Thunderfuck, Katya wins the challenge, and World of Wonder sells both queens' products at DragCon 2017.<sup>88</sup> Both queens embrace RuPaul's Camp marketing strategies and, as a result, follow in the footsteps of the queen "marketing motherfucking genius."

### **Conclusion: Phase Three and Camp Capitalism's Future**

Through Camp Capitalism on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, RuPaul and World of Wonder effectively create a distinctly queer, RuPaul-centric commercial Camp economy. RuPaul first adopts straightforward marketing strategies in order to claim a queer space within consumer culture. She then strategically introduces Camp elements into her marketing, slowly bringing the audience "in on the joke" without threatening capitalism. Then, RuPaul redefines "shameless self-promotion" through a Camp value system, in order to distinguish Camp consumerism from corporate consumption. Next, RuPaul teaches her *Drag Race* children to become "shameless self-promoters.. As her queens embrace shameless Camp consumerism, RuPaul expands her commercial drag enterprise through larger (and increasingly more mainstream) corporate opportunities. Through these techniques, RuPaul and World of Wonder both build a queer economy rooted in Camp value. Using hyper-Camp marketing strategies, RuPaul markets more and more Camp commodities in this emerging economy, thereby drawing in more and more

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<sup>88</sup> Alaska similarly creates a Camp commodity that relates to her drag persona. Her "Alaska Thunderfun Fashion Tape" markets yellow duct tape through a campy commercial that parodies 1990s perfume ads and references Ariana Grande and Janet Jackson. Alaska's product has no inherent value as duct tape but gains Camp value from the campy commercial and association with Alaska's drag brand.

Camp consumers. Valueless in a standard heterosexual capitalism context, these products become highly valued Camp commodities in RuPaul's Camp economy (as I discuss in the next chapter). DragCon provides a market for the products and an audience of Camp consumers. By the end of Camp Capitalism's second phase, RuPaul and World of Wonder effectively establish a distinctly queer economy that values Camp commodities.

As *RuPaul's Drag Race* becomes more mainstream and Camp Capitalism begins Phase Three, RuPaul may embrace less parodic forms of hyper-Camp marketing. For Season Nine, *Drag Race* begins airing simultaneously on Logo TV and VH1. This dual broadcasting, particularly on the less LGBT-centric VH1 network, disseminates the show more and more to heterosexual audiences. In Season Nine, RuPaul appears to embrace more hyper-Camp marketing strategies at the expense of parodic Camp consumerism. During Season Nine, RuPaul releases three albums, *Remember Me: Essential, vol. 1*, *American*, and *Essential vol.2*. The first album includes remixes of RuPaul's pre-*Drag Race* back catalogue. By remixing the older songs, RuPaul reintroduces the music to newer audiences and makes the music available for use on *Drag Race*. Whereas World of Wonder would have to pay additional licensing fees to use RuPaul's music from his former production company, the show's producers can now use the remixed versions at a cheaper cost. *Essential, vol. 2* compiles RuPaul's *Drag Race*-era music onto one album, essentially serving as the series' soundtrack for 2009-2017. The combinations of *Essential vol. 1* and *2* seem to signify a transformational moment in RuPaul's music career: bringing together the older catalogue with the end of *Drag Race* music thus far. *American* presents all-new music in conjunction with Season Nine. Additionally, RuPaul announces the start of DragCon New York City during the Los Angeles DragCon convention. In 2017, RuPaul

and World of Wonder now sponsor two DragCon events, thereby making their weekend-long Camp economic event bicoastal.

While these changes present increased opportunities for fans to spend money, the show also scales back on some events. Season Nine presents only one premiere party in New York City, instead of the multi-city tours from Seasons Seven and Eight. Additionally, the Season Nine Reunion does not include original lip sync performances from the Top Four contestants. Instead, the queens face off in a “lip sync battle royale.” In pairs of two, they lip sync against a competitor to two Whitney Houston songs and one Britney Spears song (“Grand Finale” 2017). Season Nine no longer uses the lip sync performances to promote original music for monetary gain. Similarly, this season marks the first time in the show’s history when the runway theme song does not come from RuPaul’s released music. The main runway theme is an as-of-yet unreleased remix of RuPaul’s song “Category Is.” In addition to not marketing this song, RuPaul does not market his products through shameless Camp consumerism in Season Nine. None of the challenges specifically sell RuPaul’s products, and RuPaul (as of this writing) does not release the remix version of “Category Is” featuring the Top Four contestants (“Category Is” 2017). As Appendix A shows, Season Nine incorporates RuPaul’s music into the show more as background music than as aspects of the challenges. These changes signal a shift away from RuPaul’s signature parodic Camp consumerism.

Beginning with Season Ten, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* will benefit from an increased budget courtesy of VH1. How this budget affects Camp Capitalism will reveal how *Drag Race*’s distinctly queer, Camp marketing strategies interface with a more distinctly mainstream, heterosexual economy. Now that RuPaul and World of Wonder earned access to this bigger platform, they could potentially alter their Camp marketing strategies significantly. Now that



RuPaul and World of Wonder have created a large fan base of Camp consumers, they have the potential to influence these individuals through Camp Capitalism. How Camp Capitalism will and will not queer this new context will demonstrate the subversive power and potential of RuPaul's Camp consumerism.

## Chapter Three

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### **“You have to buy stuff” Participant Observations from RuPaul’s DragCon**

Above all other *RuPaul’s Drag Race*-related live events in which I have participated, “RuPaul’s DragCon” provides the best opportunity for analyzing the emerging *Drag Race* economy. A weekend-long convention, RuPaul’s DragCon originated in Los Angeles on May 15, 2015. As of this writing, the Los Angeles Convention Center has hosted three RuPaul’s DragCon events in 2015, 2016, and 2017. In September 2017, the Jacob K. Javits convention center in New York City hosted the first NYC-based DragCon. For the inaugural 2015 event, World of Wonder advertised DragCon as a mixture of Comic-Con, BeautyCon, and Hello Kitty Con, three well-established conventions that bring together fan communities in a consumer-based environment. RuPaul’s DragCon similarly brings together *Drag Race* fans from across the world to “celebrate the art of drag, queer culture, and self-expression for all” (St. James 2015). The RuPaul’s DragCon event includes a number of different interactive options for fans. The main convention floor space features opportunities for shopping and interacting with drag artists (often by purchasing autographs or photographs). The main floor includes multiple vendors and exhibitors who promote and/or sell products, which most often relate to queer culture or beauty/fashion consumer cultures. The upstairs conference rooms host panel discussions and film screenings, which typically relate to drag/queer cultures and feature panelists including drag performers and queer artists. RuPaul also delivers a culminating keynote address to a packed audience of superfans.

The three Los Angeles-based DragCon weekends have been massive events, with the total number of guests increasing exponentially in just three years. In 2015, DragCon garnered an

attendance of 13,718 fans. This number almost doubled to 22,575 attendees in 2016, and the amount almost doubled again in 2017 with over 40,000 attendees.<sup>89</sup> As the number of guests grew, the amount of floor space used at the Los Angeles Convention Center also increased. The main convention space, which features the shopping area, more than tripled from 63,619 square feet in 2015 to 210,000 square feet in 2016 and 2017.<sup>90</sup> The upstairs conference rooms used for panels also expanded to accommodate more guests. DragCon 2015 used four conference rooms for the panels, which combined hold a maximum of 1,050 to 1,800 people (depending on the room's organization).<sup>91</sup> For DragCon 2016, the rooms expanded to hold 1,959 to 3,324 people. For DragCon 2017, the room rearrangement accommodated between 1,160 to 3,025 people. As these numbers indicate, RuPaul's DragCon is a huge event that brings together large numbers of drag performers, queer artists, vendors, and *Drag Race* superfans—all of whom invest time and money into RuPaul's commercial drag economy.

While individual investments vary considerably, general participation in RuPaul's

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<sup>89</sup> After the DragCon weekend, the RuPaul's DragCon official email address sends ticket purchasers a "Thank You" message. For 2015 and 2016, this message included the exact number of attendees (which I include here). For 2017, the DragCon official address did not send out a Thank You message with an exact number. This "over 40,000" estimate for RuPaul's DragCon 2017 was released by World of Wonder (Yee 2017).

<sup>90</sup> I base this square footage on numbers available from the LA Convention Center's official website. According to this website, the main floor used for DragCon 2015 contains approximately 63,619 square feet. For DragCon 2016 and 2017, this space more than triples to 210,000 square feet.

<sup>91</sup> DragCon 2015 uses the following four conference rooms: 501 C, 501 AB, 511 AB, and 515AB. Room capacity amounts available on the LA Convention Center's website indicate that these four rooms combined can hold a maximum of 1,050 to 1,800 people (depending on the room's organization). For DragCon 2016, 501 C expands into 501 ABC (increasing maximum capacity from 100 to 300 people), 501 AB is replaced by 502 AB (increasing maximum capacity from 200 to 1,125 people), 511 AB expands into 511 ABC (increasing maximum capacity from 200 to 300 people), and room 411 is added exclusively for film screenings (sitting 299 maximum people). DragCon 2016's total capacity, then, increased to 1,959 to 3,324 people (depending on the room's organization). DragCon 2017 dropped screening room 411 but maintained the other four rooms, making the maximum capacity for all rooms between 1,160 to 3,025 people.

DragCon requires a minimum monetary purchase. For DragCon 2015 and 2016, the basic ticket options included a \$50 weekend pass and \$30 individual day passes. These prices increased slightly for 2017, to \$60 for the weekend pass and \$40 for individual day passes. Along with these general admission tickets, DragCon provided numerous add-on options.<sup>92</sup> Based on these available tickets, the RuPaul's DragCon weekend potentially garners hundreds of thousands of dollars in ticket sales alone.<sup>93</sup> When factoring in costs for travel, lodging, food, and shopping, the event can easily cost attendees hundreds to thousands of dollars (not to mention the amount of time that goes into planning one's attendance). When I attended, I purchased the weekend pass and an additional VIP pass.<sup>94</sup> Because RuPaul's DragCon is a research project for me, I used the VIP pass to ensure that I gained entrance into the panels and RuPaul's keynotes. As part of RuPaul's ever-expanding commercial drag enterprise, DragCon requires significant investments of time and money from fans who wish to participate.

Therefore, RuPaul's DragCon provides an invaluable opportunity to analyze how the themes I discussed in Chapters One and Two translate into tangible consumer practices. With this chapter, I analyze my experiences participating in and observing the RuPaul's DragCon

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<sup>92</sup> For DragCon 2015, basic ticket options include: a \$50 weekend pass, \$30 Saturday/Sunday one-day pass, \$40 VIP pass, \$150 RuPaul VIP Experience, and \$425 Ultimate Kai Kai VIP Pass. For DragCon 2016, basic ticket options include: a \$50 weekend pass, \$30 Saturday/Sunday one-day pass, \$40 VIP pass, \$150 RuPaul VIP Experience, and a \$100 WOWPRESENTS package. For DragCon 2017, basic ticket options include: a \$50 weekend pass, \$30 Saturday/Sunday one-day pass, and \$100 VIP badge. For a more detailed explanation of what these options include, see Appendix B and Appendix C.

<sup>93</sup> If the 13,718 attendees at DragCon 2015 all purchased just a one-day pass, the event would earn \$411,540. That number increases to \$677,250 with the 22,575 attendees in 2016, and the over 40,000 attendees in 2017 would bring in a minimum of \$1,600,000. These huge estimates represent the smallest possible revenue from ticket sales (i.e., if each attendees purchased only a one-day pass).

<sup>94</sup> With the VIP pass, guests gain access to a VIP line for panels, early access to the main floor shopping area, and access to VIP autograph/photograph lines. For DragCon 2016 and 2017, the VIP pass allows the attendee to access a VIP 2-hour preview night on Friday. During this night, VIP attendees can peruse the main floor, visit the vendors, shop, and meet any attending drag artists.

weekends in 2015, 2016, and 2017. As discussed, RuPaul's DragCon provides a weekend for *RuPaul's Drag Race* superfans to congregate in Los Angeles and consume drag cultures, commodities, and histories through shopping, panel presentations, and RuPaul's keynote speeches. Because DragCon provides attendees with so many different ways to consume and engage in the event, my study cannot possibly encompass the totality of potential DragCon experiences. The data and analysis included herein reflect my own positionality as a researcher and interests as a scholar-consumer. For instance, I prioritized the panel presentations over shopping because I am generally more interested in witnessing how DragCon represents drag cultures/histories than in purchasing products. As a result, I did not invest as much of my time and money into the autographs, photographs, or interactive experiences on the main floor. Therefore, my experience at RuPaul's DragCon is vastly different than attendees who invest time and money into meeting RuPaul (a wait time that often ranges between four-to-six hours). I make this point in order to acknowledge that my analysis cannot provide an all-encompassing study of RuPaul's DragCon.

With this caveat in mind, I organize my study of RuPaul's DragCon to address some of my dissertation's overarching theoretical questions. I am particularly interested in studying how fans invest their time and money at DragCon, how DragCon provides drag performers with opportunities to accumulate economic and social capital, and how vendors and RuPaul deploy Camp marketing strategies. The DragCon event provides opportunities for participants to gain economic and social capital. The convention is a type of institutionalized network, organized around the *RuPaul's Drag Race* brand. Access to this platform is a type of social capital for drag performers and queer artists because they gain an audience and social recognition. This access can translate into economic gains, if the performer/artist successfully sells products at the event.

With this context in mind, I analyze how Camp Capitalism on *RuPaul's Drag Race* translates into tangible practices at RuPaul's DragCon. I consider how this event provides different opportunities for drag performers and queer artists to accumulate economic and social capital. I study the different strategies by which RuPaul's DragCon commodifies and markets drag cultures and histories to attendees, and I consider how the attendees reflect an evolving "queer" fan base. Additionally, I consider how RuPaul's DragCon provides a space for political discussions that do not occur on the show directly, and I use this analysis to question how scholars should challenge their own interpretations of the show's politics.

To answer these overarching analytical questions, I organize my study of RuPaul's DragCon into four particular areas of investigation: the attendees, the main floor vendors, the panel presentations, and the RuPaul keynote addresses. Each of these four areas provides me with an opportunity to study the *RuPaul's Drag Race* economy through the aforementioned questions. My observations of and conversations with fellow DragCon attendees provide data on consumer practices and the fan base's shifting "queer" identity. For DragCon 2015 and 2016, I developed a sets of interview questions to use when conducting short interviews with attendees (Appendix B and Appendix D, respectively). These brief eight-to-ten minute conversations occurred primarily while I and other attendees waited in line for panel presentations. In 2015, I interviewed 33 total informants, and in 2016, I interviewed 39 total informants.<sup>95</sup> This interview data does not present a quantitative analysis of RuPaul's DragCon, and the compiled responses from 2015 and 2016 are not applicable to all attendees (Appendix C and Appendix E, respectively). I never wanted to conduct a large-scale quantitative analysis of DragCon attendees.

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<sup>95</sup> By 2017, the crowd size grew so large that I could not conduct interviews in the hallways—the amount of bodies pressed into the small space prevented the same type of interviewing process. For 2017, I instead focused my data collection on observing the panels and main floor vendors.

Rather, I include excerpts from these interviews in order to think about the diversity of consumer practices and experiences at RuPaul's DragCon. When I quote these informants, I provide them with aliases to ensure anonymity. I include the names of all informants at the end of this dissertation.

Through my study of the main floor shopping experiences, I analyze how vendors sell Camp commodities and employ Camp marketing strategies. I also observe how RuPaul's DragCon attendees disproportionately invest their time and money into meeting and purchasing merchandise from some *Drag Race* contestants more than others. For this data collection, I documented my observations through field notes and photographs, which I compiled both while walking the floor and at the end of each DragCon day. My observations of the panel presentations provide data on how RuPaul's DragCon markets drag cultures and histories, as well as how attendees consume these representations. I analyze how DragCon's panels provide a platform to drag artists and drag cultures/histories not represented (or underrepresented) on the show. At the same time, I consider how attendees invest time differently into these experiences, often by privileging *Drag Race*-related panels over historical panels. I also document how the conversations during these panels (particularly in 2017) provide more radical and intersectional political discussions than are often found on the television show. To collect data at these panel presentations, I audio recorded the event and later transcribed the text. Because World of Wonder uploaded edited video recordings of panels to their YouTube channel, I also viewed these recordings to incorporate visual information. Through my analysis of RuPaul's keynote addresses, I consider how Ru markets Camp and drag for the diverse DragCon audience. By studying the changing marketing strategies RuPaul employs during these performances, I analyze how the show's Camp Capitalism translates into this performance setting. I also compare the

changing post-Keynote Question & Answer sessions in order to understand how the shifting questions reflect the franchise's changing demographics.

Through this study of RuPaul's DragCon, I connect my analysis of the television show to tangible practices within RuPaul's emerging commercial drag economy. I hope to demonstrate how this event should challenge scholars to nuance their understandings of the *Drag Race* phenomenon. The RuPaul's DragCon experience is multifaceted and complex. While shamelessly commercial, the weekend is also unapologetically queer. Political conversations that occur therein are simultaneously radical and homonormative. Dismissing the *Drag Race* phenomenon as simply "commercial" and, therefore, "normative" fails to account for the complexity and contradictions that occur at RuPaul's DragCon. With this chapter, I confront these seeming paradoxes head-on. I present my analysis in a narrative structure that incorporates the ethnographic present tense. I include both my in-the-moment reactions to events, as well as later reflections. In choosing this writing style, I hope the text provides the reader with a sense of DragCon's "feel." The event is highly experiential and performative in nature: attendees often dress in full drag, assorted costumes, and/or their favorite drag performer's merchandise. I myself frequently wear ACT UP or Divine t-shirts to celebrate these areas of drag culture and queer history. During the weekend, attendees congregate and converse with thousands of other *Drag Race* fans from around the world in a celebratory setting that is at once corporate and subversive. I hope that my writing conveys this texture.



### **“Go down there, and get the stuff!”: The Inaugural RuPaul's DragCon 2015**

I first learned about RuPaul's DragCon in mid-February 2015 through World of Wonder's official announcement. Looking at the press release, I delight in seeing the advertised



panels that include “Drag King Makeovers,” “Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence,” and “A Drag Revolution: Stonewall Riots.” I am excited that DragCon will showcase drag kings and aspects of drag culture and queer political activism that are not always represented on the show. While I recognize that the weekend will be unapologetically commercial in nature, I now realize that the event will be more than *just* a shopping extravaganza. By the time World of Wonder releases the finalized schedule, I am disappointed to discover that the “Drag King Makeover” panel does not make the cut. This exclusion in particular disappoints me since *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, as of this writing, does not permit drag king participants. I was hoping that DragCon would provide the kings with opportunities to accumulate social and economic capital through their panel participation (and potential merchandise sales). Despite this development, I am particularly thrilled that RuPaul will deliver a culminating keynote address. Although I have read his books and watched countless interviews he has done, I cannot wait to hear what RuPaul will say to this audience of consumers. By this point in time, I have spent the past four years studying the show and attending *Drag Race*-related events (including two *Battle of the Seasons* tours, the Season Six Finale Taping, and the Season Seven Premiere Party). Compared these events, however, I anticipate that DragCon will be *the* crowning achievement of RuPaul’s Camp Capitalism.

I prioritize ethnographic data collection over shopping and meeting talent. While I do purchase products and meet/greet drag artists, my goal when walking the main floor is more to study the different booths and products offered than to wait in long lines. For the panels, I decide to attend a combination of presentations: those that focus on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and those that discuss broader drag cultures/histories. I want to compare the attendance numbers at these events to gauge how attendees invest their time. For DragCon 2015, I create the following schedule:

	<b><u>Saturday, May 16, 2015</u></b>	<b><u>Sunday, May 17, 2015</u></b>
9:30 to 10 a.m.	Walk the Floor/Survey	Walk the Floor/Survey
10 to 11 a.m.	Walk the Floor/Survey	<i>Untucked</i> : Live Panel
11 to 12 p.m.	First Ladies of Disco Panel	Walk the Floor/Survey
12 to 1 p.m.	Walk the Floor/Survey	<i>Alyssa's Secret</i> Panel
1 to 2 p.m.	Comedy Queens Panel	Wait in Line/Survey
2 to 3 p.m.	Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence Panel	RuPaul Keynote
3 to 5 p.m.	<i>Paris Is Burning</i> Screening	Survey
5 to 6 p.m.	Walk the Floor/Survey	

On Saturday, May 16, 2015, I drive to the Los Angeles Convention Center. When I arrive, a crowd of around thirty people waits in line. The crowd visually reads as younger (people in their 20s and 30s), racially mixed, and a fairly even mixture of feminine, masculine, and genderqueer presenting bodies. Some attendees come in full drag, decked out in wigs, high heels, and fishnets, with painted faces. Many people wear merchandise from RuPaul or *RuPaul's Drag Race* contestants. The prevalence of these outfits demonstrates how fan adoration translates into economic exchange and social performance. This crowd shows their commitment to *Drag Race* queens through their consumerism and dress. I notice that the majority of these fans wear t-shirts from *Drag Race* contestants Adore Delano, Alaska Thunderfuck, Bianca del Rio, and Katya Zamolodchikova. The presence of certain queens' merchandise more often than others reflects a growing hierarchy within the litany of *Drag Race*-affiliated artists. The "fan favorite" *Drag Race* queens often develop larger fan bases, which can translate into increased opportunities to accumulate money, queer cultural status, and future employment.

When I arrive Saturday morning, I first walk the main floor to observe the vendors and shopping opportunities. Of the 130 exhibitors, the majority of companies sell products related to "femininity," including makeup/cosmetics, corsetry, wigs, lashes, and skincare products. These businesses tend to draw large lines of people, and the consumers visually read as a mixture of cis female and queer bodies. Some of these vendors use their marketing strategies to sell a

specifically Camp form of femininity. These exhibitors feature drag queen models in their advertisements, and their salespeople are often in drag or adopt queer aesthetics. As a potential consumer looking at these booths, I read the products as Camp. They sell items related to femininity, but they frame these items as ways to embody and perform gender. I do not read their marketing strategies as selling essentialized, gender normative or heteronormative ideals of femininity. On the contrary, they market products in such a way that celebrates gender as a constructed and performative identity.

Other vendors, however, market their products in a more gender normative manner. These booths display advertisements that feature models who visually read as cis women, and their salespeople often wear business attire. These vendors sell makeup or beauty products in a way that, to me, reads as naturalizing gender. I read these marketing strategies as selling attendees beauty products that will “fix” their flaws or make them more presentable. For instance, when I peruse one of these booths, a salesperson asks me if I would like to sample a product that will help my skin. I interpret this pitch as a more traditional form of hetero-capitalist advertising: identify a flaw within the consumer that can be fixed by this product. These products are decidedly not Camp in how they emphasize normative notions of beauty and gender. Many consumers who visit these booths pay to have their nails and/or makeup done by employees, so I witness multiple makeovers while walking the floor. As I observe these booths, I question how many of the consumers who invest time and money into these beauty products approach the commodities as Camp or as “beauty fixes.” I wonder how many cis women buy these items in order to fix supposed flaws created by patriarchal standards of beauty; or, how many of these women celebrate their femininity as a Camp source of empowerment. Regardless of how consumers interpret and personally relate to these products, they all invest monetarily into the

business of beauty (both explicitly Camp and seemingly normative). Within the queer space of RuPaul's DragCon, multiple marketing strategies exist in contradictory ways.

As I walk the floor, I notice that the smaller booths consist of artists who sell their original *Drag Race*-inspired artwork. Many of these artists are fans of *RuPaul's Drag Race* who hope to profit off their fan made work. While this artwork often features portraits of *Drag Race* contestants, the queens do not necessarily profit off sales. In talking with some of the vendors, I learn that they do not all have agreements with the queens to use their likenesses. Some of the more established vendors do have licensing agreements with the contestants, but the smaller artists typically do not. This situation could put the *Drag Race* queens into a precarious position, since someone else profits off their image without paying them. Because the *Drag Race* economy is still emerging and most of these vendors exist only because of the show, a set of established rules and guidelines for portraying contestants does not yet exist.

A good number of *Drag Race* queens purchase their own booths to sell merchandise. When not speaking on panels or sitting in the designated autograph/photograph location, these queens stay in their booths and greet fans while selling their merchandise. Interacting with these queens can be difficult or easy, depending upon their popularity. At DragCon 2015, Katya has the longest line, which circles from her booth around the convention center. To meet her, fans must invest *a lot* of time, which often translates into monetary investment when purchasing merchandise from the booth. Less popular queens, however, often sit in their booths waiting for consumers to approach. This visual disparity emphasizes the hierarchy of drag performers within RuPaul's *Drag Race* economy.

While I meet and converse with several queens just by going up to their booths and starting a conversation, these interactions sometimes feel awkward because of the DragCon

context. During a drag show in a gay bar, I understand the proper performance etiquette: a drag artist puts on a show, and I give them money for their artistry and labor. At DragCon 2015, however, no set guidelines exist for paying the performers. When I ask queens to sign the DragCon poster that comes with my VIP pass, I feel awkward when I do not then purchase their merchandise—and I cannot afford to purchase merchandise from every queen when the average cost of a t-shirt is \$20. When I visit the booth of a Season Two queen, I awkwardly hand her money after she signs my poster, even though she does not ask me to do so. Because I understand how much time and money these artists invest into their craft (both generally and for this particular weekend), I feel obligated to pay them for their labor. By getting into drag, they put themselves in physical pain, not to mention the emotional/mental labor of being “on” for an entire weekend filled with superfans. Because these performers invest so much, I find that asking them for an autograph without giving them any money in return feels like a violation of the artist-audience contract.

To me, the exchange seems a bit exploitative of talented artists, in part because I know many of the queens must purchase their own booths and spend their own money to manufacture and bring merchandise. The queens represented by Producer Entertainment Group gain the privilege of having their merchandise sold at PEG’s booth. Other performers, particularly those not represented by the larger management companies, take on the monetary burden themselves. Those artists who invest in their own booths have no guarantee of financial profit, and over the weekend I see many of the “less popular” queens sitting in their booths alone waiting for interactions. This discrepancy disturbs me in part because DragCon provides the privileged upper echelon of *Drag Race* contestants with opportunities for sizable financial gain, while less adored contestants do not reap the same benefits. The weekend is expensive for performers,

exhibitors, and fans alike. This situation raises controversy over the weekend, as some fans negatively react to queens' charging for selfies/autographs. Because attendees invest so much time and money into attending DragCon, some fans feel exploited when asked to pay for selfies or autographs, while not purchasing the performer's merchandise. Fans post about this issue on social media sites, and other queens at DragCon call out this issue during panels. The issue is complex because both fans and artists invest a lot into the event. However, the queens are not paid to attend DragCon, so they need to protect themselves from economic exploitation.

The booths themselves utilize interesting marketing strategies for drawing in consumers. While the majority of queens' booths at DragCon 2015 feature their displayed merchandise, some *Drag Race* contestants turn their booths into campy experiences. For instance, Trixie Mattel, a queen known for her Barbie-doll like makeup, decorates her booth with a giant Barbie-like package. Attendees who meet Trixie may pose with her in this backdrop. This strategy both intelligently incorporates Trixie's doll-like brand and provides an "experience" to fans: the interaction is not just a standard meet-and-greet. RuPaul's "Realness" display similarly provides attendees with an "experience." The RuPaul area features a mini-museum of Ru's various gowns, and her booth hawks her various CDs, books, apparel, and posters. These vendors smartly incorporate Camp into their marketing strategies to draw in consumers.

After observing the main floor, I walk upstairs for the panels. While a large crowd attends DragCon, moving through the space is relatively easy. The hallways do not feel overcapacity, and I walk through the space without being pressed up against other bodies. The VIP and General Admission (GA) lines for panels generally begin to form fifteen minutes before the panel's scheduled start. Waiting for the panels provides me with time both to interview and to take in DragCon's atmosphere. I overhear tongue pops and catchphrases from the show, which

audibly marks the convention space as queer. I see attendees embodying various queer aesthetics through their dress: many superfans wear *Drag Race* queens' merchandise, while a smaller number come in full drag. I conduct the majority of interviews while waiting in line for these panels. During DragCon 2015, usually around 10-30 people wait in the VIP and GA lines before the start of panels. While we wait, I strike up conversations with attendees, tell them about my research, and ask them my survey questions. The majority of people with whom I chat are happy to speak with me.

During DragCon 2015, I survey a total of thirty-three informants while waiting in line. These individuals represent a wide and diverse range of identities, and their full answers to my interview questions can be found in Appendix B.<sup>96</sup> When I ask their primary reason for attending DragCon, almost every respondent notes their interest in seeing/meeting the queens and RuPaul in person. Two individuals declare their "obsession" with drag queens, and four people note their love of drag and drag culture as driving factors for their attendance. One respondent identifies shopping as their primary goal, three people express desires to be in a fun environment with other *Drag Race* fans, and one individual appreciates DragCon as a safe space for gender expression. While Long Beach's 2015 gay Pride events occur on the same weekend as DragCon, only one respondent expresses interest in seeing a non-*Drag Race* related drag event, and only

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<sup>96</sup> In terms of gender identity, eighteen informants self-identify as "female" and fifteen as "male." With regard to age, the majority of respondents (twenty) were in their 20s, with two individuals under 20 years-old, seven individuals in their 30s, and four individuals in their 40s. When asked to self-identify their sexuality or sexual identity, fifteen people described themselves as "gay," three as "lesbian," two as "bisexual," one as "bisexual/pansexual," one as "asexual/pansexual," one as "pansexual," one as "gay/lesbian," and one as "homosexual." The eight non-LGBTQ respondents self-identified as "heterosexual" or "straight." When asked what they consider their racial identity, thirteen respondents identified as "white/Caucasian," eight as "Hispanic, Latin American, or Latina/o," seven as "mixed/multiracial," three as "Mexican," one as African American, and one as "Pacific Islander."

four respondents say that they will attend another non-*Drag Race* related drag event during the weekend.

A majority of respondents (twenty-four) plan a trip to Los Angeles specifically for DragCon. Thirteen of these individuals who live in California save money by commuting from home rather than staying at hotels. Of the informants I interview, one invests the most amount of time and money on travel because she lives in Canada. This 37 year-old pansexual female superfan, Lindsay dresses in a gorgeous mermaid outfit and bedazzles her wheelchair for the weekend. During our conversation, she tells me that she regularly attends *Drag Race*-related events. Thus far, she has invested time and money into the *Battle of the Seasons* touring drag shows and the AlandChuck.travel *Drag Stars at Sea* cruises. Over the years, Lindsay estimates that she spends thousands of dollars on RuPaul's commercial drag empire. She also anticipates spending at least \$100 over this weekend—in total, thousands of dollars after accounting for her airfare and hotel accommodations. Lindsay hopes to meet RuPaul and as many *Drag Race* contestants as possible, and she tells me that her primary reason for investing so much money and time into RuPaul's empire is her love of queens. When I ask why she loves drag queens and *Drag Race*, Lindsay says that the queens' life stories resonate with her. Although Lindsay does not identify as a gay male or trans female drag queen, she connects to their struggles with oppression and bullying. In her own life, Lindsay has faced bullying because of her gender identity, so she relates to the queens' similar-yet-different experiences showcased on *Drag Race*. Watching the show and meeting the queens is an emotional and empowering experience for her. Her investments of time and money translate provide an emotional return. For Lindsay, DragCon is a weekend of fun and empowerment.



When I ask how they plan to invest money into RuPaul's economy, informants indicate a wide range of potential spending habits. For their DragCon general admission tickets, twenty-three respondents purchase the \$50 weekend pass, five purchase the \$30 Saturday-only pass, three purchase the Sunday-only pass. For their add-on ticket options, one informant purchases the additional \$40 VIP pass, one purchases the \$75 gift bag, two purchase tickets for the grand opening ball, one purchases the \$200 *RDR* Reunited bundle, and two purchase the \$425 Ultimate Kai Kai VIP Pass. When I ask respondents how much money they allocate to spend at DragCon, three respondents say below \$100, twelve between \$100-200, nine between \$200-300, four between \$400-500, and three over \$1,000. Respondents overwhelmingly anticipate spending this money on RuPaul's and contestants' merchandise, including autographs, photo opportunities, and t-shirts/apparel. Of the people I interview during DragCon 2015, Sylvia and Renata allocate the most money for their DragCon experience. A lesbian couple (both 32 years-old) living together in Long Beach, Sylvia and Renata both purchase the \$425 Ultimate Kai Kai VIP Pass, which includes VIP seats at the Season Seven finale taping and priority lines for RuPaul. While waiting in line, we discuss their experience meeting RuPaul and getting a photograph together. Sylvia and Renata express disappointment in their purchase, telling me they assumed the expensive tickets would include RuPaul's autograph and photograph. Instead, they must pay additional money both for RuPaul and for many queens who charge additional money for selfies. Because they invest so much money into the weekend, Sylvia and Renata expect more of a private audience with RuPaul.

During DragCon 2015, the VIP pass gains me early entrance into the panel rooms and (almost always) front-row seating. The rooms contain rows of chairs for the audience, rows of chairs on an elevated proscenium stage for the panelists, and camera equipment to film the

events. World of Wonder staff tend to introduce the panels by informally welcoming us to DragCon and casually introducing the panelists. The most crowded panels are, unsurprisingly, the ones featuring *Drag Race* panelists. The *Alyssa's Secret* panel in particular is overcapacity, and even with my VIP pass, I barely gain entrance and must squeeze into the room, leaning against a wall. Audience members at these panels tend to be superfans of the show, often younger folks who adorn themselves with their favorite *Drag Race* queens' merchandise. Rooms for these panels fill up quickly.

By contrast, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence panel and *Paris Is Burning* screening attract fewer people but provide more political discussions of drag cultures/histories. The Sisters tell us about their history, the role of drag as a form of activism, and the importance of using Camp humor as a political tool. The audience in this panel consists largely of people who visually read as older queer individuals, many of whom come in full drag. As the Sisters talk about drag history, many people in the audience nod along, visually displaying their knowledge of and involvement in drag culture. A huge fan of the Sisters, I love this panel experience and feel invigorated by the celebration and recognition of drag's larger history outside *Drag Race*. I also enjoy seeing Sister Roma among the panelists, a legendary queen in San Francisco's drag life.

A contestant from Season Three of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Mariah Paris Balenciaga facilitates the *Paris Is Burning* screening. Mariah started her drag career in the Atlanta ball scene, so she relates the history from *Paris Is Burning* to her own experiences. During the panel, she provides opening remarks and runs the post-screening Q&A session. In her remarks, Mariah emphasizes the fundamental role ball culture plays on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Mariah tells us, "The awesome part about RuPaul is she does keep ballroom culture and the slang in the forefront

of mainstream consciousness. Whether people absorb the fact that it came from us or not, she still gives us the kudos and credit: ballroom scene, *Paris Is Burning*, and the legendary children” (Balenciaga 2015). While I absolutely agree with Mariah that *Drag Race* consistently pays homage to *Paris Is Burning* through Camp references, I am disheartened to witness how few individuals at DragCon show up to the screening. While the room’s maximum capacity is between 650 to 1,300 people, a grand total of 53 people attend the screening. Sixteen people stay for the Q&A session. This disinterest troubles me, particularly because so many of the attendees shopping for merchandise during the screening recite quotations from *Paris Is Burning* without necessarily knowing the history. While, as Mariah says, DragCon keeps *Paris Is Burning* in the collective consciousness through this screening, only a handful of attendees invest the time to witness and celebrate the legacies and lives of these legendary black and Latina/o queer and trans performers. While I recognize that attendees familiar with *Paris Is Burning* may not want to spend their DragCon experience re-watching the documentary, I am troubled that the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* screening hosted by Sharon Needles draws a much larger crowd. I wonder how this disproportionate investment translates into remembering and honoring drag histories. The artists documented through *Paris Is Burning* have much more to lose when forgotten by *Drag Race* fans than the actors from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

On Sunday, I anticipate RuPaul’s keynote, scheduled to begin around 2:00 p.m. I decide to line up around 1:00 p.m., at which time around ten people wait in the VIP line. A larger number of attendees wait across the hall in the general admission line. While we wait, I continue interviewing attendees. The hallway is relatively quiet, but cheers ring out every so often, announcing the presence of an admired *Drag Race*-affiliated star. The room opens a little before 2:00 p.m., and I rush to the front of the room. The first two rows consist of reserved seating, so I

choose a spot in the third row. Sitting directly in front of me are legendary drag entertainer Hot Chocolate (aka Larry Edwards) and Derrick Barry, a renowned Britney Spears impersonator who ends up competing on Season Eight of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Legendary entertainer and original *Dreamgirls* star Sheryl Lee Ralph sits two rows ahead of me. Ru's keynote more than any other panel event at DragCon draws stars into the audience. Over the next twenty minutes, we wait as more and more people fill the room to capacity. By the time the doors close, bodies fill every chair and line up against the wall—the antithesis of yesterday's capacity at *Paris Is Burning*.

When RuPaul enters, the crowd erupts into applause. Dressed in a red suit, RuPaul effortlessly commands attention with her aura. She walks back-and-forth across the stage waving to us, as we devoted fans give her a standing ovation. For the next thirty minutes, RuPaul gives a seemingly effortless, thoughtful, and campy keynote. I hang on her every word and marvel at her skill as an entertainer. Ru starts by welcoming us to the first DragCon and, after name dropping audience members Big Freedia and Sheryl Lee Ralph, lays out DragCon's goal:

RuPaul: That's what this whole thing is all about, it is about bringing people together from all over the world. Young people. *Older* people.

(Audience laughs)

R: You know, every nationality and everything. And that's what the show *RuPaul's Drag Race* is about. We are showing people that it's important to not take life—bear with me—it's important to not take life so seriously. Yes, life is serious, but you have to have fun with it. You have to enjoy the colors and the music and the beauty and the joy. And that's the job of the drag queen throughout history. I told people in all the interviews that I do, it's important to remember to have fun and to enjoy. Know what you're here for. To know what you're here for, which is, you are the physical reality of god. I know, bear with me, bear with me.

(Some audience members laugh, while others applaud. Someone close to me says, "Amen honey," and another person in the room shouts, "Preach!")

R: You are the physical realization of the power that created the entire universe. That's you. I'm not talking about Jiggly Caliente alone.

(Audience laughs)

R: It's not just Jiggly. It's *you*. And you, and you [Ru points at different audience members]. Everyone within the sound of my voice. That's what we're here for. That's why this thing is so important. (RuPaul 2015)

Although she does not use the word “Camp” in her keynote, RuPaul essentially preaches a Camp ideology: the need not to take life too seriously. While her invocation of a nondenominational god, which recurs throughout the thirty minutes, could easily devolve into overly serious proselytizing, RuPaul brilliantly peppers the speech with campy jokes to avoid such a situation. Her mentioning of Jiggly Caliente, a contestant from Season Four of *Drag Race*, injects humor into the seriousness. Jiggly's name becomes a running joke, a way to lighten the mood and elicit raucous laughter from the crowd, and at certain times throughout the speech, audience members shout out “Jiggly Caliente!” in response to some of Ru's more serious questions.

RuPaul utilizes different performance strategies for engaging the packed audience of attendees. Throughout the speech, Ru shouts out different celebrities in the audience, and the audience frequently cheers in response. Ru gives us “insider information” about the show when she informs us that she wears an earbud during the runway. Producer Tom Campbell sometimes feeds Ru jokes, and Ru often has to laugh before repeating the line for television. For instance, during the first of Season Five, contestant Alaska carries a giant plastic bag as she walks the stage. Tom Campbell, via Ru's earbud, comments, “She must have a *really* big dog,” insinuating the plastic bag is full of shit. Upon hearing Tom's comments, Ru cracks up and must then deliver the line. Ever the showman, Ru elicits raucous applause and laughter from the audience when she brings the ASL interpreter on stage and has the interpreter “walk the runway.” While these moments showcase Ru's Camp side, she also personalizes her image by recounting some

autobiographical stories. Early in the speech, Ru points out her sisters Rozy and Renetta in the audience and shares stories of their childhood.

While the majority of this year's keynote focuses of gay identity and experience, Ru affirms the straight audience's presence through a strategic rhetoric of "outsider" identity. Ru frames DragCon as both, "a convention of people who understand how important it is to be yourself," and an opportunity for superfans to connect. She says, "The big news here is that you see each other on Twitter, but this time you get to meet each other in person like this. You get to put a face to the name and connect, and I'm just excited for the sort of ripple effect this is going to have in pop culture for *years* to come. This convergence of people who love color and beauty and everything" (RuPaul 2015). Having studied Ru's interviews over the years, I recognize these familiar tropes. Ru tends to discuss the *Drag Race* audience as people who love color, beauty, music, and dancing—a sort of Bohemian cultural identity defines the group rather than a marginalized identity. This language of embracing outsider status through artistry, creativity, and irreverence brings together diverse consumers who love the show. At the same time, however, this inclusive strategy does not necessarily foreground actual queer experiences with oppression. To me, these bon mots seem directed more toward straight members of the audience: a way for RuPaul to affirm their participation in and consumption of a culture to which they do not necessarily belong. Interestingly, however, Ru situates this rhetoric within a type of Camp ideology. Love for artifice, humor, and glamour, key elements of Camp, become the defining quality of DragCon's community. In a sense, then, the audience's ability to embrace and love Camp becomes their unifying quality. Through this strategy, Ru marks the audience as distinctly "queer," not in their experiences with marginalization or their radical politics, but in their appreciation for and consumption of a queer television show.

To my delight, the topic of Ru’s 2015 keynote is gay experience and “educating the children.” Ru honors the legacy of our queer forebears, addresses the importance of *Drag Race* as an educational tool, and articulates the need for younger LGBTQ viewers to understand LGBTQ history. In making these arguments, Ru addresses the younger fan base and their toxic social media behavior directly:

RuPaul: This season on the show, we decided that we would put younger—we would go a lot younger for Season Seven, and you see them. We have twenty-ones, several twenty-one year-olds on the show. And because of that, we’ve gotten a lot of younger fans on the show. And through social media, we’ve noticed that younger fans who don’t know the history of the gay experience where there are certain double entendres, certain speech if spoken out of school can be perceived as, um, I don’t know, just like misunderstood, right. But they’ve taken that part of the language without understanding the backstory behind it. Do you know what I’m talking about? Nod your head.

(I and many audience members nod)

Ru: Do you know what I’m talking about? I’ll explain it more. There is a certain hurtfulness that young people will display on social media that doesn’t have the backstory that some of the older queens would have. So I’m gonna try to break this down for you so you really understand. Where I’m going with this is that it has been an issue, and we wanted to address it somehow in our experience with the show. There’s a certain meanness that has been happening that is not in line with the gay experience, you know what I mean?

(I and many audience members respond, “Yes!”)

Ru: You know, with black folks, we can talk about certain things because we know that we share the same spirits, and we’ve been through the same thing. And the same with gay people, but the younger gay people seem to not have the background or haven’t owned the right to say certain things, so we’re just trying to figure out a way to educate people in a way where it’s not so hurtful. Are you following me? Do you know what I’m saying?

Carl Schottmiller: Yes!

Ru: Johnny McGovern [host of *Hey Qween!*], you know what I’m saying. We’re still trying to figure this out, but I wanted to talk about this in this event right now because where we come from, we know the pain. We have lived through it. You know, a lot of us, a lot of the language that we talk about in the gay experience was a secret language.

CS: Mm-hmm

Ru: We had to have a secret language because we didn't want to be killed, we didn't want to be hurt by other people, so we had to create a secret language, and some of it if heard out-of-school, so to speak, could be misperceived and misunderstood. So, we're still trying to work this dialogue out with young people and educating them. And again that's why this event is so important. I wish I could explain this more without saying lots of dirty words.

(Audience laughs)

Ru: Because I could. But I'm trying to keep this clean because I'm sure there are lots of kids in here. Are there kids in here?

(Audience responds, "Yes")

Ru: There are lots of kids in here, yeah. So, I'm just trying to (Ru begins chuckling) get somewhere without having to say anything really—cause, actually, if I got TS Madison [trans icon and social media superstar] up here, she would break it down!

(Audience cheers)

Ru: And, actually, TS Madison has done a very good job of explaining what I'm talking about, you know. Because we come from a long line of people whose blood was spilled to make sure and ensure that we could have this convention here tonight.

(Audience cheers)

Ru: We would do them a disservice if we didn't acknowledge them and if we didn't educate young people about this. You know, we have so many freedoms right now that who could ever have *imagined* the things, the freedoms we have right now as not just gay people but people who think outside the box. And that's what this is all about, people who love color and beauty and joy and love and freedom. And as sort of cliché as that might sound, the truth is there's really not that many, really. It's like the Bohemian creed of music and joy and just really enjoying life, and a lot of people get upset with you when you live that way because somehow it threatens their belief system. Somehow it forces them to have to deconstruct their whole belief system, and that threatens them.

CS: Mm-hmm

Ru: The message is the magic here. This whole event, I'm gonna say it again, this whole event is for you to go and spread the word. Spread the gospel of being a lovely child of God—I said it

(Someone in the audience shouts, "Amen!")



Ru: And being someone who is going to spread the word to younger people because somehow there was a void in-between the generations where they didn't get the message, unfortunately. And I think you know why that void happened, but we can make up for that right now. We can do that through this event and through the show and everything we do, actually. We can tell them the story.

(Someone from the audience shouts, "How's your head?")

Ru (without skipping a beat): I haven't had any complaints!

(The audience cheers wildly)

Ru: But, you know, that's a perfect example honestly. That kind of humor, the fact that they have to understand that sort of off-center twisted sense of humor. (RuPaul 2015)

During this segment of Ru's speech, I hang on her every word because she speaks directly to queer communities and gay experiences. She contextualizes *Drag Race's* representation within a larger queer subcultural history, and she discusses LGBTQ peoples' experiences with violence forms of oppression. As I consume his keynote, I feel a specific queer subcultural connection to Ru. Because we are both gay men who know this history, we connect on the details. Ru need not directly say "Camp" or "HIV/AIDS" in his keynote because I understand these cultural references. I know what he means when talking about our "secret language" because I have spent the past four years studying Camp scholarship. Through this performance, Ru puts on display the history and theory from my first chapter (which was drafted before this keynote). He talks about the pedagogical functions of *Drag Race*, and he identifies the "how's your head?" Elvira reference as one prime example. I connect more directly to these moments of Ru's keynote because they speak to our shared experiences as gay men. While I wish Ru would more directly name the racism displayed by some *Drag Race* fans, I also appreciate his critique of younger queer fans unfamiliar with their history. In this moment, DragCon feels like an extension of queer history and not just a commercial enterprise.

An approximately twenty-four minute Q&A session follows RuPaul's prepared remarks, during which audience members ask a mixture of thoughtful and humorous questions. The majority of questions come from attendees dressed in drag, one of whom identifies themselves as a former member of The Cockettes (the San Francisco-based drag performance troupe). For the final question, the speaker asks Ru how to love yourself on a daily basis. In response, Ru shares her daily morning routine of stretching, praying, and meditating. She goes on to situate the need for self-care within our capitalist society:

RuPaul: We live in a consumer culture. When you live in a consumer culture, the way the culture thrives is you have to buy stuff.

Carl Schottmiller: Mm-hmm (claps)

R: You got to buy a lot of stuff, and you got to buy stuff you don't need. So how are they gonna get you to buy things that you don't need? They have to tell you that you're not whole, that you're not really clean unless you're zestfully clean.

(Audience laughs)

R: That's how they do it. So you feel really, really bad about yourself. You feel awful about yourself. You think you've got to buy this; you've got to buy that. So how do you offset that? You have to take care of yourself. (RuPaul 2015)

In this moment, RuPaul puts her Camp Capitalist rhetoric on display for the crowd of consumers. He differentiates his form of Camp consumerism from heterosexual "consumer culture." His discourse here matches my analysis of Camp Capitalism in Chapter Two: Ru suggests that heterosexual consumer culture identifies a lack within individuals, who then must spend money on products to "fix" themselves. Ru does not want the audience to feel this lack or need to fix themselves. Indeed, he tells us that we need to love ourselves instead of spending money to change ourselves. With this public performance, RuPaul aligns his live Camp marketing strategies and ideology with those he displays on *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

The Q&A session ends when Mathu Andersen, RuPaul’s longtime makeup artist, joins Ru on stage. Mathu is scheduled to present in room 515AB after RuPaul’s keynote, which by this point is running long. After praising Andersen’s genius and talent, RuPaul says with seemingly no hint of irony, “I want you all to head down to the RuPaul Realness experience downstairs and get some of the gorgeous products that we are slashing the prices! Slashing the prices on things! Yes! So go down there, and get the stuff” (RuPaul 2015). RuPaul ends his keynote with a performance of his call-and-response catchphrase, “Now everybody say love! (Audience: love!). Everybody say love! (love!).” To me, this ending perfectly encapsulates the contradictions and complexities of Ru’s Camp Capitalism. Ru suggests that dominant “consumer culture” sustains itself by forcing consumers to buy stuff, and he wants to differentiate his own economy and Camp consumerism. Instead of identifying a lack within consumers, RuPaul encourages attendees to purchase items that display their individuality and creativity. Ru’s message here is not “consume to fix yourself” but rather “consume to enjoy a Bohemian creed and assert your creative individuality.” While these marketing strategies differ, both forms of consumerism ultimately share a central feature: the audience must consume. RuPaul wants us to love ourselves, but he also needs us to invest our time and money into his empire. DragCon cannot exist, and this culture cannot thrive, unless we attendees invest our time and money. While Ru builds a specifically queer, *Drag Race*-centric economy through Camp Capitalism, this emerging enterprise still maintains on a foundational feature of capitalism: we must consume.



### **“This is a Movement!”: RuPaul’s DragCon 2016**

On Friday, May 6, 2016, I once again drive to the Los Angeles Convention Center to pick up my DragCon passes. As I did the previous year, I spend Friday evening looking through the

program and finalizing my weekend schedule. I am thrilled to see the inclusion of a drag king panel this year, as well as a panel featuring photographs of 1980s NYC drag cultures from drag legend Linda Simpson. I devise the following DragCon 2016 schedule to maximize data collection:

	<b><u>Saturday, May 7, 2016</u></b>	<b><u>Sunday, May 8, 2016</u></b>
9:30 to 10 a.m.	Walk the Floor/Survey	Walk the Floor/Survey
10 to 11 a.m.	<i>Unhhh</i> Panel	The Business of Drag Panel
11 to 12 p.m.	<i>Hey Qween!</i> Panel	Walk the Floor/Survey
12 to 1 p.m.	Wonderful World of Drag Kings Panel	Walk the Floor/Survey
1 to 2 p.m.	<i>Alyssa's Secret</i> Panel	Wait in Line/Survey
2 to 3 p.m.	Walk the Floor/Survey	RuPaul Keynote
3 to 4 p.m.	<i>Transformations</i> Panel	Survey
4 to 5 p.m.	Walk the Floor/Survey	
5 to 6 p.m.	Linda Simpson Panel	

Overall, the main floor experience is nearly identical to the previous year. When I first walk into the space, I immediately notice the massive size increase from last year's convention: the square footage more than triples from 63,619 to 210,000. Despite this increase, the convention's layout is nearly identical. Official sponsors such as World of Wonder and Logo Television have designated booths close to the entrance. Walking the main floor, I notice that this year more *Drag Race* contestants purchase their own booths. This change works in the artists' favor because they may sign autographs in the same location where they sell merchandise. The majority of companies sell femininity: cosmetics, wigs, corsetry, apparel, etc. However, this year features more queer businesses that sell Camp femininity. A company founded by a gay male made famous through Myspace, Jeffree Star cosmetics is one of this year's biggest sponsors. Star markets his products using queer male models (himself included), and the company and its products are specifically and explicitly queer. This year's convention also features an increased social media presence. Reddit, the online forum with a large *Drag Race* fan base, serves as a DragCon sponsor and purchases a booth at the event. On the *RuPaul's*

*Drag Race* subreddit forum, Reddit event organizers encourage their social media users to stop by the booth and interact with one another in person. These changes to the main floor indicate the increasing importance of social media for *Drag Race* fans. The Reddit booth provides fans from around the world who interact online to meet in person, thereby creating more personal communities.

While waiting in line, I conduct interviews in the same manner as the previous year. Similar to last year, I observe attendees who dress in full drag and wear their favorite *Drag Race* contestants' merchandise. This year, I notice an increase in campy apparel, such as Golden Girls t-shirts. I recognize much of this clothing as coming from the companies Swish Embassy, Huntees, and Drag Queen Merch. This year, I interview a total of thirty-nine individuals over the weekend, whose full responses are compiled in Appendix E. From these conversations, I notice an interesting demographic change from last year. Many more straight women attend this year, and ironically, the majority of people I interview in 2016 identify as heterosexual. Additionally, I observe an increased presence of (largely heterosexual) families, both parents with young children and mother-daughter duos. While waiting for panels, I meet Christina and Sharon, two straight white women from Massachusetts. A forty-eight year-old mother, Christina brings her sixteen year-old daughter Sharon to DragCon for a "mother-daughter weekend." While they have not attended local drag shows before, Christina and Sharon invest a "couple thousand" dollars in the weekend and hope to purchase *RDR* queens' merchandise and cosmetics from Jeffree Starr.

I also observe interesting changes in interviewees responses when I ask their main reasons for attending DragCon. Some queer individuals repeat verbatim language from DragCon's marketing campaign. For instance, while waiting in line, I meet Chad and Brian, a twenty-one year-old white gay male from Salt Lake City and a thirty-two year-old white gay

male from Burbank, respectively. While these men allocate a few hundred dollars each to purchase merchandise at DragCon, they both identify DragCon's sense of community as their primary factor for attending. In discussing this sense of community, both men repeat RuPaul's mantra of "finding your tribe." This repetition reveals the effectiveness of DragCon's marketing campaign: a general notion of community becomes a specific rhetoric of finding one's tribe. I also observe an increased amount of monetary investment among my informants. This year, the majority of my informants purchase VIP badges (and allocate an overall larger amount of money than the previous years' interviewees).

The panels themselves and audience attendance follow an almost identical pattern to what I observe the previous year. Panels that feature live versions of WOWPRESENTS YouTube shows (*Unhhh*, *Alyssa's Secret*, and *Transformations*) fill with superfans, many of whom are younger (teens-20s) people who wear their favorite *Drag Race* contestants' merchandise. The *Hey Qween*, "Wonderful World of Drag King," and Linda Simpson panels reveal different levels of attendee investments in drag cultures outside the purview of *Drag Race*. When attending the *Hey Qween!* and Drag King panels, I am thrilled to see a packed audience. A web series hosted by gay recording artist/superstar Johnny McGovern and Los Angeles-based drag performer Lady Red Couture, *Hey Qween!* is a talk show that regularly features *Drag Race* contestants, drag legends, and queer celebrities.<sup>97</sup> An avid fan of *Hey Qween!* since its 2014 premiere, I delight in seeing both the live taping and the level of audience appreciation for the web series. *Hey Qween!*'s inclusion at DragCon and adoration by DragCon superfans represents the expanding drag network beyond *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

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<sup>97</sup> Produced by The Stream TV, Johnny McGovern, and Walter Delmar, *Hey Qween!* premiered in 2014. Beginning with Season Four, *Hey Qween!* added singer-songwriter Adam Joseph and drag legend Erickatoure Aviance to the cast.

Similarly, the “Wonderful World of Drag Kings” panel showcases drag artistry that, as of this writing, unfortunately remains outside the purview of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. Featuring Los Angeles-based drag kings Landon Cider and Ivory Onyx, as well as NYC-based drag king Murray Hill, this panel brilliantly showcases and celebrates drag kings. For the presentation, Landon puts together a slideshow of drag king history to educate the audience. While I commend Landon for this celebration of king artistry, I am saddened that Landon must take on the burden of presenting this history at DragCon. Because *Drag Race* does neither include drag kings nor represents the long history of king cultures, Landon presents this context for the audience. Drag queens do not have the same burden at DragCon. This panel’s packed audience of drag kings, queens, and *Drag Race* superfans reveals the huge interest in king cultures/histories among the fan base. By contrast, a much smaller crowd attends the Linda Simpson panel. A legendary NYC-based drag icon, Linda Simpson shares photographs and stories from 1980s NYC drag nightlife. Unlike the other panels, this panel features an audience who visually reads as older queer people, many of whom lived the history shown and discussed. These individuals appreciate drag cultures/histories beyond *Drag Race* and invest the time to celebrate and honor this history.

Just before 1:00 p.m., I get in line for RuPaul’s keynote address at 2:00 p.m. The VIP and General Admission lines are both much longer than last year. Despite the increased crowd in the VIP line, I manage to get seats close to the front: not as close as the previous year but still prime seating. Before introducing RuPaul, World of Wonder creators Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato announce DragCon 2017. They encourage us to purchase weekend tickets now, before the price increases. When RuPaul enters, the crowd goes wild and gives her a cheer-filled standing ovation. For the next thirty minutes, RuPaul gives a decidedly different keynote from last year.

Whereas the 2015 keynote focuses on gay experience and speaks directly to the LGBTQ audience, this year's speech instead emphasizes a theme of "self-care" couched in the rhetoric of mothering oneself (apropos since the day happens to be Mother's Day):

RuPaul: It couldn't have happened on a better day. Mother's Day, it's perfect. Cause who am I? I'm Mama Ru!

(Audience shouts, "Mama Ru!")

Ru: I sort of inherited that slogan, "Mama Ru." Just happened to be Mama Ru. You know, the kids dubbed me, "Mama Ru." You know, everybody's looking for a mama, I guess.

(Audience laughs)

Ru: You know, it's true. Everybody wants that warmth, that comfort from a mother. That's what the name "mother" invokes, that comforting thing. That sweet, loving, comforting thing. Of course, very few people have that, you know?

(Audience laughs)

Ru: Some people do. My mother was *not* that. (RuPaul 2016)

Ru describes her mother as, "a sweet, sensitive soul whose heart was broken by the world."

Because Ms. Charles could not handle the weight of the world, she transformed into a sad, world-weary person filled with bitterness and darkness. This anecdotal beginning introduces the keynote's theme: how to overcome a broken heart. Ru frames the issue as a battle between lightness and darkness. Those individuals "stuck in the bitterness that life hasn't given them what they deserve," versus those who embrace irreverence and laughter. In performing this ideology, Ru does not present himself, like he did the previous year, as a queer knowledge keeper. This year, he performs a type of "self-help guRu" role who wants to give the audience life advice. As a marketing strategy, this approach veers from his previous Camp approach. RuPaul identifies a lack within the audience (the need/desire to feel mothered), and he wants to give us life advice to fill this need.



When addressing the audience, Ru emphasizes our connection as queer consumers. The 2015 keynote included some of these elements (e.g., suggesting that a Bohemian creed brings the audience together), but this year's keynote amps up this message. Ru emphasizes the audience's shared identity as lovers of art and participants in a cultural movement:

RuPaul: The fact that you are here today in this gorgeous, gorgeous event means that you know that you have the potential to create beauty and magic. You can see magic. That's why you're here. You want to align yourself with the magic people because this world needs you. There are children here. You saw the kids. This year, we had so many kids!

(Some audience members cheer and clap)

Ru: It's just beautiful. So, yes, I'm Mama Ru, and I'm proud of it!

(Audience cheers)

Ru: All these kids get to see all these beautiful colors. Can you imagine growing up with all of this wildness? Seeing people live their lives without any restriction. I'm looking at a man with a cat painted on his face right now.

(Audience laughs)

Ru: It's beautiful, I love it! Gorgeous! It's fabulous! That's what this is about. And talk about movements. This is a *movement*! This is what this is all about. We are God experiencing life on this planet. You—we're not separate from one another, by the way. We are one organism, one thing experiencing humanity, experiencing life on this planet together. And we get to decide where we want to land with this, whether it's the darkness or light. And, by the way, darkness, light, it's all good. You get to choose. It's not that the darkness is bad. I've been to the darkness; I don't want to spend time there cause I spent a lot of time there. I don't want to go there. It's not my thing, it's not my thing.

(Some audience members chuckle)

Ru: No judgement though, no judgment. You need that balance. The balance is there. Light, day, it's okay. I choose to stay on the light side, on the lightness, creation, color, and beauty. It gets me out of bed in the morning. That's what gets me out of bed in the morning: the color, the music, the dancing. I love it. That's that sweetness, and I tried to do that for my mother. I tried to say, you don't have enough lightness, here have some of mine.

(Some audience members let out an emotional, "aw")

R: She couldn't take it. She couldn't accept it. She couldn't take it. Her identity was tied to the victim of being—that world had broken her heart. And if you identify with that, if you decide that that is what your identity is, that is what you will get. That's what you'll get. And I'm a living witness up here. I was a little boy from San Diego with dreams to go and become an international star. I didn't know how I was gonna do it. I really didn't. I had no idea, but I was open to the possibility. And each of you here, the fact that you're here right now means you have it. You have it. You're the ones. You're the ones with the ability to go out and be the mother to all of these children out here. The mother of invention, the mother of the house of extravaganza! (RuPaul 2016)

The focus of Ru's keynote shifts from "educating the gay children" in 2015 to teaching the straight and gay audience how to "feel good" in 2016. When I sit in the audience and hear RuPaul speak, I do not feel the same connection with him that I did in 2015. I still admire his skill as a performer, but the speech's substance does not connect with me. In this moment, I feel like a cultural outsider, or at least not the speech's target audience. When I consume Ru's speech, I want to hear his perspective on gay culture or issues—that queer cultural discussion is my desired payoff. Because I view Ru as a significant queer icon, I connect with him on this level. This speech's emphasis on life advice falls flat to me because I do not connect with Ru as a guRu figure. I want him to teach me about gay culture, not to sell me self-help. Compared to the 2015 keynote, this speech lacks the same presence of irreverent Camp humor. Last year, Ru disrupts moments of maudlin over-sentimentality with Camp, but this year, his performance strategy is built upon connecting to the audience through emotions. While I do not necessarily disagree with Ru's advice, I wish that this self-help overcoming narrative would directly address institutionalized forms of oppression that queer people face. This speech feels both more inclusive to the diverse consumer audience and less specifically LGBTQ.

As with last year's keynote, this year features another Q&A session following Ru's prepared remarks. Whereas last year's Q&A features a mix of thoughtful and humorous questions about drag history, this year's Q&A focuses more on self-help. One person asks Ru

how not to “get into your own head,” and Ru talks about meditating and breaking down the ego. A perfect campy “How’s your head?” joke goes unsaid. Ru ends her keynote by telling us, “Be the mother to yourself. Treat yourself the way you feel you deserve to be treated, and also be the mother to all these children out here who are looking for guidance. I love you, and thank you so much for coming” (RuPaul 2016).

When I leave this year’s keynote, I am struck by the changes in Ru’s performance strategies. Ru performs more of a self-help guRu role in connecting with this year’s audience, which contrasts greatly with the 2015 keynote. This marketing strategy does not necessarily translate into economic gain, since Ru as of this writing does not sell any particular self-help products. I interpret Ru’s performance strategy this year as a way to build her future career options. While I did not personally connect to Ru’s keynote, I witnessed her strong ability to perform this self-help role. Through this speech, Ru markets herself as a guRu who can provide consumers with live advice. This performance could herald a new addition to Ru’s marketing personae: the “self-help guRu.” I could see RuPaul effectively giving this presentation at seminars for consumers who invest time and money into life advice. As I leave the keynote, I wonder if this persona is part of Ru’s Camp Capitalist marketing strategy. I just witnessed a room full of consumers who appeared to enjoy this guRu performance, and I could easily see the same audiences investing time and money into a guRu self-help tour. Perhaps, then, this performance heralds a new phase in Camp Capitalism, as yet to unfold.



### **“This is the best of times and the worst of times!”: RuPaul’s DragCon 2017**

In-between DragCon 2016 and 2017, the vitriolic 2016 election results in 45’s inauguration. In response to this situation, RuPaul and World of Wonder vocalize anti-45

sentiment. Through interviews, podcasts, and social media posts, RuPaul actively criticizes 45 and displays a commitment to radical queer politics that Ru had not espoused as vocally during President Obama’s administration. Similarly, at their storefront gallery in Hollywood, World of Wonder features a “Surviving Trump: The Art of Resistance” gallery filled with political artwork. These shifts toward a more explicitly queer, in-your-face politics excite me. My anticipation of DragCon 2017 grows after World of Wonder announces that this year’s convention will have multiple panels devoted to the themes of drag, politics, and resistance. I look forward to seeing how DragCon 2017 incorporates and builds upon the legacy of radical queer politics. I devise the following schedule to maximize my data collection, investing more time for the activist-based panels:

	<b><u>Saturday, April 29, 2017</u></b>	<b><u>Sunday, April 30, 2017</u></b>
9:30 to 10 a.m.	Walk the Floor	Walk the Floor
10 to 11 a.m.	Walk the Floor	Walk the Floor
11 to 12 p.m.	The Art of Resistance Panel	Walk the Floor
12 to 1 p.m.	Walk the Floor	Season 2 Reunited Panel
1 to 2 p.m.	Drag in Trump’s America Panel	Alexis Del Lago Panel
2 to 3 p.m.	Walk the Floor	Comedy Queens Panel
3 to 4 p.m.	Walk the Floor	Wait in Line for Ru Keynote
4 to 5 p.m.	Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence Panel	RuPaul Keynote
5 to 6 p.m.	Walk the Floor	
6 to 7 p.m.	Walk the Floor	

On Friday, April 29, 2017, I once again drive to the Los Angeles Convention Center to pick up my badges and attend the VIP preview night. At 5:30 p.m., I walk down the hallway to line up and, to my surprise, I discover a massive VIP line already in formation. This year, at least forty people precede me. As I wait, I talk to the other superfans. A woman with purple-dyed hair stands next to me wearing what appears to be a wrap dress with a thigh-high slit. Her left leg is covered in tattoos of drag queens’ signatures. She tells me that she loves drag queens, asks them to sign her leg, and then has the signatures permanently tattooed onto her body. I count at least

thirty signatures. While she declines an interview, the woman allows me to photograph her leg, which she proudly displays through her dress. This level of superfan commitment permeates DragCon 2017.

Attendees this year wear not only the now standard attire (full drag, *RDR* queens' merchandise, and campy apparel from the companies Swish Embassy/Huntees/Drag Queen Merch), but they also create elaborate costumes specifically for the weekend. Over the weekend, I encounter two white women, who appear to be in their 20s, dressed in replicas of RuPaul's *Drag Race* credit sequence outfit, complete with giant checkered flags. Another woman reproduces Katya's Soviet Union-inspired outfit from *All Stars 2*, and her friend paints his face to look exactly like Trixie Mattel's signature Barbie doll-inspired makeup. In addition to replicas, some fans create Camp costumes inspired by the show. I meet a woman who wears a giant purse costume in homage to Bob the Drag Queen's purse from Season Eight. My favorite costume, however, is from a woman who dresses herself as a giant RuPaul chocolate bar. I watch as a white woman dressed in an inflatable rainbow penis costume fight-dances with another person dressed as a Tyrannosaurus Rex. Although completely unrelated to drag, this bizarre costuming marks the space as distinctly queer. This year's aesthetics go beyond just drag, and the atmosphere feels more and more like cosplay (a form of dressing up more often associated with anime, video games, and Comic Con-like conventions). This aesthetic transformation from previous DragCons makes the convention atmosphere feel more playful but less explicitly LGBTQ. Now, people come in various forms of costume, which I love and appreciate. At the same time, I wonder where the art of drag as a specifically queer practice fits into these changing aesthetics. While I admire the dedication of these attendees and how they embrace the queer

environment, I also worry that drag may be subsumed by these aesthetics not directly tied to LGBTQ cultures or histories.

In contrast to my experience at last year's "Preview Night," this year I attend Friday with shopping as my main goal. I want to purchase three items in particular: the two products from Alaska and Katya featured on *All Stars 2*, as well as one of the exclusive RuPaul dolls. In the sixth episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars 2*, contestants must design merchandise, based on their drag brand, to be manufactured and sold at DragCon 2017. Alaska designs a duct tape, and Katya designs a "moisturizing body spray" filled with "heavy doses of thorazine" to relieve anxiety. Obviously, both products are Camp jokes that perfectly embody Camp Capitalism, so I make purchasing these commodities my primary target. In particular, I want to discover how World of Wonder ultimately manufactures and markets these Camp products.

When the glass doors open at 6:00 p.m., the crowd quickly rushes inside. Right away, I walk to World of Wonder's booth and ask to purchase "Katya's Krisis Kontrol" and "Alaska Thunderfun's Fashion Tape." I assume that World of Wonder will mass produce these items for the convention, since the episode of *All Stars 2* specifically promotes the products. To my surprise, I learn that the World of Wonder booth sells only twenty-five of each item; however, each item comes signed by Katya and Alaska, respectively. This exclusivity adds more value to the Camp commodities. I purchase one of each (at \$25 per item), and I am further surprised to find that my Katya spray is number 3/25, and my Alaska tape is 2/25. Even though I am one of the first thirty people to enter the preview night and move immediately to the World of Wonder booth, other patrons beat me to the first products. By Sunday, all 50 products sell out. When I later arrive home and discover that Katya's spray is filled with plain tap water, I cannot help but laugh at the ridiculousness of the Camp product.

After purchasing these items, I walk to RuPaul's booth at the back of the Convention Center. The main booth features RuPaul's CDs, photographs, perfume, candle, apparel, and candy from Sweet! Hollywood. Twelve RuPaul dolls sit on the shelves, each dressed in a different iconic RuPaul look. I ask the attendant about the dolls, and he informs me that one of these collectors' items has already sold out. After requesting a doll for purchase, I try to hold back my utter shock upon hearing they cost \$1,000 each. I politely decline and settle for an \$8 DragCon-exclusive RuPaul chocolate bar. By Sunday, all twelve dolls sell out. Interestingly, when I ask to see the merchandise listing, I discover that the printout lists the dolls at \$750. This number is crossed out and replaced by \$1,000. Behind RuPaul's merchandise booth, I find the RuPaul museum, which yet again features iconic RuPaul looks (usually housed at the RuPaul Pop-Up store at Sweet! Hollywood). This year's museum also features RuPaul's Emmy award in a glass display case, as well as a golden RuPaul maquette (not available for purchase).

With my shopping complete, I spend the remaining time walking around the convention floor. The setup is even larger than the previous year (309 exhibitors compared to 218 last year), and I am thrilled to see the inclusion of more nonprofits and queer political and community organizations. Planned Parenthood, the ACLU of Southern California, the Human Rights Campaign, Chicas Rockeras South East Los Angeles, YVote-Movement Strategy Center, ProjectQ, The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, Culture Strike, and the It Gets Better Project all have individual booths this year, as well as a feature in the DragCon 2017 program.<sup>98</sup> These exhibitors provide attendees with important information on getting involved in local grassroots

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<sup>98</sup> Chicas Rockeras SELA provides a summer camp experience, specifically for younger girls, where they collaborate on music-making under the guidance of female mentors. Y-Vote Movement Strategy Center focuses on organizational strategies for engaging voters. ProjectQ is a non-profit that helps LGBTQIA and homeless youth combat bullying, develop self-esteem, and find an identity through hair styling. Culture Strike focuses on arts-based social justice movement projects.

movements and national political organizations. Additionally, the Men's Health Foundation sponsors a giant performance stage, which throughout the weekend showcases talent from both *Drag Race* contestants and local queens, including Misty Violet and Allusia from Los Angeles. Peppered throughout the convention space are signs providing attendees with information on how to contact their representatives and senators.<sup>99</sup> Additionally, World of Wonder has a booth dedicated to its "Surviving Trump: The Art of Resistance" art gallery. This booth sells golden pieces of fake feces and other artwork at no set price: consumers donate the monetary amount of their choice, and all proceeds go to the ACLU of Southern California. The inclusion of these booths and signs at DragCon 2017 marks the space as distinctly, politically queer. This political environment translates into attendees' costuming, as I observe someone dressed like Bernie Sanders wandering around DragCon the following afternoon.

Interestingly, in addition to these queer political elements, the main floor this year also features a large "Kid Zone." This space includes a large "bounce house" castle, an arts & crafts table, and a few pillow-like dolls that resemble contestants from *RDR*. A schedule for the Kid Zone lists different activities for the children on Saturday and Sunday, including one hour of face painting, two different spelling bee events, one reading of the book *Odd Duck* by author Cecil Castellucci, one hour facilitated by the group Chicas Rockeras, and four different "Drag Queen Story Hour" events. Drag Queen Story Hour is a program that originated in San Francisco, created by Michelle Tea and Radar Productions. These events, which happen regularly now in San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York City, and cities in Canada and the UK, features drag queen participants reading children's books at local public libraries. The inclusion of this

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<sup>99</sup> These signs feature the websites [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov) and [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov), as well as the instructions to "enter your zip code and discover links and contact info."



section at DragCon provides heterosexual and LGBTQ parents with opportunities for entertaining their younger children.

Walking the main floor of this year's DragCon, I notice a change in the marketing strategies employed by different *RDR* contestants. This year, multiple performers organize full-scale "events" at their booths. I notice that Valentina, Detox, and Acid Betty all have booths that section off the performer from the fans. Valentina's booth features a giant couch hidden behind closed curtains. Superfans must purchase merchandise before they may sit on the couch and take photographs with Valentina. Similarly, Detox sits in a giant bathtub hidden behind see-through screens. After purchasing a minimum of \$20 worth of Detox merchandise, attendees may enter into the sectioned-off space and interact with Detox. The inside of Acid Betty's booth features a backlight display, which illuminates her gorgeous costume. Fans who purchase merchandise may experience the visuals up-close when they take photographs with the artist. These marketing strategies prevent passersby from snapping clear photographs of the performers, thereby protecting the artist's image and ensuring that the performers earn money from their fan interactions. While I can still see both performers in their booths as I walk, I cannot snap a clear photograph of them. I observe that over the course of the weekend, the lines for these booths are consistently filled with superfans. These newly introduced marketing strategies safeguard the contestants against economic exploitation by requiring fans to buy products.

However, drag artists still face potential economic exploitation from some of the other vendors. While larger companies such as Huntrees and Drag Queen Merch collaborate with drag artists to sell merchandise, some smaller exhibitors exploit the performers by selling their likenesses without paying them. Because anyone who can afford to cost may submit an exhibitor application, DragCon often features superfan artists. While not all of these exhibitors exploit the

drag performers, I notice several booths that sell merchandise featuring the likeness of and quotations from queens such as Jasmine Masters. Jasmine receives no money from these sales, and unless the artists protect themselves legally, they do not necessarily have legal recourse. At DragCon 2017 in particular, I notice an exhibitor who sells a “Drag Queen Coloring Book.” Flipping through the pages of this item, I notice that many of the drag queens resemble contestants from the show. For instance, one page of the coloring book features a queen whose makeup looks almost identical to Trixie Mattel’s Barbie-like face. Another page featuring a drag queen who resembles Adore Delano also features punk outfits (Adore’s aesthetic) and an image of pizza (Adore’s catchphrase). These coloring pages do not directly identify the queens as *Drag Race* contestants, but the likenesses are *obviously* references to (if not complete reproductions of) *RDR* drag performers.<sup>100</sup> The queens themselves make no money from this commodity, and a legal safety net is not necessarily in place to protect against this level of commercial exploitation.<sup>101</sup> The artists or their management (if the performer is lucky enough to have non-exploitative management) must pursue the legal matter.

Walking from the main floor to the upstairs meeting rooms, I notice a distinct change in DragCon 2017’s ambiance. In addition to the increased presence of cosplay aesthetics, a cacophony of *RDR* catchphrases, fan snaps, tongue pops, and “yaaas gods!” fill the air.

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<sup>100</sup> Other pages in this particular coloring book feature a Katya-like character that includes a shark (a reference to the shark outfit Katya wore in Season Seven), as well as a Bob the Drag Queen-like character that comes with a purse on which the word “first” is written (a reference to the purse Bob created in Season Eight, as well as the single “Purse First” Bob released after the show).

<sup>101</sup> During my fieldwork, I interviewed David Gottlieb and Zack Gottlieb (aka drag artist Biblegirl666), the creators of the company Drag Queen Merch. Drag Queen Merch is one of the largest companies that manufactures merchandise and apparel for drag artists, both affiliated and non-affiliated with *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. In our interview, David and Zack discussed how they encourage their clients to protect their copyright/image from this type of unauthorized image reproduction. According to David and Zack, the queens must pursue the legal issue. While I cut this interview with David and Zack from the dissertation, I will include the full interview in the book version of this project.

Attendees perform these drag cultural practices so frequently that the constant background noise becomes a sort of soundtrack for the weekend. While I witness such displays at each DragCon, I notice an exponential increase in the frequency of such performances throughout DragCon 2017. This repetition demonstrates the increasing popularization of certain queer cultural practices. While walking to the panel rooms, I can feel the increased crowd size. At several points, I am unable to physically maneuver through the space, and I find myself often pressed up against other bodies, stuck in the hallway as the large crowd attempts to filter through the space. As a physically able-bodied person, I find the space inaccessible and often feel slight claustrophobia when trapped against other attendees. Because of this size increase, I cannot conduct interviews with attendees in the same manner as the previous two years. Therefore, I focus my data collection on observing the main floor marketing strategies and transcribing audio at the political panels. Both the VIP and General Admission lines for panels extend down the hallways, far beyond where they previously ended during DragCon 2015 and 2016. Even with my VIP badge, I sometimes have difficulty getting into the more popular panels. The conference rooms this year do not increase in size, and I find that many panels fill the entire room with attendees.

This year's panels all have a more corporatized feel than those at the previous DragCons. Panels begin with a moderator or DragCon staff person reciting some version of this scripted intro: "First, I'd like to thank our sponsors, VH1, World of Wonder, the Men's Health Foundation, and Jeffree Starr cosmetics. If you're not already subscribed, please do so now. Go to [Youtube.com/WOWPRESENTS](https://www.youtube.com/WOWPRESENTS). And let all your friends know you're here by taking photos, videos, and using the hashtag DragCon." Whereas the previous year's panels have a more formal introduction and welcome, this year's shift reflects a continued mainstreaming of *Drag Race* and DragCon. Despite this corporatization, the panels I attend on drag and resistance provide exactly

the type of queer political activism I desire. The “Art of Resistance” panel features queer Latino recording artist AB Soto, black female comedian and co-host of the podcast “Sooo Many White Guys” Phoebe Robinson, gay journalist Raymond Braun, and *RDR* Season Nine contestant Sasha Velour. Favy Fav and Babelito, hosts of the “Latinos Who Lunch” podcast, moderate the discussion. During this panel, the artists discuss the importance of intersectionality (specifically using that word), the significance of representation for queer communities and in particular queer communities of color, and the role drag/art plays as a form of political resistance. I am overjoyed to witness these brilliant panelists speaking to a packed crowd, and I am so excited to see discussions of intersectionality (and name-dropping of queer theorists including José Esteban Muñoz) at DragCon 2017. This panel in particular provides a thoughtful and necessary political discussion in the midst of DragCon’s capitalist enterprise.

Similarly, the “Drag in Trump’s America” and “#Resist with The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence” panels provide a space to discuss queer activism in front of packed audiences. Presented by *Teen Vogue* and moderated by Sandra Song, a writer at *Teen Vogue*, the “Drag in Trump’s America” panel draws the largest crowd, in part because the panelists include *RDR* Season Eight winner Bob the Drag Queen, *All Stars 2* winner Alaska Thunderfuck, and Season Nine contestant Eureka O’Hara. The panelists cover a range of topics from incorporating politics into their drag performances, voting in local elections, and addressing sociopolitical issues beyond 45, such as climate change and racism. While discussing the mainstreaming of drag via *RDR*, Bob the Drag Queen addresses how drag continues to shift from a referential art form to a referenced art form. Bob identifies how Sia’s 2016 Coachella performance “references” (read: rips-off) a 2008 Entertainer of the Year performance by Columbus, Ohio-based drag performer Nina West. While Sia’s “re-staging” of West’s performance could be read as respectful

referencing, Sia makes far more money from West's idea without necessarily giving West any money. Sia did tweet West, acknowledging West's "inspiration" for the performance. Bob similarly reflects on his own references to black and Latina/o ball cultures in his song, "Purse First":

Bob the Drag Queen: It's not bad that they're [mainstream female pop artists] doing the things that we do, but it's just the fact that people don't know where it came from. You see what I'm saying? I mean, for the young people out there who have heard the song "Purse First," it opens with the line, "It is a known fact that a woman do carry an evening bag at dinner time." I didn't write that. It's just a reference from *Paris Is Burning*, and I need you to know that that's not my idea. That's not my intellectual property.

(I and some audience members clap)

BTDQ: You see what I'm saying? And it's great that it's out there, but it's important to know that this is not their intellectual property. It came from people who are still struggling. Isn't it crazy, the idea that Rihanna's wearing an outfit that someone designed, and that person can't even afford to eat food that day? But she made a thousand, bajillion bucks off of it. So, that's the issue, honestly.

Throughout the discussion, Bob frequently (and brilliantly) directs the conversation back to larger questions about marginalization, dynamics of power, and systems of oppression. Bob discusses the importance of knowing and decoding these Camp references in order to remember and honor the represented histories. Because this panel is packed, a large number of attendees witness Bob's important statements.

While not as heavily attended, The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence panel still draws a large crowd and provides a space for reflecting on queer activism. Featuring Sisters from across the U.S., the panel focuses on the role humor plays in the Sister's form of queer politics. Panelists share their experiences using humor to protest Christian fundamentalists, and the participants reflect on the need for self-care in queer activism. While the Sisters do not necessarily use the word "Camp," their discussion brilliantly touches on the role and effectiveness of Camp humor. At the end of the panel, Sister Roma from San Francisco

demonstrates a form of activism by calling Republican Senate Majority “leader” Mitch McConnell. Roma brings a pre-written script to DragCon and intends to leave a voice message for McConnell. Unfortunately (but unsurprisingly), McConnell’s mailbox is full and cannot accept additional messages. Next, Roma calls California Representative Nancy Pelosi in order to leave a message expressing thanks for Pelosi’s activism. Pelosi’s mailbox is also full and cannot accept any more messages. Undeterred, Roma reads her script to the crowd, as we cheer her on. I leave Saturday’s DragCon event inspired by the amount of explicitly queer political activism prevalent, and I hope that this rhetoric continues into tomorrow’s RuPaul keynote.

Knowing that the overall crowd size has increased exponentially this year, I stop by the keynote room early to see when the line will start forming. I do not want to miss Ru’s keynote, so I prioritize waiting in line over attending panels. To my surprise, I find a sign outside the room that informs me the line will form downstairs this year. Because of the overcrowding in the hallways, the VIP and General Admission lines cannot possibly form in this space. I decide, therefore, to head downstairs and check out the lines. When I arrive downstairs, I find a multitude of attendees waiting. The keynote does not begin until after 4:00 p.m., but by 2:15 p.m., a good number of attendees wait in the VIP and General Admission (GA) lines. Over the next 90 minutes, more and more people join the lines, with the GA line creating a serpentine pattern as it extends down the hallway and circles back around multiple times.

As I survey the crowd, I lock eyes with Drew, a *Drag Race* superfan from Canada whom I met at the previous year’s convention. Drew and I express our amazement at the size of this year’s DragCon and chat about our weekends. This year, Drew brings four friends who wish to attend DragCon after hearing about Drew’s experience. When Drew tells me that he and his friends purchased RuPaul’s meet-and-greet earlier, I am curious to know how long they waited

in line. Earlier in the day, I meet two women holding RuPaul autographs, and when I ask them about their wait time, they say four hours. To my surprise, Drew informs me that with his VIP badge, he waits for Ru's autograph only 45 minutes. Drew's friends similarly wait only 60 minutes. I express my surprise at their good fortune, but Drew quickly alters my outlook: his friends must wait an additional 90 minutes for RuPaul's photograph. Fans continue to invest a lot of time and money into meeting RuPaul for a brief moment.

Around 3:40 p.m., a DragCon staff member parades the VIP line from the first floor and up the stairs, forming a new line outside the keynote room. We wait an additional ten minutes or so before staff members allow us to enter the keynote room. As I move toward the front row, I notice that this year, the first seven rows consist of reserved seating for *Drag Race* contestants and special guests. My VIP pass no longer grants me access to the front, so I take a seat in the ninth row. As the room fills to capacity with bodies, I await RuPaul's keynote and what words of wisdom he will share regarding the current political climate. This year, Michelle Visage introduces RuPaul ("our beautiful leader"), who once again walks out to wild applause and a standing ovation. RuPaul begins with his call-and-response catchphrase, "Everybody say love," before previewing his keynote topic: the 1-2-3s of how to love yourself. I grow concerned, as my hopes that RuPaul will focus on queer politics start to dwindle. Before delving into the keynote, RuPaul makes a "special announcement," informing us that we are, "hearing it here first." Ru announces that DragCon will take place in New York City on September 30<sup>th</sup> and October 1, 2017. Rows of drag performers (mostly from *Drag Race*) stand and wave fake torches modeled after the Statue of Liberty. The crowd goes wild.

After making this announcement, RuPaul moves into the focus of his keynote speech. This year, Ru instructs the crowd to think of themselves as "human machines" who need to

“clear out the blockage” in their lives. Similar to the 2016 keynote, RuPaul references his childhood as a way to personalize the self-help rhetoric. As children, Ru and his sisters (who once again sit in the audience) would wait on their mother’s porch to be picked up by their alcoholic father. Their father never came. According to Ru, this experience of neglect created a victim mentality, wherein Ru would chase unattainable men because he saw himself as that little boy always waiting for somebody who never arrives. Years of therapy allows Ru to “clear out the blockage” from this experience. With this keynote, RuPaul once again performs his guRu persona, speaking to the audience and giving them self-help advice. As with last year’s keynote, I do not directly relate to this performance because I am not looking for self-help advice from RuPaul. Instead, I want him to speak to the current political climate directly. Ru does address this reality later in the speech:

RuPaul: Every person who’s ever lived on this planet for a long time who is successful, who is doing what you want to do, somehow they have learned how to circumvent those booby-traps that we create for ourselves. And we all have them. We have friends who don’t want to move from where they were. In fact, this whole election—I mean, this is the best of times and the worst of times, right now. This election, when you look under the hood of it and see what it’s really about, what happened, it’s like the TV show *Downton Abbey* where it’s the changeover from the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And the people who don’t want to move into the future forward and move on uptown like my World of Wonder friends, those people who—you know, they took on this used car salesman who promised them that they could turn back the hands of time and bring it back to what it was. We ain’t going back, baby.

(Audience cheers wildly)

Ru: Aside from being impossible, it’s about learning how to do what you can to be of service to right now. You know, I’ve said this on Twitter, how can you shop at Walmart and want all them Chinese jobs to come back here?

(Audience laughs, claps, and cheers)

Ru: All that stuff is made in China! Now, I equate that to what we’re talking about now because, again, those people become your teacher. You are not their teacher, they are your teacher in terms of what not to do. The idea of being stuck—if I stayed in the mentality of that little boy who was left behind on the porch, I wouldn’t be standing up



here today. I couldn't do it because it was the blockage I'm talking about that kept me from moving forward and then forward and then more. You know? Let the church say, "Amen to that."

(Audience replies, "Amen!")

Ru: That is the key for you young people who've come to *Drag Race*, you feel the color and the love, know that that same creativity can work against you if your saboteur gets ahold of it. It's very insidious, it's smarter than you are. That's why the meditation is important because you have to—a problem cannot be solved on the same conscious level it was created on.

(The white woman sitting in front of me, who appears to be in her late teens/early 20s, says, "Mmm," indicating that she finds this part of Ru's speech moving)

Ru: Let me say it one more time. A problem cannot be solved on the same conscious level that it was created on.

(The same white woman says, "Amen." I watch as she takes out her phone, opens up her Twitter account, and posts to her page, "A problem cannot be solved on the same conscious level that it was created on-RuPaul")

Ru: So, you need some intervention. And, again, I'm not religious, but any time—because you have free will, any time you say the words, "Please help me," your angels will hear it, and they will come and they will intervene because they can't do it unless you say it because you have free will. And just like on *T.J. Hooker*

(Audience laughs)

Ru: Sometimes they will do a stakeout, and they need to get the prostitute to say

(Audience laughs)

Ru: Oh, no, they need to get the "John" to say, "I'm gonna give you twenty dollars for a B.J."

(Audience laughs)

Ru: Until he says—there's a monetary transaction. You cannot arrest that John!

(Audience laughs and claps. RuPaul laughs)

Ru: You can't arrest him! He has to say the words, and the same is true for your angels. They are hovering around you right now. All you gotta do is say, simple words, "Please help me." That's it. (RuPaul 2017)

In this section of Ru's keynote, he addresses the election briefly by relating the situation back to his self-help theme. Unlike the other DragCon panels that directly attack 45 for his litany of offensive qualities, Ru walks a fine line here. Ru does not directly name or mention 45, and he explains the current politic climate through a *Downtown Abbey* reference. This rhetoric presents a very digestible narrative: a few people want to turn the country backward, but we will not go back. Ru then immediately connects this brief mention of 45 to his topic's overall self-help theme, and in so doing, he guides the conversation away from fiery politics to emotional guidance. Ru affirms the audience's shared identity as people who "feel the color and the love," presumably in contrast to the individuals wanting to move the country backward. When Ru delivers this portion of the keynote, I cannot help but think that he assumes everyone in the DragCon audience voted against 45. Love of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and attendance at RuPaul's DragCon do not inherently translate into a certain liberal or progressive political affiliation. As a gay man witnessing this speech, I want RuPaul to tell the audience that if they consume queer culture, they need to vote for queer rights. Ru does not, perhaps because such a direct dictum could harm the *Drag Race* enterprise's commercial expansion.

Although I do not relate to this speech, I am struck by the young woman in front of me who hangs on Ru's words and even retweets a bon mot in real-time. This demonstration represents a tangible effect of gaystreaming: Logo marketed *Drag Race* to straight women, and now this white woman who visually reads as straight consumes the guRu persona. She hangs on Ru's self-help advice so much that she shares the phrase with her social media following. In witnessing her reaction to Ru's keynote, I am struck by how differently the diverse audience consumes this performance. Ru has successfully marketed himself as guRu, such that now younger female followers share his self-help advice. The Q&A session further reveals the

tangible effects of Ru's marketing strategies. The first question comes from a female attendee who asks Ru for advice on how to deal with familial struggles. This consumer wants advice from the guRu on how to fix a problem within her family. Next, an individual who visually reads as a middle-aged white woman walks with her cane to the microphone. She shares with Ru (and the audience) that she is currently celebrating seven years being cancer-free. The woman chokes up as she continues, saying that she lives with chronic pain and feels like she cannot catch a break in life. She asks for RuPaul's advice on dealing with chronic pain. As with the previous question, this woman also wants self-help advice from the guRu. Now, however, she seeks advice that Ru cannot provide: how could a drag queen tell someone living with chronic pain how to cope? In his response, Ru makes this very point:

I'm so sorry. Honestly, I don't know the answer to that question, but right now, everyone in this room, if you can accept it, is sending you loving energy at this very moment. (The audience claps). I hope that can somehow alleviate some of it, but I honestly don't know. The fact that you brought it out there into the world, and the fact that you want it to end is the beginning. (RuPaul 2017)

A professional drag queen who does not experience chronic pain cannot tell someone how to live with chronic pain.<sup>102</sup> That these women seek Ru's self-help advice reveals the effectiveness of Ru's guRu persona. At the same time, these questions reveal fissures in Ru's Camp Capitalism. As I demonstrated in Chapter Two, RuPaul on *Drag Race* frames his Camp consumerism as antithetical to corporate consumerism because Ru's brand does not seek to fix individuals. Ru does not suggest that his audience is flawed and must consume his products in order to become whole. Ru even states this point explicitly in his 2015 DragCon keynote. Now, however, these DragCon attendees seek Ru's advice to fix a part of themselves. They want the guRu to instruct them how to fix familial issues or how to cope with physical pain. Ru's Camp Capitalism

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<sup>102</sup> As of this writing, RuPaul has not publicly disclosed that he lives with chronic pain or illness. I do not want to assume his experience with chronic pain but base this assertion on his public statements.

through the guRu persona capitalizes on a lack in consumers: they connect with and personalize his discussions of hardship, and they want Ru's self-help to fix this distress. At these questions demonstrate, Ru has effectively marketed himself as a guRu, and white women will invest time and money into consuming this self-help advice.

### **Conclusion: The Complexities and Contradictions of RuPaul's DragCon**

I leave DragCon 2017 filled with a mixture of awe from a weekend full of powerful queer political discourse, as well as unease from the Q&A portion of Ru's keynote. This dichotomy perfectly encapsulates the commercial drag economy on display at RuPaul's DragCon. One's experience at this event ultimately depends on how the individual chooses to invest time and money. Over the past three years, I witness brilliant discussions of queer politics and history, as well as celebrations of drag kings and artist-activists. At DragCon, I interact with queer people who share a knowledge and love of drag cultures and histories. We often engage in wonderful discussions about queer politics that reflect on questions of visibility and representation, as well as larger systems of power and intersectional forms of oppression. In this midst of this decidedly commercial and capitalist enterprise, I find powerful forms of queer art and resistance. These experiences challenge how some *Drag Race* scholars discuss the franchise. Analyses that focus only on the show's aired episodes cannot encapsulate the nuances on display at DragCon. While the show itself often espouses more homonormative politics, DragCon creates a space and platform for radical queer political conversations. Particularly at the 2017 event, audiences at these panels witnessed crucial discussions on drag politics, activism, intersectionality, and institutionalized oppression. However, not all attendees invest their time into these experiences. While DragCon provides a space for these more radical conversations, not all consumers choose

to participate. Because of this complex situation, scholars seeking to evaluate the *Drag Race* franchise's political potential need to also consider how the franchise's politics operate differently at live events.

Additionally, RuPaul's DragCon often provides underrepresented drag artists and cultures with a platform. By featuring drag kings on a panel and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, DragCon marks these artists as culturally significant. Because DragCon is an institutionalized social network, this access can provide participants with opportunities to accrue social capital. By appearing on panels, these performers gain entry into the weekend's social network. At DragCon, these performers could accumulate new fans or sell merchandise. Access to this space can thus translate into economic gain. Vendors and drag artists who purchase booths can profit from merchandise sales, but they also can face economic exploitation if other vendors sell their likeness without providing monetary compensation. Additionally, the DragCon attendees do not invest the same levels of time and money into every vendor and performer. Fan favorite *Drag Race*-affiliated contestants often receive many more opportunities for financial gain. Fans will invest hours just to interact with these performers, and through this interaction, they will often spend money on merchandise, photographs, or autographs. While DragCon provides a platform for these artists to accrue economic capital, they do not all reap the same benefits.

Through my fieldwork, I have observed that as *RuPaul's Drag Race* grows in popularity, the fan base increasingly becomes more "queer" but less specifically LGBTQ. The attendees at RuPaul's DragCon are all queer in the sense that they all share a love of consuming this queer television show. They invest in DragCon to celebrate the show, to consume drag cultures/histories, to meet their favorite *Drag Race* contestants, to shop, and to mingle. This

shared queer identity is ultimately rooted in consuming the *Drag Race* franchise (and investing time and money into RuPaul's commercial drag enterprise). Over the past three years, I have observed an increase in straight women, heterosexual couples, and young children at RuPaul's DragCon. These demographic changes reflect the effectiveness of gaystreaming: as *RuPaul's Drag Race* grows in mainstream popularity, straight audiences (particularly white women) invest and participate in the economy. At the same time, aspects of the event are becoming less specifically LGBTQ. RuPaul's keynote shifts from 2015 to 2016/2017 indicate a change in marketing strategies. The first year, Ru performed the role of queer knowledge keeper and spoke primarily to the LGBTQ audience. The next two years, Ru defined the audience as queer by virtue of their shared love for Bohemian culture (e.g., color, music, etc.). When I hear these keynote speeches, I get the sense that I have become a cultural outsider during Ru's talk. Because I do not consume Ru for his guRu persona, I do not connect with his rhetoric.

When evaluating *RuPaul's Drag Race*, too often scholars and critics approach the phenomenon through a binary framework. They question whether *Drag Race* is hegemonic or radical, commercial or subversive, progressive or harmful. As my ethnographic data from DragCon demonstrates, the answer to these questions is always *both*. The phenomenon absolutely provides opportunities for radically queer political conversations and subversive identity performances. At the same time, in order to survive, the culture requires that fans invest time and money. To capture the nuance and complexity of RuPaul's expanding commercial drag empire, scholars should consider utilizing ethnographic methods to evaluate the tangible practices. Rather than making a generalized declaration about the show, researchers should consider how the experiences of participants reflect interesting contradictions and complications in the phenomenon.

## Chapter Four

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### “Treat yourself as a business” Queens Discuss the *RuPaul’s Drag Race* Phenomenon

Over the course of my ethnographic fieldwork in Los Angeles, I participated in both the *RuPaul’s Drag Race* economy and the more localized Los Angeles drag cultures. I attended drag performances at multiple LGBTQ venues in the greater Los Angeles area, particularly in West Hollywood, Hollywood, Silverlake, Long Beach, and DTLA (downtown Los Angeles). By attending performances semi-regularly, I was able to interact with many different drag artists. Some of these performers agreed to in-person interviews, and over the course of my fieldwork, I conducted in-depth interviews with eleven drag artists. In this chapter, I analyze three long-form interviews from three particular Los Angeles drag queen informants: Dani T, Cake Moss, and Jasmine Masters. I put these three informants’ interviews into conversation because doing so reveals some overlapping tangible effects that *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is having on Los Angeles-area drag communities. These informants all speak to how the show affects their lives and careers, and their interviews compliment and nuance one another.

I selected these three particular informants for a collection of reasons. First, Dani T is two years into her career and regularly performs, Cake Moss is five years into her career and regularly hosts drag events, and Jasmine Masters is twenty-one years into her career and competed on Season Seven of *RuPaul’s’ Drag Race*. Each performer has acquired a different level of social capital within Los Angeles drag cultures. Dani is the newest performer who has now earned steady gigs, Cake is well-established in the West Hollywood drag circuit, and Jasmine is one of the contestants from *Drag Race*. Thus, each informant provides a different

perspective on how the franchise affects local communities. Second, each informant performs in different drag scenes/communities around Los Angeles.<sup>103</sup> Because they perform in different venues and move in various drag social networks, these performers all provide unique perspectives on how the *Drag Race* franchise impacts diverse drag communities around Los Angeles. Third, each informant relates to *RuPaul's Drag Race* differently. Dani T started performing because of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Cake Moss identifies the show as her next career goal, and Jasmine Masters competed on Season Seven of the show. While the experiences of these three informants by no means represent those of all drag performers, their interviews provide invaluable insights into the tangible impacts on local drag communities that result from the *RuPaul's Drag Race* phenomenon.

In particular, these informants identify key overlapping issues pertaining to topics discussed in my previous chapters. Each informant discusses the high economic and social investments required to become a full-time drag artist. Dani and Cake in particular discuss the high cost of drag: the money necessary to buy makeup, wigs, outfits, and other accoutrements. As the informants suggest, new drag artists often must accrue debt and/or invest lots of time and money into their artistry before they receive any monetary payoffs. Dani, Cake, and Jasmine all had to “pay their dues” by performing at low-paying (or non-paying) events. By demonstrating

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<sup>103</sup> Dani T performs regularly on Thursday nights in the “Haus of Starr” revue at Revolver, as well as on Monday nights in the “Exposure” drag show at The OffBeat Bar. Additionally, she performs in various clubs around Los Angeles, including at Fubar and The Abbey in West Hollywood and the Precinct and Redline in DTLA. Like Phantom, Dani also frequently travels outside Los Angeles to perform at clubs including Executive Suite in Long Beach, The Boulevard in Pasadena, Hamburger Mary’s in Ontario, and the Main Street Bar & Cabaret in Laguna Beach. Cake Moss regularly hosts weekly shows, including “Wasted Wednesdays” at Revolver, and “Clique” on Thursdays at Micky’s. She also sometimes hosts “Notorious” on Saturday at the Faultline and “Touch” on Thursdays at The Abbey. Cake also performs regularly in West Hollywood on Thursdays in “Barrio Bitches” at Fiesta Cantina, as well as on Mondays in “Lip Service” at The Abbey. In DTLA, Cake performs at Más Malo’s Sunday brunch show and Redline’s Saturday night “Consent” show. At this stage in her career, Jasmine Masters performs all over the U.S., spending less time directly in Los Angeles than the other performers.



their talents and professionalism, these informants started to make a name for themselves. They could then accumulate social capital by performing at different shows. By performing in these drag networks regularly, the informants started to earn more economic capital and social status. Eventually, usually after several years, drag started to become a lucrative practice for these artists. Through their interviews, the informants identify the different investments necessary for becoming a drag artist, and they also speak to the process of accumulating social capital that then translates into economic capital.

Additionally, Dani, Cake, and Jasmine all discuss how *RuPaul's Drag Race* impacts their drag social networks and opportunities for economic gain. Dani T and Cake Moss both address how the franchise inspires more performers and creates more performance opportunities. However, these gigs do not always pay well, and the newer drag artists can risk economic exploitation. Jasmine Masters discusses the show's positive effects on her career through increases in social and economic capital. At the same time, she addresses how her new career options also require increased investments of time and money. For these informants, *Drag Race* directly affects their career trajectories and goals. Dani T speaks about *Drag Race* inspiring her to perform and wanting to be bigger than RuPaul. Cake Moss discusses how the show creates a career barrier for her, while Jasmine Masters speaks about utilizing the *Drag Race* brand. The show's popularity changes the demographics at these performers' live shows. Dani, Cake, and Jasmine all notice an increase in straight attendees at their shows. As a result of these changing demographics, the informants all notice an increase in negative behaviors displayed by audiences, including a lack of etiquette.

Similarly, the informants all noted behavioral changes among newer drag performers and the online fan community. Dani and Jasmine notice a homogenizing effect among younger drag

queens who emulate the *Drag Race* performers. Additionally, *Drag Race* fans who know drag culture primarily through *Drag Race* sometimes misread representations from the show as original rather than as coming from a longer history. Dani, Cake, and Jasmine all identify the significant impact social media has on their careers and fans. They all discuss the importance of developing a social media presence for drag performers, which impacts the individual's marketability. The fans interact with performers primarily through social media, and certain members of the online *Drag Race* fan base use social media to send hateful messages to drag artists. Dani discusses how fans sometimes create unrealistic expectations for performers because of *Drag Race*, and Cake talks about how some fans use social media to degrade her abilities. Jasmine discusses the violent messages that *Drag Race* contestants receive from fans, including the anti-black racist slurs she received. Through these conversations, the informants identify both the positive and negative impacts *RuPaul's Drag Race* has on their lives and communities.

I have chosen to present these interviews in such a way that foregrounds the informants' perspectives/voices. Each interview starts with two paragraphs of background information, including information about the informant's start in drag, participation in LA drag cultures, and circumstances of our meeting/interview. I then present the interviews at length, with minor editing. In transcribing the interviews, I maintain the informant's speech pattern, removing the words "um" and "like" only when not directly relating to the conversation. The most frequently removed phrase ("mm-hmm") came from myself. As an active listener, I often say "mm-hmm" when following the individual's conversation. I removed the majority of these statements in order to condense the length of conversations. Within the interviews, I use [brackets] when putting clarifying information directly into the sentence, (parenthesis) to indicate laughter or bodily movement, *italics* to show when an informant put emphasis on an individual word or

phrase, and footnotes to provide additional information when necessary. Following the transcribed interview, I present an Interview Synthesis that analyzes aspects of the informant's experience.

As an interviewer, I try not to put words into informants' mouths, so the majority of speech comes from the informants themselves. When transcribed, this dynamic can read as one-sided and/or disinterest on my part. To the contrary, the actual conversations were incredibly engaging, with the two of us maintaining eye contact (when in person) and my following along through body language and affirmations (“mm-hmm,” “yes,” etc.). In one instance, the Dani T interview, I rearranged information to flow more chronologically—and in doing so, I made sure that the rearrangement would not alter the content of the interview but instead would provide clarity to the content. Otherwise, the interviews included here flow as the actual conversations did. The following information provides not only invaluable information into the lives of these dynamic drag performers but also insight into the incredibly warm, dynamic personalities of these generous informants and fierce drag performers. Sharing their stories is an immense privilege, and I am eternally grateful for their willing participation.

**Dani T – “When people haven’t done it, they’re just gonna think that it’s easy”**

Dani T is a twenty-five-year-old gay male Latina drag queen who has been performing for almost two years. Originally from Oak Park, Illinois, Dani started drag after moving to Los Angeles in May, 2015. Dani’s familiarity with drag began at a young age, however. Her lesbian mother worked at The Baton Show Lounge in Chicago, a legendary club that hosts weekly female impersonation revues and the Miss Continental drag pageant. Dani saw images of drag queens on show programs that her mother brought home, and her exposure to drag cultures increased during college when she worked at Club 213, a gay bar that hosted drag shows. Dani regularly watched *RuPaul’s Drag Race* with friends while at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, and she decided to start performing after attending the Season Seven Reunion taping in 2015. Dani first performed during Friday night amateur drag competition at 340 Nightclub in Pomona. She now performs regularly in and around the Los Angeles area, continuing to make a name for herself as she establishes her drag career..

I saw Dani perform during a Thursday night “Haus of Starr” event at Rage in West Hollywood. We connected via social media, and Dani agreed to an in-person interview. We met on a Sunday night (the night of the Emmy awards) at Rubies + Diamonds coffee shop in Hollywood. Dani arrived in male gender presentation, with her hair pulled up into a bun. We spent almost an hour conversing over coffee until a barista asked us to leave, as the shop was closing for the night.

**Carl Schottmiller:** So, tell me about your drag history.

**Dani T:** I started drag a little under two years ago. I started basically as soon as I moved out to Los Angeles. I moved out in May of 2015, so I’ve been here going on two years now. And as soon as I moved out here, I knew like a handful of people. I’m from Chicago, so you know there’s definitely a good amount of people from Chicago out here that I knew. But, coming out here I didn’t really have like my tribe, you know what I mean?

CS: Mm-hmm.

DT: I just broke up with my boyfriend when I came out here. I didn’t know anyone besides like the two or three people I was living with because I went to high school with them. And yeah, I was just like, “You know what, drag seems fun.” When I moved out here, Season Seven of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* was just finishing up, and I would watch it every week with my ex-boyfriend. We watched it all the time. When we came out here in May, we actually were here when they were filming the Finale for Season Seven.

CS: Did you go to the taping of it?

DT: Yeah, so him and I went to the taping of that. We met a few of the queens, and it was like, “Oh my...” You know, I was losing my mind, you know what I mean?

CS: Yeah.

DT: Cause it was the first time that I had seen, uh, you know I had been living in Los Angeles

for a week. So I was seeing a live taping. I was seeing all these queens. I was seeing RuPaul and all these queens that I've seen for, you know the past three or four months on my television every single week. So it was definitely a surreal experience, and it really pushed me even more to be like, "You should totally do that. Why not?" So I started it. I started doing makeup tutorials online. Off of *YouTube*.

CS: Watching other queens who put their stuff up?

DT: Yeah, I watched a lot of Miss Fame.<sup>104</sup> There's a girl, her name is Fendi Laken.<sup>105</sup> She's like a UK queen. Yeah, there's a lot of queens that I would just watch on YouTube and kind of do it for myself. For whatever reason, it just never looked the same.

(DT and CS laugh)

DT: But, you know, it's okay. And, yeah, I just did that for about three or four months and then in August of 2015, that was my first performance. And my first performance, it was out in Pomona at a club called 340. And there—that's where you'll find a lot of the younger queens.

CS: Yeah.

DT: That's where you'll find a lot of the younger queens because they have a contest every Friday. At least two or three nights a week they have the contest, and each week has a different theme and things like that. And I remember going. It was the worst thing ever. I didn't bring my CD for my music, so as soon as I got to the venue, I had to change my song on the drop-of-a-hat. And that's not what I wanted to do at all.

(DT chuckles)

DT: But, you know, you just gotta roll with it and work with it, and I did. And I performed. I had a great time, and after that I just wanted to perform more and more and more and more. And at that time, for me, when I first started, it was all about like gigs. Just go every single place you can. And then after about, maybe performing for like six-to-eight months, I was just like, "Okay, I need to start focusing on looks." You know what I mean? I need to start focusing on the actual fine-tuning details of my drag: who I was, all the things like that as opposed to just going every single where, where I knew there was an open spot for me to perform. And when I first started, I mean, I would drive out to Riverside. Every Wednesday night, it would be like an hour, an hour and ten minutes for a drive. And I would go there for a "tip spot."<sup>106</sup>

CS: Mm-hmm.

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<sup>104</sup> Miss Fame was a contestant on Season Seven of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Prior to competing on the show, Fame was a well-known makeup artist whose YouTube makeup tutorials received many views.

<sup>105</sup> Fendi Laken is a drag queen who regularly posts drag makeup tutorials on YouTube.

<sup>106</sup> A "tip spot" gig is when a performer earns money through the tips alone.

DT: And there'd be nights where I drove out there, and I'd make literally zero dollars. I would drive over an hour, there-and-back in LA traffic and make zero dollars. That was very hard and disheartening, but at the same time, I didn't really care because I was on a stage. And I got to, you know, I got to perform. So, it's just kind of been a lot of traveling and a lot of kind of self-discovery, kind of finding out what I like, what I don't like. Since I've started my journey in drag, I've been exposed to so many more styles that I didn't even know were a thing. There's just so much to it that I think people don't really realize.

CS: Absolutely.

DT: I bought a brand new car when I moved out here, so since I had that brand new car, I would go everywhere. I would go perform in Long Beach, where there's a ton of pageant girls. Then I would go out to Riverside and it was kind of a similar thing, where it was all about the pageants and the glitter and the glam and all that. And then, you know, once I started finally getting gigs around this part of town [Hollywood], then I wouldn't have to drive so far. Then I saw West Hollywood and it was kind of like these are the girls that you would see in your commercials or your movie. And then there's downtown, Eastside, and that's more, a little bit against the grain.

CS: Yes.

DT: So, I think as of right now, I'm just kind of trying to solidify myself and my drag as its own thing because I don't necessarily belong to any subsect or specific—when people ask me who do I love to perform to, I'll say Kanye West. I love to perform to Kanye West. This upcoming Wednesday, I'm in a show, and it's 80s-themed, and I'm doing a Guns 'N Roses song.

CS: Nice!

DT: So I'm very like experimental, but for me at the same time, my goal is always to look great. Look great. That's my goal, is to look great and to look amazing and look like I actually care that I'm on that stage. I will experiment with anything really, and that's kind of what I enjoy about my own journey and my own history of drag. Because I'm not afraid to really do anything outside-of-the-box. I think from the day a queen starts, to the last day she does it, she's always growing and changing. You know, it's just a constant evolution.

CS: Absolutely. So, take me back to the beginnings of your introduction to drag.

DT: I think my first introduction to drag was probably seeing my mom's programs. There's a club in Chicago, it's like a legendary club called Club Baton or Baton Show Lounge. There was a girl there, her name is Mimi Marks.<sup>107</sup> She won Miss Continental, which is one of the big pageant systems, and she won that years and years ago. And I remember she always performed at the Baton, and my mom would bring home those big glossy programs. That was kind of my first introduction to drag, just seeing those polished, pretty showgirls in the pictures. And then my first time actually seeing a drag queen perform would probably have been in college. I worked at

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<sup>107</sup> Mimi Marks is a trans woman and female impersonator who has performed at Club Baton for twenty-five years. Mimi has competed in and won multiple pageants, including the 1992 Miss Continental title. Miss Continental is an annual female impersonation pageant founded in 1980 and held at Club Baton.

a gay bar [Club 213], and my first drag show that I went to was probably either the college drag show that they would have. They have like one every semester.

CS: Usually for a fundraiser or something?

DT: Yeah, a fundraiser that they would do with like the LGBT group on campus. So, it was either that or at the one gay bar that we had in town [Club 213]. Because I ended up working at that gay bar, and I remember that was kind of my first introduction to having conversations with queens and kind of seeing the transformation that goes into it. Because I worked the door. From my seat, I could see the stage, which is where like that red pole is in the corner [points to pole at the far side of the coffee shop].

CS: Mm-hmm.

DT: So I would be working every Friday, every Saturday and just sit there for hours and watch the same performances every single week. Watch the same queens, but I got to meet them. They would come in, and they would be as boys or, in Southern Illinois there's also a big pageant scene and a lot of girls who end up going into the pageant scene end up transitioning. So, there was a lot of queens that would come in as men, quote-unquote, and would have boobs. That was kind of my first experience with trans individuals, as well as communicating with a drag queen and not just seeing them on a stage. That was the first time they were like a real person to me, was when I was in college. When you meet queens outside of being "drag queens," it's totally different than what you think.

CS: In what way?

DT: They were real, you know what I mean? When you see them on stage, you see they're glamorous and they're this and they're that and they're just perfect on the stage. But then when you see them afterwards or beforehand, you see that they're just a regular guy. Just doing it for some money. They're just doing something for fun, they're just having fun. And then when you talk to them afterwards, "Oh, my feet hurt. Oh, I'm hungry. Oh, I want to go have sex with this boy or oh, you're so sexy blah blah blah." And it's just like, whoa!

(CS laughs)

DT: Oh my god! You're just used to them being that pretty thing on stage. It's like a drawing come to life. Talking to a drag queen is kind of like a drawing come to life, when you're talking to them outside of the bar being open. Because when the bar's open, they're, "Hi, darling. Honey" [said in affected, higher pitched voice].

CS: They're on all the time.

DT: Exactly. On all the time. So as soon as the lights come up [snaps fingers], it's like night and day. They drop the character a bit. And I mean especially these days, everyone is all about the character. I think *RuPaul's Drag Race* has pushed this idea of aesthetic onto people. Tons of younger queens or like Internet queens, the people that will do their makeup in their bedroom

and then record a video of themselves on Instagram and post it. You'll see them and they don't really get it, you know what I mean? It's just a totally different thing when you're coming up on your own and then coming up in the club system.

CS: Mm-hmm.

DT: And these kids that are just starting drag will say—I remember there was a girl I met, and I still perform with her every Thursday, but she's a baby, baby queen. And I remember one of my first times meeting her, I asked her, "What are you about? What's your gig? What's your deal?" And she's like, "I am sexy!"

(CS laughs)

DT: "I am fishy! And I will steal your man!" And that's kind of like the standard answer you'll get from a lot of girls when they first start. You hear "sexy," you hear "slutty," you hear "trashy." There's this like weird phase right now where all these up-and-coming queens are like, "I'm trashy. That's my aesthetic. I'm that bitch that's going to be throwing up in the hotel lobby." And it's like, what is this?

(CS laughs)

CS: And do you think that's primarily because of the show's influence?

DT: Um, yeah. I would say so. I would say if there was never an Adore Delano on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, I don't think there would be people pushing this idea of, "Oh, I'm trashy. I'm messy."<sup>108</sup> She went on the show and said, "I'm Adore, and I'm a messy slut." And people went *crazy*. People went wild, and they're like, "Yes, I love that. I'm a messy slut too!" And it's kind of the same thing with Fame and Violet Chachki.<sup>109</sup> They were on the show, beautiful, the very tight waved wig style, the corsets. All of a sudden, everyone wanted to have this sickening slim waist. Everyone was corseting until they were blue in the face.

CS: Mm-hmm.

DT: So it's interesting to kind of clock the trends as they come along. I mean, if you look at someone like Jasmine Masters.

(CS chuckles)

DT: She would be a great person to interview!

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<sup>108</sup> Adore Delano competed on Season Six of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and Season Two of *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars*. Delano is well-known for having an edgier "punk rock" aesthetic, which has been criticized by some drag queens for being sloppy.

<sup>109</sup> Violet Chachki won Season Seven of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. In the *Drag Race* fandom, she is well-known for her glamorous looks that often feature corsetry.



CS: I interviewed her a few days ago.

DT: Did you? Oh my god, that makes me so happy!

CS: She's hilarious and amazing!

DT: Yeah, she's hilarious, she's amazing, she's beautiful, and I think if you haven't seen her video where she exclaims, "*RuPaul's Drag Race* has...

DT and CS simultaneously: Fucked up drag.<sup>110</sup>

DT: Yeah, exactly. So she's one of those people that pushes this like, "Drag can be whatever you want. You don't need to do those tight curls. You don't need to do that corseted waist. You don't need to do three bottom lashes with white eyeliner." Because when someone does it on *Drag Race*, all of a sudden people are like, "Oh my god, they're the first person to do it." You know?

CS: They don't know the history of drag.

DT: Exactly. And that's kind of like the disconnect that's happening right now, and I noticed that from the first time I performed. The first time I performed, it wasn't a bad performance. I thought I was okay, you know, I looked pretty. And you know I made like five bucks, and it was from one person after the number. This girl came up to me, this lesbian girl came up to me, and was like, "here you go." Gave me five bucks. So I'm like, "Yes! I've got a five my first time. I'm ready to come for all these bitches."

(CS laughs)

DT: Looking back, I'm just thinking like, "She must have tipped me that because she felt bad for me." But still, five dollars, I'm not gonna complain. I'll take that five dollars. But the audience at 340, it's eighteen-and-up, so these kids that are coming to the shows, they only know drag from *RuPaul's Drag Race*. So for them, all they see and all they know is that 2D representation of drag on their screen. So when they come out to the clubs, they think it's almost the same thing. They think it's like a movie. Sit there, enjoy it, smile, and then that's kind of the end of it. Whereas in reality, years and years ago, you tip them.

CS: Mm-hmm.

DT: And people will still say that at the beginning of the show, "Tip these girls. Good drag ain't cheap, and cheap drag ain't cute."<sup>111</sup> Or something like that. And that's kind of where the

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<sup>110</sup> On January 28, 2016, drag queen Jasmine Masters uploaded a video titled "RuPaul Dragrace fucked up drag" to her YouTube account. In the video, Masters identifies what she believes to be some of the negative impacts on drag culture resulting from *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The video is available to view at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gf25Xzhpz\\_k&t=9s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gf25Xzhpz_k&t=9s)

<sup>111</sup> Drag queen Samantha Starrland, hostess of the "Haus of Starr" event at Rage in West Hollywood, says this phrase at her shows. Dani performs at "Haus of Starr" regularly.

disconnect is, and I think that's why a lot of people kind of have an issue with the up-comingness of drag because it's not coming up in the best way. If there's people that are just like expecting you to be perfect, you know. You go to any *Drag Racers* Instagram and go through their comments, god, people are terrible.

CS: Oh yeah!

DT: People are absolutely terrible. I work with *Hey Qween!* TV and so I produce a lot of the content and write a lot of the scripts and things like that.<sup>112</sup> I do a lot of the casting for our side shows and things like that as well. And so we'll put someone on the show, and people will be in the comments, "Oh, gosh, she needs to blend that contour. Oh, she just wishes she was Trixie Mattel."<sup>113</sup> You know what I mean? They don't understand, people were wearing corsets before Season Seven of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. People have been wearing beards and doing drag long before RuPaul did a bearded challenge. He didn't create that, he just put it in an episode.

CS: They don't know the history of the Sisters or anything.<sup>114</sup>

DT: Yeah, they don't know the history. And for me, I'm someone that, one, I'm very defensive. But I know that I am, so when someone's giving me advice or something like that, even though it may suck to hear, I try to take it all in because I know that they've been doing this for "X" amount of years, and they're only telling me things to make me better. And I think that's a lot of the problems that people have. Jasmine Masters, for example, says that a lot of young queens, they don't want to listen.

CS: They think they know it all.

DT: Exactly. They think because their crease is perfect and their brows are symmetrical and ombré that it's like, "I'm the shit, and you can't tell me anything else." But there's so much more to it than just having that perfect face or that perfect costume because now anyone can do drag. If you know how to beat your face, if you know how to buy a costume, you can go up on that stage and look sickening. But it's not just about that face. When you finish the show, talk to the people at the bar. Tip your bartenders. Socialize with everyone. Take pictures with people. Do all that stuff. Don't go on stage and then act like a bitch the whole time because even though you may look like the best queen on that stage, if you treat everyone like shit, you're not gonna get invited back.

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<sup>112</sup> *Hey Qween!* is a YouTube-based talk show hosted by gay singer/media personality Jonny McGovern and drag queen Lady Red Couture. The show regularly features drag performers, including *Drag Race* queens. *Hey Qween!* filmed an episode during a panel at *RuPaul's DragCon* 2016.

<sup>113</sup> Trixie Mattel was a contestant on Season Seven of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. She is well-known for her campy, overdrawn doll-like aesthetic

<sup>114</sup> The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are an international "Order of queer nuns" devoted to community service, ministry, and outreach. The Sisters originated in San Francisco in 1979, and orders now exist around the world. The Sisters are well-known for their aesthetic, which often includes donning nun habits and painting their faces white. Many Sisters have beards.

CS: Right.

DT: You're not gonna be remembered. And I think people just want it all, really instantly. They want it all now. They want to be on *RuPaul's Drag Race* now, and I think it's a phase that everyone hopefully eventually phases out of. I know for myself, when I first started I was kind of like, "Gig, gig, gig, gig, gig." When I was working so much, I remember being in dressing rooms with girls I didn't like, and I would be like, "Oh, yeah, I've got four shows this week." Just kind of flaunting it, and it's because I was new. But I was like, baby I've got all these gigs. Why wouldn't I talk myself up?

CS: Mm-hmm.

DT: But, you know, gigs don't mean anything. Anyone can find a quick spot to fill in or a show to be in. It's not hard to secure a gig. The hard part is coming back over and over again. Them asking you to come back.

CS: Making an impression. Making a name for yourself.

DT: Exactly. Making that impression, and it's a job too, you know what I mean? You can't show up late, forty-five minutes late to your shows. You can't show up hammered because, again, you're working. If you go on that stage, and you break a light or you make a mockery of yourself, that's on you and you're probably not going to get asked back. There's just so much in it that I think a lot of people don't really realize, whether it be getting ready, whether it be how you compose yourself, all that.

CS: So, before you moved out to LA, you were working at the club [Club 213], and the show was airing while you were working there?

DT: I started watching *RuPaul's Drag Race* my freshman year of college [Southern Illinois University Carbondale]. I want to say they were on either Season Two or Season Three. And I just thought it was the funniest thing, you know what I mean? And I remember watching it with my friends when I was at college. One of the girls I went to high school with, she lived a couple floors below me. And I would always invite her and her best friend at the time up to my room and be like, "Let's watch *Drag Race*. Isn't this show so funny?" Ever since that introduction, I would watch it every single season. And I never had a desire to be a queen. I just thought it was interesting. I thought it was an interesting little thing. I think a lot of gay boys have this complex where they think they would be the most amazing drag queen.

(CS laughs)

DT: I'll just have a conversation with any random gay boy who will say—and I was guilty of it too! I remember when I wasn't even doing drag, and I would say things like, "Oh, when I come out on the stage, baby, if I was a drag queen I would come out in a leather corset with crystal gloves and blah blah." You know what I mean? When you're not a queen, you think that it's just

so easy. You think that it's just so simple to go and buy that perfect costume, those amazing accessories.

CS: Yep!

DT: That perfectly styled hair, and you think it's just like that [snaps fingers]. Whereas today, I know it's not that easy. So, that's why when I have conversations with my boyfriend who will say things like, "Well, if I was a queen..." Like, I remember we had a conversation once, and he said to me, "When I come out for my first performance, I'm going to come out and I'm going to be carried."

(CS laughs)

DT: Like on an Egyptian platform-type thing with four people carrying him. He wants to have like bongos in each corner of the stage with fog coming out of them, and I'm just listening to this conversation, and I'm like, "that is *so* not real."

(CS laughs)

DT: That is not possible! You know what I mean? But when people haven't done it, they're just gonna think that it's easy like that. Whatever, you can go ahead and believe that. But it's hard work.

CS: Absolutely. When you were working at the club [Club 213] while *Drag Race* was airing, did you notice people in the bar, queens in the bar or queers in the bar, talking about the show? Did it have an impact when it first started to air?

DT: You know, I don't remember a lot of queens talking about it. I think *Drag Race* is having this moment where right now it's a hot topic. I was talking to someone the other day, and there's some drag fans that'll say, "Oh, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, it peaked in Season Three. Season Two, oh that was the best season ever! It's never been better, blah blah blah." And it's like, sure, you may think that was the best, but if you look at the numbers, you look at the ratings and everything behind it, Season Nine of *RuPaul's Drag Race*—all they did on *Entertainment Tonight* was a blurb: "coming out today, the twelve new girls on *RuPaul's Drag Race* Season Nine." Showed a thirty-second clip. That's it. That's not even close to mainstream, so if you're starting to see, *just starting* to see people like Trixie Mattel in commercials and Violet Chachki in *Vogue* magazine.<sup>115</sup>

CS: Mm-hmm.

DT: It's just the tip of the iceberg. If everyone in the community doesn't like shoot themselves in the foot and do something stupid, drag could really keep going as another art form and not just

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<sup>115</sup> Trixie Mattel appeared in commercials for Las Vegas tourism and the Food and Drug Administration's "This Free Life" anti-smoking campaign. Violet Chachki was photographed for the January 2016 issue of *Vogue Italia*.

like a fad. Cause it's not even close to being saturated. Especially because the only place where like drag is saturated is in big towns where there's a big gayborhood.

CS: Yep.

DT: In Chicago, in downtown LA, in WeHo, there's a drag show every single night of the week. Some people say, "Oh, there's too many drag shows, there's too many drag shows." For *you*. For the gay community. But there's a whole—the LGBT community is a minority. There's so many more people out there that don't even know what drag is. Even to this day, I'll have conversations with people and say, "Oh, I'm a drag queen." They don't really know what that means. "Oh, okay, so you dress up like a girl. That's cool. What, do you sing? Do you like do magic?" They don't really understand what goes into the performance of a drag queen. When you think about it, it's just like glorified karaoke, you know?

(CS laughs)

DT: And now, it's getting to that point where it's like, oh this person is a singer, this person is a comedian, this person is a tap dancer, or whatever it may be. And I think those girls that find things to do outside of the one-two-step lip sync, those are the ones that are kind of finding their foothold.

CS: Finding their niche.

DT: Exactly. Very that. I'd say as of recent, that's when you've kind of heard it talked about in the bars. But when I worked in the bar, the only time you would really hear people talk about *Drag Race* and RuPaul girls is when a girl would be in town. In Southern Illinois, I think Chad Michaels was there once and Pandora Boxx.<sup>116</sup> And that was like the extent of the girls that would come out to Southern Illinois.

CS: So then, prior to coming to Los Angeles, you started to develop an interest in maybe performing. Testing the waters a little bit. You get here the first week, you go to the Season Seven reunion taping, you start to see the more popular Ru-girls in person. Was there a particular moment that it just clicked, of going beyond "I'm interested" to "Yes, this is what I'm going to do?"

DT: You know, I would say when I was at that Reunion. I think it was just so glamorous, it was so over-the-top, and I was like, "I'm going to be here next year. I'm going to be on that stage. I'm ready to win." Obviously, I knew that wasn't the case cause at the time, just in like the grand scheme of the timeline, if the Reunion was in like May they were probably already filming Season Eight in June or July. So realistically, impossible for me to be on that stage the following year.

CS: Yeah.

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<sup>116</sup> Chad Michaels won Season One of *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars* and competed in Season Four of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Pandora Boxx competed in Season Two of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and Season One of *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars*.

DT: But, it still put the idea in my head, and I was like, “Yeah, this is it. I’m into this.” You know, it’s interesting because I kind of fluctuate, and I think so many queens fluctuate all the time where they’re like, “Do I really want to be doing this?” But you invest so much money and so much time in it.

CS: Mm-hmm.

DT: That it’s almost like you can’t quit. Like, I think, “I’m just gonna quit today.” And then I’ll always think back like, “No, you can’t. You’ve spent thousands of dollars on your costumes and makeup.” Just like my makeup alone. I came out to California with a dream to make it big, and two years later I’m just in a ton of debt. But I am so happy. I’m living in the same place, I’m living with my boyfriend. I have costumes, I have a sewing machine, I have makeup. And the bills are paid on time, and I’ve got some spending cash. It’s taken me a while to get to a good point, cause when I first started it was just like, “buy, buy, buy, buy, buy.” Buy everything. And then it was like, okay let’s just work. And then now it’s to the point where I can take what I make from drag and spend that specifically on drag. And then my coins that I make from my regular job is for my bills, my credit cards, my this, my that. And I make enough with my drag that I can spend that directly. When I get cash at the end of the night or from my tips or whatever, I’ll keep it together, and I usually go to the fashion districts once a week to pick up some new accessories or some fabric or a wig or something like that. It took me a while to get to a point where I’m kind of self-sustaining, but now I’m there, which is really cool. And I don’t know if I would be in this same situation if I lived in another town. Cause here there’s gigs a plenty.

CS: Absolutely. So, you’re at the point where it’s a self-sustaining enterprise. About how long did it take to get there?

DT: Probably a little over a year, and I say that because in the very beginning there’s so many costs that you don’t think about. In the beginning there’s your first pair of shoes, your first wig, your first waist trainer, your first everything. I think of like my face, I use probably thirty-plus different products on my face when I do my makeup. When you first start off, you need to get all those things. Now I’m at a point where the reason why I’m self-sustaining is because I already have all this stuff.

CS: It’s just refilling if necessary.

DT: Exactly. It’s refilling the glue stick or the Pros-Aide [an adhesive for prosthetics] and the contour coloring.

CS: It helps a lot that you sew.

DT: Well, kind of. I have a sewing machine, and I know how to work it generally. But I’m also really good with glue, so that works too. Once I had all the stuff, it becomes a little bit easier because it really is just that replenishment. And now, really, the stuff that I do get, it goes straight to looks. It goes straight to a costume or a new shoe. Every time I have tips, that’s what I’ll

spend it on, is either groceries or more clothes. I can't remember the last time I purchased clothes for myself, like as a boy. Yeah, no, I cannot remember. I really can't. It's really just been all girl stuff, all drag.

CS: So, ultimate goal, is it to get on that Reunion stage?

DT: The ultimate goal is to be bigger than RuPaul. That may sound cocky, that may sound farfetched, but I remember having this conversation with my ex and I told him, "I want to be bigger than RuPaul." He's like, "that's ridiculous, blah blah blah." I think about it in the sense of like if you were to meet someone that's a singer and you ask them, "What's your ultimate goal?" Are they gonna say, "I want to be almost as good as Beyoncé." It's like, no, why would you—that's literally putting a ceiling on yourself.

CS: Mm-hmm.

DT: Sure, the ceiling to get to Beyoncé is pretty fucking high, but it's still putting a ceiling on yourself. So for me, yeah, I want to be bigger than RuPaul. I want to do what he couldn't. He still says to this day, "drag is not mainstream." He's won an Emmy, he has millions of dollars, he's doing it. But, there's still—I don't know, I don't know when the world is going to end, but there's thousands of new queens and there's definitely going to be someone that does something or creates something that gets them to top. And it's almost a thing of like Madonna and Britney Spears. Madonna broke barriers back then. Obviously no one's ever gonna top her in terms of legend status. But, you know, someone could sell ten trillion records and surpass Madonna in every single thing. Does that take away any of Madonna's accomplishments? No, absolutely not. Is she still a legend? Absolutely. RuPaul will always be a legend. But, there's still gonna be drag queens for years to come, and eventually I'm sure there will be someone that will make more money or be more successful than him. At the end of the day, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is a cable television program that gets, I mean, probably between like 500,000 to 1.5 million viewers on broadcast television, so who's to say in ten years we're not gonna be in a place where there's a drag queen as the main character on an ABC sitcom? You know what I mean? Obviously that's a lofty goal, but there's so much more growth for drag, it can really go anywhere. And that's why I don't want to limit myself. I want to be bigger than RuPaul.

## Dani T Interview Synthesis

Dani's interview provides invaluable insights into both the economic investment of drag and the tangible impacts *RuPaul's Drag Race* is having on drag cultures, performers, and audiences. Dani is part of a newer generation of performers inspired to perform because of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. As she recounts, the process of becoming a performer requires heavy investment. Dani accrues debt because she must purchase so many drag-related items, including makeup and costumes. When starting her career, Dani must invest time and money into travelling around Los Angeles. These early "tip spot" gigs often provide only exposure. Her full-time career provides the necessary financial stability that allows Dani to invest in drag. As she makes a name for herself, Dani is able to earn some social capital. She starts to accumulate regular gigs, which provide her with economic capital. After two years of working, Dani is now starting to see financial returns: drag has become a self-sustaining enterprise for her. This necessary investment of time and money before receiving economic and social capital is a common reality for the drag artists interviewed in this chapter. Fans who watch *RuPaul's Drag Race* do not necessarily understand the financial burden that comes with drag. As Dani says, "when people haven't done it, they're just gonna think that it's easy like that."

Dani also identifies important tangible effects that *RuPaul's Drag Race* is having on the lives of drag performers. With regard to drag culture, the show impacts how newer queens create their own characters. As Dani says, some of the newer performers directly emulate *Drag Race* contestants. They adopt catchphrases or personality traits such as Adore Delano's "trashy" aesthetic, and these newer artists sometimes even change their wardrobes to match the wigs or fashion trends on *Drag Race*. As Dani says, the show's popularity emphasizes the importance of drag aesthetics, which can result in a type of standardization wherein newer performers end up



copying representations from *Drag Race*. Social media also provides a new outlet for these performers to learn about drag cultures. Dani herself learned to paint her face through YouTube tutorials from drag artists. Newer artists can now learn about drag makeup through these technological advances. These cultural changes translate into behavioral and social changes. As Dani notes, some of the newer artists and fans do not necessarily understand the social etiquette of the live drag performance. Performers sometimes adopt a grandiose attitude and fail to socialize with the audience or colleagues. Similarly, audience members sometimes fail to tip the performers appropriately. These fans treat the live drag show like a television show because, as Dani says, “all they see and all they know is that 2D representation of drag on the screen.” These changing social practices at live drag shows can negatively impact the performers by taking away their opportunities to earn money. As Dani says, many of the newer performers take gigs that pay only through tips. These performers lose the opportunity to earn money when audiences do not adopt appropriate etiquette.

Additionally, Dani notes, some fans of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* exhibit negative behavior on social media. These individuals will send nasty comments to drag artists and accuse performers of copying the representations on *Drag Race*. As Dani says, this perspective stems (in part) from a lack of cultural knowledge. Fans who know little-to-nothing about drag outside *RuPaul’s Drag Race* sometimes do not understand that what the show displays comes from a longer history. As Dani suggests, when fans assume the representations on *Drag Race* are original, they demonstrate a lack of awareness about drag history. What RuPaul displays on the show is often a reference to or invocation of something from drag history. As Dani says, “he didn’t create that, he just put it in an episode.” As Dani reveals in her interview, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* impacts how drag artists and fans both understand the culture and participate and invest in local economies.

## **Cake Moss – “It’s becoming a catch twenty-two”**

Cake Moss is a twenty-seven-year-old gay male white drag queen who has been performing for almost five years. Originally from Strongsville, Ohio, Cake began her drag career after moving to Los Angeles. Before turning twenty-one, Cake would frequently attend eighteen-and-up shows produced by TigerHeat, a promotional group that sponsors LGBTQ events throughout the Los Angeles area. TigerHeat regularly holds events on Sunday nights at 340 Nightclub in Pomona and on Thursday nights at Club Avalon in Hollywood. The Sunday night shows feature a drag competition, and the winning queen earns the opportunity to perform at the Thursday night show. Cake became annoyed by what she considered to be “sloppy” drag performances during the Thursday shows at Club Avalon. Encouraged by friends to compete, Cake first performed during the Sunday night competition. She won and has been performing ever since. Cake now regularly performs and hosts events throughout the LA area. Additionally, she is a singer, model, dancer, and SAG-AFTRA card-holding actress. Along with Melissa Brown, Cake co-hosts the weekly talk show, “Spilling the T with Cake and Melissa B,” produced by Zinna Media Group. The show airs digitally Monday nights at 5:00pm (PST) on Zinna.tv.

I had seen Cake perform a few times in Los Angeles, particularly in West Hollywood. I reached out to Cake via Facebook, and she agreed to meet for an in-person interview. We met on a Monday night at the studio where she films “Spilling the T.” Cake had just finished filming an episode and was in full drag. We sat together at a table on the set, talking for about forty minutes. After the formal interview, Cake asked if I could drive her back to her apartment so that she could prepare for her gig later that night in West Hollywood. During the car ride, we continued talking informally as Cake played music, trying to decide what song to perform that evening.

**Carl Schottmiller:** So, when you first started performing in Los Angeles, what was the drag scene like?

**Cake Moss:** Um, it was, it was alive. Not as alive as it is right now.

CS: Mm-hmm.

CM: But it was very easy for me to get into it because I was honestly just performing in Pomona a lot at 340. I got blacklisted for talking shit to someone cause they stole my friend’s choreography, but it was a push—like go to West Hollywood. And then I found where all the drag shows were, and it was four years that I’ve been doing the show at The Abbey on Mondays. *Lip Service*. Pandora Boxx used to host it before Jackie Beat hosted it, and then Pandora hosted it, and now Allusia hosts it.<sup>117</sup> Then there was all these competitions at The Abbey and then I started go-go dancing at Micky’s in drag and then that’s how I weeded my way into Micky’s. And then I started working at Here Lounge, and then I started working at Rage, and then before I knew it, I was literally working at every single bar in West Hollywood, and everyone was like, “Cake, Cake, Cake, Cake, Cake, Cake!” And I was like, “Wow, this is pretty cool.”

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<sup>117</sup> Pandora Boxx competed on Season Two of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and Season One of *RuPaul’s Drag Race: All Stars*. Jackie Beat is a legendary drag queen well-known for her musical parodies and biting wit. She has appeared in the documentary *Wigstock!* Allusia is a Los Angeles-based drag queen who regularly hosts drag events in and around the LA area.

(CS laughs)

CM: And, I kind of forget sometimes all the stuff that I've done. In the city of West Hollywood. It's crazy. Like, it's super crazy.

CS: So, as a budding drag queen, did you pretty much have to do these gigs for free just to start getting your name out there?

CM: Um, for a little bit yes. I was lucky enough—well not saying I *was* lucky enough. I am lucky enough to actually be talented.

(CS chuckles)

CM: I'm not saying other people aren't talented, but when you are talented, it shows, and it's like, "Okay, this bitch is for real."

CS: She can back it up.

CM: Right. Not just like I'm gonna stand on the stage and point at everyone in the audience and expect you to walk up to me and give me a dollar. I guess that's that person's form of drag, and in their mind that's great, but in my mind it's like, "Bitch, I need to put on a miniature concert right now." You have four minutes with me, it's going to be the experience of this artist, ready set go, okay. So, I would just do that full out, and I would always put on some crazy performances and huge productions. I've done some of the craziest shit in West Hollywood. I remember one night I did "Wrecking Ball," and I had a giant grey ball hanging from the ceiling at The Abbey. It was full of twelve bags of confetti, and I had a sledge hammer with nails on it. I literally bleached my hair that day to look just like Miley, and I came out and I looked just like Miley. Perez Hilton was there, and he was just sitting there recording me like, "Oh my god!" And then I hit the wrecking ball and it explodes and there's confetti everywhere all over the club.<sup>118</sup>

CS: That's awesome!

CM: And it's hella intense. And I was like crying and shit. That was *the* performance, and everyone was like, "This bitch is the one, okay. We see you, girl. Respect." There's a lot of times when people are like, "oh, it's just a tip spot, it's just a tip spot, it's just a tip spot." But then they see you come upstairs with all the tips, then they're like, "Okay, hey girl, we're gonna bring you under the cast so you cool with that? Do you wanna rotate?" And it's like, "Oh, yeah, of course." Here's a lot of the base pay in LA, it varies from \$50/tip spot to the highest I've been paid for a *club* gig in West Hollywood is \$200." But, I do acting stuff. They pay what I set my booking fee as, cause I'm also in SAG. So, it's also a union thing. They have to pay for other stuff like me getting in drag. They have to pay extra for that. So, the base for like SAG stuff is a \$187 for

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<sup>118</sup> Perez Hilton is an online gossip blogger.

eight. But then for drag it's like \$275 for six. I was like, okay! (said in high pitched tone). That's cool.

(CM and CS laugh)

CS: So, when you were first starting out, was there kind of like a hierarchy of clubs in terms of I really want to be able to perform at Micky's or I really want to be able to get to—

CM: Yes, it's still like that. It's still like that.

CS: What would you say is—

CM: If you're mothered into Micky's, if you work at Micky's and The Abbey, like regularly, then you're a queen in the hierarchy of the West Hollywood drag queens. There's like eight of us. And we're *the girls* of West Hollywood who represent Los Angeles. Me, Allusia, Misty, Mayhem Miller, Raya Litre, we're like *the girls* of West Hollywood.<sup>119</sup> When people are like “West Hollywood,” they're like, “Oh my god, Vicky Vox! Allusia! Misty Violet! Mayhem Miller! Cake Moss!”<sup>120</sup> Those are the names that they say, and then there're all the *Drag Race* girls that live in LA too. We love those bitches, too! So it's like, “We are the queens” [said in a sing-song voice].

(CS laughs)

CS: What would you say is that hierarchy? If Micky's is kind of at the top—

CM: No, Micky's is number two.

CS: Mm-hmm.

CM: Micky's is number two only because size. The Abbey is very large.

CS: Yes.

CM: And always very crowded. But on Monday, the show is huge, and we have the whole dance floor with our stage. But the rest of the week it's full, so everyone's like, “Oh my god, The Abbey!”

CS: Mm-hmm.

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<sup>119</sup> Misty Violet, Mayhem Miller, and Raya Litre are Los Angeles-based drag queens who regularly perform in and around the LA area.

<sup>120</sup> Vicky Vox is a Los Angeles-based queen who regularly hosts events in West Hollywood and who is well-known for being part of the drag queen singing group “DWV,” along with Willam and Detox.

CM: So if you're a headliner at The Abbey or if you're on a flyer on The Abbey's Instagram then that's it (snaps fingers). Like, you're that bitch. And that's when it's like, "Yaas, okay bitch we see you. We see you. You movin up, girl. You at The Abbey now, okay!"

(CS chuckles)

CM: But, Micky's is number two cause it's the second most popular gay nightclub on the West Coast. Even people in Cleveland know what the fuck Micky's is. They're like, "Oh my god, I've heard of Micky's. Oh, The Abbey too! And Rage!" And I'm like, "Uh huh."

(CM and CS laugh)

CM: Yes, girl, they're all in a row!

CS: So did you have to kind of pay your dues in a way to get started?

CM: Oh my god, yeah! Yeah! So much!

CS: What does that usually entail?

CM: The free jobs, the "tip spots," all of that stuff. Whatever the crowd tips you is what you go home with. Or, if it's a competition let's say, like that night specifically maybe the prize is \$100 for first place. So you'll get what a regular girl in the cast would get. So you get that \$100 and all your tips. And then, sometimes a lot of the finals competitions in L.A., like the grand prize is between \$1,000-2,000. So it's crazy.

CS: That's nice.

CM: Yeah. I'd always be so mad. They're like, "Do you wanna judge?" And I'm just like, "No, I want that money."

(CS laughs)

CM: But I can't compete anymore. I'm not allowed to, in the competitions. They're like, "Um, no girl you can't compete." And I'm like, "Why?" And they're like, "Mm—because it's for new drag queens, so that's not fair. You're very put together now."

CS: You made it. You're established.

CM: -ish. Yes, -ish. Almost. I'm almost there. Almost there. Close. I'm like on this line, it's like literally *Drag Race* keeps me to here [holds one hand horizontally in the air to indicate a barrier]. We can only get to a certain spot and then it's like, "Oh, but you're not on the show." So, it's like, "Yeah, but I do *this* and this and this and this and this and this and this." It's like, "Yeah, but you're not on the show, so..."

CS: Tell me more about that—how that distinction between you’re very well known in Los Angeles but you’re not on the show yet.

CM: Yeah, it sucks.

(CM chuckles)

CM: It really sucks. *Drag Race* has made it easier for me to be working almost seven days a week in drag. That’s very much a part of it. But at the same time, since I’m not on the show, everyone’s just like, “Aaw.” I’ve literally had people tell me, “I can’t follow you on Instagram or anything until you’re on *Drag Race*.”

CS: Really?

CM: I just go to your page and look at your stuff and “like” it, but I won’t follow you. And I’m like, “Are you serious?”

CS: That’s crazy.

CM: People say the most crazy shit to me and no one ever believes me. And then I show them messages, and I show them pictures, and I’m like it’s a real thing. I would just show people messages that people send me, and it’s like, “Oh, they really do say that stuff to you.” I’m like, yeah, I wouldn’t make it up. There’s no reason for me to make something like that up, it’s stupid. Why would I be like, “Oh, these people think that I’m shitty because I’m not on the show.” I’m not gonna say that because that’s not gonna bring me any good attention.

CS: Mm-hmm.

CM: But it’s literally, it’s very much like that. *I* find it annoying and people think that I’m bitter. It’s—I’m not bitter. Honestly, I’ve heard it out of RuPaul’s mouth: “If I choose you, I choose you. If I don’t, I don’t.” She’s like, “I don’t care how many followers you have, I don’t care how many gigs you have, I don’t care about how popular you think you are, I don’t care what you’re doing. If you’re a fucking fierce queen, and I think you’re fierce, I’m gonna choose you.”

CS: And have you auditioned for the show?

CM: I’ve auditioned for the show four times. Four seasons in a row. Season Six, Season Seven, Season Eight, and Season Nine. But, the most reaction from them and the most involvement they had with me was Season Nine. Which was interesting. But [said in very high pitch] then they didn’t choose me.

(CM laughs)

CM: As everyone now knows. A lot of people were actually waiting for the Season Nine list to come out. They’re like, “We know you’re on the show, girl.” And I’m like, “I-I didn’t even

disappear.” And they’re like, “You’re the one queen they let use their social media.” And I’m like, no, I was posting pictures from gigs. I was at work. I saw most of you.

CS: People track those things.

CM: I *know*. That’s why it’s hard for them to cover it. But it’s most of my friends. I’m like, you saw me. We actually talked. I touched you. You hugged me. We took a picture. And you still think I was gone? Okay girl. People are weird. But, it’s whatever. It’s fun. I think this is fun. I think drag is so much fun. And the only time I feel, like when I’m doing my talk show or when I’m performing or when I’m on stage, honestly, the only time I really feel like I *belong* to anything of importance or substance. Is when I’m doing drag.

CS: Why do you think that is?

CM: Cause drag queens have been empowering figures in the community for so long. When tragedies happen drag queens are always there to make everyone feel good again, but it’s like we don’t really have anyone to make us feel good. Cause we’re always making everyone else feel good. But I still like doing it just because I don’t know, I’ve tried doing so many other things and then this is the only thing that’s been lucrative and enjoyable to me.

CS: So, once, if you were to get on the show, what would change?

CM: Everything. Depending on when I went home. If I make it to the top three or win, my life would be changed forever in the most blessed, positive way. If I got sent home first, everything I’ve done would be for nothing. And my career would be basically ruined. At this point, in *Drag Race* Season Nine, and after *All Stars* Season Two, if you’re not in the top four, no one really gives a fuck. To be honest. And even then, people only really care about the Top Three and the Winner. So part of me is nervous to go on the show because they could just be like, “Boop,” and just send me home first.

CS: Uh-huh.

CM: And be like, “Bye girl.” And then that would ruin all of the work that I’ve done the past four-and-a-half years. And I’ve done a lot of shit the past four-and-a-half years. And that scares me, but at the same time, I know who I am as a person and an entertainer. I know I wouldn’t act a fool and let them edit me to filth.

CS: So for the queens who have been on *Drag Race* and are eliminated earlier in the show, do you know if their money still goes up in terms of what they get paid for gigs?

CM: Ummmmm, not really. I don’t think so. They can still have a higher booking fee, but if you don’t have that following that the Top Four girls have, then no. Like, we’ll give you \$1,000, maybe. Maybe like \$500 or \$750. Especially if you don’t have a manager, maybe \$800. [said in almost a whisper]. Maybe. And we’ll get you a kind of okay hotel room.

(CM chuckles)

CM: It's intense. That show has changed *a lot of things*. Like, I know one of the girls' booking fees right now is ten thousand dollars.

CS: Oh, wow!

CM: And she works like every other day.

CS: That's incredible.

CM: So, yeah. So I'm just like, "Oh, wow, that's—that's really intense" [said in high pitched voice].

CS: How else have you seen the show's changed drag culture in LA?

CM: Um, it's...kind of fucked it up a little bit. Now there's so many queens. There's like a drag show every night of the week. It was kind of like that before, but now it's like literally there's two duel drag shows on Monday, there's a drag show on Tuesday, there's—wait, is there one on Wednesday? There's not one on Wednesday. There used to be. I used to host one at Rage every Wednesday. But, I mean, I work on Wednesday nights, and I perform at the club I work at. But, it's not like a show-show. But then Thursday night, there's drag shows, and I'm hosting a night too as well. Friday night, there's drag shows. Saturday mornings, Sunday morning, all the brunch shows. There's all these clubs that have brunch shows, it's crazy. There's literally drag every day, but they don't really, like the clubs and the promoters don't really like to pay us what we should be paid.

CS: Uh-huh.

CM: And I always voice my opinion on it, and people are like, "Girl, just stop complaining and take it." And I'm like no because they want us to wear like these amazing outfits and all this amazing hair, and this shit is fucking expensive! Like, this fucking wig [pulls on wig she is wearing] that I'm wearing was \$89. And if I wear it more than once in a week, everyone's gonna fucking read me. And that's just how it is now. And this outfit was like \$75 from a boutique because it was hand-stitched. They hand-stitched the eyes and made them and put them on the clothes. So, right there I'm wearing almost \$200.

CS: Mm-hmm.

CM: And that doesn't include how expensive—my cheapest makeup item is like \$11 with my discount, so they don't understand that. And they're like, "Oh, well here's \$50" or "Oh, can you just do it with the tips spot?" And it's like, no. No.

(CM scoffs)

CM: At least if our base pay was always a \$150, and we turn it the fuck out. The queens of West Hollywood, we turn it the fuck out. We always have new looks, we always have new numbers,



we always have new this and new that, and we always have all these things. But, if our base pay was higher, our show qualities would go up *phenomenally*. Cause you give me \$50 then you're gonna get a \$50 show. You want me to look like \$10,000, but you want to pay me five pennies. It financially doesn't work like that. And so, it's getting to a point where it's becoming almost a struggle again because a lot of the *Drag Race* girls also do move to LA.

CS: Mm-hmm.

CM: They move to WeHo, and they start working for less money. Unless you're like Bianca or Alaska or Alyssa or something, they're not gonna pay your booking fee. They'll give you max I think like \$275 at Micky's on a Monday night for Showgirls. You'll get like \$275 or \$300. But they won't go over that. So, even the other shows that *Drag Race* girls host, they only get like \$250 or \$300. But that's still like *four times* what most girls get in a night.

CS: Right.

CM: To do the same amount of work. And it's like just because they're on *Drag Race* and they brought more people. But, we're here every week, and we do the same thing. We bring the same people that they brought. They're just handing out more money today.

(CM chuckles)

CM: It's just a giant thing. It's becoming a giant catch twenty-two, and it's fucking annoying.

CS: Since the show has aired, have you noticed any changes in the audiences at your show?

CM: Um, well most of the people always compare us to the *Drag Race* girls. And they're like, "Oh, what season were you on?" Like if they haven't seen the show or they sort of started watching from Season Six or Seven, and they're just like, "Oh, um, what season were you on?" And it's like, "I wasn't."

CS: Have you noticed more straight people starting to come to drag shows?

CM: Um, oh my god, yeah! Especially on Monday at The Abbey. There's *so many straight people* [said in a strained whisper]. But they don't really tip. They don't really get the concept of tipping. But that's okay, I guess.

(CM scoffs)

CM: They always look intrigued, and they're always very drunk. And it's like, "What are you doing? Oh, you're a guy! Ohhh."

CS: Do you think it's an actual appreciation for the art form, or is it more of just going to see the spectacle of drag?

CM: I believe it's more of that, from the straight community. Straight people love drag queens, and I'm like, "Yeah, they love drag queens, but they also love making fun of us. And it's like, "Oh my god, we saw these clowns the other night, and they were just like 'oh my god.' [said in a throaty voice]. It's stupid.

CS: So, even though the show's kind of popularized drag, you still need that hustle and you still need to advocate for yourself?

CM: Oh my god, yeah! Cause if we don't, then you fall off. Completely. Because there's so many *Drag Race* girls. And so, if you don't keep yourself relevant, even for them, if they don't keep themselves relevant anymore, everyone stops caring. Like, you have to give like at least two-to-three new looks a week. You have to like at least post one or two photos a day on social media and post in general just to keep your place. It's weird, it's interesting. Cause I've noticed that of the older queens that aren't really savvy with technology and social media and all that, they're just being swept under the rug. And to me it's kind of upsetting cause they're the reason that all of these bitches and myself can do the shit we do, is cause their old asses were out in the street every motherfucking day like, "Hey, y'all, come inside my bar." And not just sitting behind their computer screen taking a super cute selfie filtering it and being like, "Hey, I'm gonna be at this place at this time. Come and see me." Instead, they were literally outside doing the hard work. That's kind of what I do. I stand outside the front of my clubs and I say, "Hey, guys, we have this happening." And, that's what I do. And it's like, you gotta do it. I hang out with everyone that's in the club, I like dance with everyone, I show everyone I'm not just some bitch sitting in the corner like, "I'm over it [said in strained, faux exhausted tone]. I'm bourgeoisie, uhh." Cause if I didn't have the fans I have, I wouldn't have anything.

CS: Mm-hmm.

CM: But a lot of fans are my fans because they want me to be on *Drag Race*. So, that's a thing. Which is kind of annoying. I keep saying annoying. Cause it is annoying. It's an annoying situation, but I can't do anything about it because I wasn't chosen to be on the show. So, I just suck it up and do what I do and do it well and hope that other platforms and venues come my way that I can do them.

CS: Anything else you want people to know in general about your experience with drag?

CM: Um, it's probably the most amazing thing that's ever happened to my life. It's a life saver. Drag is not ever going to die. It's been around since Shakespeare, and it'll be around until the Earth is no more. That's it. Drag is everything. And forever changing and growing. There's a million new drag queens born every day. Honestly. No, probably like a hundred. There's a hundred new drag queens a day.

CS: Mm-hmm. It's really increased the market for sure.

CM: Yeah, but it's also decreased the pay because there's so many bitches that'll do it for free. That's another thing I need to talk to baby queens about. I understand they're baby queens, but don't just do everything cause even when you're no longer a baby queen, they'll continue to try

and take advantage and be like, “Oh, but you’ve been working for free for me for like years now. What, what’s changed?” Like, I don’t know, bitch, money.

(CM chuckles)

CM: Everything costs money. These jewels, makeup, lashes. Gotta get lashes every fucking couple weeks cause you can’t use them more than two or three times. Otherwise, they’re nasty and dirty and ugh. And you don’t want a nasty, dirty queen. If you want to do drag, have the money saved up to do it. Like have the money to invest in good wigs and good outfits and nails if that’s your thing and good makeup and all of that shit. Just make sure you have money to fall back on because if you’re not getting booked and you’re continuously working for free and doing tip spots, you’re never going to make money from your drag.

CS: Mm-hmm.

CM: Like, I don’t really have much money. But, the money I make, I do make okay money, but the money I make goes to my rent and goes into my drag. When I get paid from a gig it’s like, oh well this just paid for this wig that I’m gonna get tomorrow, and this pays for the costume I was gonna get tomorrow too. So it’s like I basically do work for free all the time. But it’s paying for my persona. Which is expensive. Cake is fucking expensive.

(CM chuckles)

CS: And Cake is your full time gig?

CM: Yeah, Cake Moss pays the bills. This bitch pays the bills. And then sometimes during the day I do acting stuff, but most of the time I’m in drag when I do that too. So, hey. I’m lucky. I’m lucky and blessed, but I also hustle my ass off and work really hard every single day. I have work until like two in the morning and have to be on set at seven a.m. So that’s an all-the-time thing. I’m very tired. All the time. Always exhausted. But, like I said, worth it. To me, at least. I can’t speak for anyone else. But for myself, the craziness is worth it. It makes me feel alive. So, it’s worth it.

## Cake Moss Interview Synthesis

In her interview, Cake Moss identifies some of the key economic and social impacts in the Los Angeles drag market, as a result of the *RuPaul's Drag Race* phenomenon. Similar to Dani T, Cake discusses how becoming an established performer requires “paying one’s dues.” Like many new drag artists, Cake started performing through an amateur competition. To build her reputation as a performer, Cake had to accept mostly “tip spot” gigs, which often paid little-to-nothing. For the start of her career, the investments (both monetary and time) surpassed the payoff. As she gained access to the different bars in West Hollywood, Cake started to acquire social capital. She became a regular performer (and then a host) at specific clubs. Cake has now acquired enough social capital to become part of an established group of West Hollywood drag artists. While these regular gigs provide money and queer cultural status, the economic payoff does not always match the required investment. As a SAG actress, Cake’s acting work (in and out of drag) with this union earns her a more stable income than the non-unionized drag circuit. As she says, her drag supplies are incredibly expensive, and the club managers/promoters sometimes underpay the artists (or, at least, pay too little for the type of expected performance).

The *RuPaul's Drag Race* phenomenon has a dual effect on this this potential economic exploitation. As Cake says, the show’s popularity increases the demand for drag performers: drag performances occur every night now in Los Angeles. At the same time, the show has created a labor surplus in the drag market. As Cake says, *Drag Race*’s popularity has inspired many new drag artists to start performing. These newer performers often accepted low-wage tip spot gigs in order to accumulate social capital, which ultimately leads to increased accumulation of economic capital. These artists must “pay their dues” through this investment process. As Cake suggests, economic exploitation can result from this situation when club

managers/promoters exploit the free labor of newer artists and/or refuse to pay increased fees to more established performers. As Cake suggests, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has become a “catch twenty-two” in how the show creates more opportunities for drag performers, which results in an oversaturated market and potentially exploitative business practices.

Additionally, the *Drag Race* phenomenon changes drag performers' experiences with fans and audiences. Similar to Dani T, Cake identifies a disturbing trend among some *Drag Race* fans' behavior on social media. These fans evaluate Cake based on standards promulgated by the television show. In order to stay relevant, drag queens must utilize social media to a sometimes exhausting extent. As Cake says, she has to constantly invest time on her social media accounts in order to stay relevant. This situation creates a problem for established queens who are less familiar with social media. As Cake suggests, these “older queens” who put in the work necessary to create social drag networks can find themselves thrown by the wayside if they do not embrace social media. This emphasis on social media presence that arises because of *RuPaul's Drag Race* can then negatively impact established, legendary drag artists who have invested time and money into drag communities. *Drag Race* affects the payoff for these performers. Additionally, Cake notes how the popularity of *Drag Race* creates demographic changes within LGBTQ clubs. Cake notices an increased presence of straight customers who do not necessarily appreciate drag artistry. As Cake says, straight people sometimes consume drag as a spectacle, mock the performers, and fail to practice proper etiquette by not tipping. This situation negatively impacts performers by depriving them of monetary gains and forcing them to confront a voyeuristic audience.

Similarly, *RuPaul's Drag Race* creates a type of career barrier for performers like Cake. While she is part of an elite group of West Hollywood drag artists, Cake must get on the

television show in order to ascend to the upper echelon of *Drag Race* performers. As Cake suggests, the show has created a new international drag hierarchy, and she cannot access that level of social and economic capital without getting onto the show. At the same time, Cake fears how her performance on *Drag Race* could negatively impact her career. For Cake, being one of the first eliminated *Drag Race* contestants would “ruin” the hard work she has put into establishing her career. Even among *Drag Race* artists, a hierarchy exists wherein the Top Four attain a higher level of social and economic capital. For Cake, then, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* directly impacts her economic opportunities and career aspirations. She experiences both positive and negative tangible impacts from the show’s popularity.

**Jasmine Masters – “Once you’re on it, you are a reality celebrity. You are a brand.”**

Jasmine Masters is a forty-year-old gay male African American drag queen who has been consistently performing for the past twenty-one years. She first performed drag around May 1993/1994 at a club in her hometown of San Diego. The venue was offering tickets to a Patti Labelle concert for the best Patti illusionist. Jasmine put herself into drag, borrowing clothes and makeup from her Auntie who was an Avon worker. She performed a mash-up of Patti’s “New Attitude” and “You Are My Friend” from Labelle’s *Live in New York* CD. Jasmine won the contest, receiving a standing ovation and bringing the house down. Afterward, she was asked to perform in drag again for the Imperial Court System, one of the largest and oldest LGBT non-profits in the world. She continued to perform at various benefit shows for the next three years, “without even making a dollar.” During this time, Jasmine was working full-time as a manager for a telephone company. Once she realized that she could make a living as a drag queen, Jasmine quit her job and started performing full-time. For the past nineteen years, drag has been her full-time profession, and Jasmine has not gone a week without being in some type of drag.

Jasmine describes the San Diego drag community when she first started performing as “small.” She remembers the scene as having a handful of performers and venues, with most of the opportunities to perform in drag related to benefit shows. Within the hierarchy of San Diego drag at the time, the Dreamgirls Revue (a legendary female impersonation show) was the “biggest thing around.” Jasmine eventually started performing with the Dreamgirls and later began to perform in and around the Los Angeles area. She moved to LA in her fifth year of doing drag and has lived here full-time for about thirteen years. Jasmine competed on Season Seven of RuPaul’s Drag Race, placing twelfth out of fourteen queens. I had seen Jasmine perform multiple times in Los Angeles, often at Hamburger Mary’s West Hollywood and on the RuPaul’s Drag Race Season Seven Premiere tour (during which she brought the house down with her Patti Labelle impersonation). I reached out to Jasmine via Facebook, and she agreed to an in-person interview. We met at Tanner’s Coffee shop in Culver City, which was relatively close to her Culver City residence. She arrived in male gender presentation, and we spent eighty minutes together discussing her drag career, from her first performance to her experiences on and after *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.

**Carl Schottmiller:** After you first started performing in Los Angeles, how long was it until you started performing in LA full time?

**Jasmine Masters:** I’m gonna say by my third year, right around the time I realized I could get money doing it, is when I started hitting LA hard. I had a choice, but I was getting asked to do different shows. I was entering contests and winning them. That was getting me bookings. During that time, there was like maybe four or five different clubs for black kids to go to perform, so that was Monday through Sunday we had places to go. As well as me doing different contests at Rage or Micky’s or The Abbey or wherever there was something at. I was always on the go. Like, I would do a contest, drive back to LA to do a show. Or I would catch the bus to do a contest and then wake up in the morning from the bus stop and just get home to do another show. So once I got into it, it was really nonstop. And it became my career, became my job, so I had to get on the ball. And it worked out. It was that third year, when I quit my job, I had no choice. So that’s when I really had to push to go for it.

CS: How would you describe the LA drag scene in particular when you first started performing here full time?

JM: LA drag, it was smaller. Much smaller. It was more open, meaning more inviting for new performers to come in, and it wasn't so much tension and so much drama. It was just, "Oh, it's a contest, hey come on. Well, come on in." Yeah, it was more inviting. More wanna be a part of something" and not like, "Oh my god, I don't know if I want to do it now because of this and because of that." It was more pleasant. Yeah, *way* more pleasant than it is now.

(JM and CS laugh)

JM: Now you're like, ah shit.

CS: When you first started performing in LA full time, how many opportunities were there for performing in drag? Was it something like it is now where there's basically a drag performance every single night?

JM: It always has been a lot of shows going on throughout the LA area. There's always been something going on, but there seem to have been maybe two or three per night. Now we have like five or six per night, shows that a person can go to. And when I mean the LA area, I mean from North Hollywood all the way to Palm Springs. There's a show every night, if not two or three. And it's just increased. Now it's just more because more clubs are getting into it, now the straight bars are getting into it, so that's even opened the doors more for a lot of performers to perform. And we need it because we have fifteen million girls here. Before we had fifteen hundred. Now we've got millions, so a lot of them need to work. A double job, a day job and a night job.

(JM chuckles)

JM: But they need to work too in drag because that's what they want to do.

CS: So, when you initially moved here full time, what was the drag culture like? Was it similar to how it is now in terms of West Hollywood is the hub for more of where straight tourists go. Akbar is more where you'll find genderfuck. What was the culture like in these different areas?

JM: Well, see I didn't hit a lot of the different areas. But what I can remember, at least on my side, it was just do what you do. Cause I always performed with different types of artists. Genderfuck, straight women doing drag, trans men or drag kings. I always performed with a mixture of people, so to me it's always just been, you know, it is what it is. We just performing, not matter what part of the club I went to or what kind of town I was in or whatever it was. To me it was just we was just performing, so I never seen like anything—

CS: Any strict divisions?

JM: Yeah, no, I have never seen it. Cause I always performed with a mixture of people, so I never seen the strict divisions. However, we do have show hostesses that are very strict on who



they have in they show and what you can do in that show and how long your number can be and what songs you can do. If somebody does that song, you can't do it in the show. I've seen that more than I've seen anything with the girls or anything else. That's kind of fucked.

CS: And do you think the diversity of the types of performances and types of performers was in part because drag at that point was still more of a subcultural thing? It wasn't mainstreamed to the point where *Drag Race* has made it. Because of the popularity of *Drag Race*, it seems like, in my experience going to drag shows in different parts of LA, it's more divided in terms of when you go to Micky's in West Hollywood on Monday nights, you expect to see this particular type of drag. If you go to Akbar on Monday nights for Planet Queer you expect to see this genderfuck type of drag. Do you think it was less divided by styles and types of performers because at that point it wasn't as popularized?

JM: Back then it wasn't [divided] because I worked with a mixture of people, so I remember working with so many. Now, it's like because everybody is so known to it, and everybody have their own, quote-unquote drag, it's more the bearded queens perform over here. The pretty girls perform over there. And I'm like, it's okay, but it's like why are we separating each other? We really need to mix each other in because we all in the same pot anyway. The way the world see us. But I have noticed that at certain clubs, like you said, you have this type of stuff and they have that type of stuff. But some people like just to see the pageant queens. Some people like to see the genderfuck. And people have the right to see and spend they money on what they want to see, and I don't have a problem with them having a show just for that because people are into that, you know what I mean? But *Drag Race* has really helped bring out a lot more drag culture. Cause drag is a big culture. We have all type of different drags, but didn't nobody know about genderfuck, kings and all that stuff as much until *Drag Race* came out because it gave people a voice to say, "this is what I do now."

CS: When *Drag Race* premiered in 2009, how long had you been doing drag at that point?

JM: About sixteen/seventeen years. And you know, the first year, they came to the Dreamgirls and asked us to be the first cast of the show.

CS: Really?

JM: They asked me, they asked Chad, they asked Delta, Morgan, Dolly Levi, Madonna Monroe, Venus D'Lite.<sup>121</sup> They asked us all. Raja was doing makeup for *Top Model* at the time.<sup>122</sup> They wanted us to be the first cast of Season One. But we all had something to do. Me and Chad was flying somewhere. Dolly was in a movie. Madonna couldn't do it because her job. So then they cast Season One. And then after that, it was like, "Oh, let's get on the show."

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<sup>121</sup> Delta Work competed on Season Three of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Dolly Levi and Madonna Monroe are drag queens who regularly perform with the Dreamgirls Revue but who have not yet competed on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Venus D'Lite competed on Season Three of *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

<sup>122</sup> Raja won Season Three of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Prior to competing on the show, he appeared regularly as a makeup artists on the reality television show *America's Next Top Model*.

CS: And when they first approached you, how did they frame what the show would be?

JM: You know what, I really don't remember detail-by-detail. I just remember it was like a reality show about drag queens. And it was gonna be like a game show where you could win money. That's what I kind of remember about it. I just remember that I couldn't do it. From what I can remember, they broke it down pretty good. And I was really interested in doing it, but I couldn't do it.

CS: And then once the show premiered, what kind of reactions in the drag community did you see to the show?

JM: I seen, sad to say, I seen a lot of hate from people around the world for the girls on the TV show. As well as a lot of love. Then I've seen people in our community really taking a part of drag who never wanted to take a part of it. And I noticed the clubs started getting more full with people. Not just because they was on TV because they didn't have to be in the club. But our clientele just got bigger within our own community and outside of the community. Because people started seeing behind-the-scenes. Hearing their stories. You could see how the doors opened up for people to want to come in the clubs and learn about it.

CS: When the audiences first started to pour into the clubs more, did you see an increase in particular types of demographics, like more straight people coming into the clubs?

JM: Mm-hmm. Oh yeah.

CS: What kinds of changes did you notice?

JM: A lot more straight women come into the club. And we have straight men. Like, we do brunches in the mornings. And ninety percent of the crowd is straight women, screaming, hollering like we male strippers out there.

(JM and CS laugh)

JM: And I feel like a hoe sometimes.

(JM and CS laugh)

JM: But I'm seeing a lot more straight women, but I'm also seeing a lot more straight men in there too with their wives, and they get comfortable. Because if I'm hosting, I tell them, "I don't want you. I'm in drag, that's turning me off. You want me in all this clown looking stuff?" You know, I got on these double lashes. I got on highlight, contour, blush. So the illusion you in love with or you oozing for is not real. So I just say, "I don't want you, I want your wife."

(JM and CS laugh)

JM: And I tell them about my experiences with women and let them know, "Hey, man, I put on this dress so I make money off of it." And I hate when people bring straight men into the bars

because then they wave the dollar over they heads. I'm like, don't do that because they already uncomfortable being here. And I get it. I respect it. But don't do that and expect us to play with them and tease them because if they hit somebody, then it's a problem. You know? So I don't even take their money, I may just go over and I give them like a fist pump or something and be like, "Hey dawg" [said in lowered, deep voice]. It's a lot of drama going on in the world that we don't need in our clubs and stuff. But it's bringing a lot more people out, which is good.

CS: When the show first started to air, tell me a little bit more about the kind of animosity from the queens. The ones who either hated the show or were not as receptive to it at the beginning.

JM: Well, I always heard bad things about the show from other queens. From Season One. "Oh, it's tired. Oh, it's late. Oh, it's this. Oh, it's that." Second Season. "Oh, it's late. Oh, it's tired. Oh, it's this." Third Season. "Oh, I'll try it out. Oh, I didn't make it. Oh, it's this. Oh, it's that." Fourth Season. "Oh, I made it on the show. Oh, I love it." So there's always good and there's always bad. You've got the good side of it, you've got the bad side of it. You've got the queens who don't accept it, you've got the queens who do accept it. You've got the queens who want to audition, who won't audition. It's just a situation where we not gonna win and we not gonna lose. It's just a fifty-fifty situation. Which is more to me on the fucked up side because a lot of the queens who beat down the show are just mad cause they have never got on the show. Cause they auditioned a lot. I auditioned a lot. Like five times. And they mad cause they don't get on there, or they just mad with themselves.

CS: Prior to getting on the seventh season, how often had you auditioned?

JM: Oh yeah, after Season One, I auditioned [Seasons] Two, Three, Four, Five, Six. And Season Six was the year I really was supposed to get on because me and Laganja did a show for them, for World of Wonder, for La Toya Jackson when she had her show.<sup>123</sup> It was her fifty-fourth or something birthday party, and they did a big special. Me and Laganja was on there, and they had us do a routine and stuff. And Ru was there and all the staff and whatever. So they got a chance to really get to know us. And my video tape came out messed up, so I didn't make it Season Six. I was like, "Fuck, I didn't make Season Six." But when I found out why I didn't make it and my video was distorted, I was like, "Oh, wow, okay I got it." But I auditioned every year. I didn't watch all the seasons, but I still auditioned. So I don't even know half the girls on the show. They bring these names to me, and I'm like, "Who is that? Which one is that?" And Kennedy, who was on the show with me, she hates it.<sup>124</sup> She always says, "Sister, you have to learn these girls." I'm like, "Well bitch, I've been working all the time." So, I auditioned like five times before I got on there. A lot of work, but you have to do it if you want to get on it.

CS: In-between when you were done filming the show and when it aired, what was that time period like for you?

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<sup>123</sup> Laganja Estranja competed on Season Six of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. World of Wonder (WOW) is a production company founded by Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, both longtime collaborators with RuPaul and producers of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. WOW also produced the reality television show *Life With La Toya*, focusing on the life of La Toya Jackson.

<sup>124</sup> Kennedy Davenport competed on Season Seven of *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

JM: Torture.

CS: Why's that?

JM: Because I wanted everybody to see it. You know, cause once you there for all that time, and you have to wait seven months or so for them to just say you was on the show, you're just like, "Damn, just release it. Please let me say I was on the show." But you don't get to say anything, so then it becomes like when, when, when? Cause they don't tell you nothing. So you just sit there like, "When is it gonna air? When are they going to release it?" That was the torture part of it, was just waiting for them to say I'm on the show so you can say, "I finally made it." That was the hard part about it really for me, but then I got so wrapped up in working so I forgot. Like by the third week or a month later, I had forgot all about it. So when it did air, when they dropped it, I didn't even know they aired it. People were calling me up like, "Oh my God, you made it on the show." And I'm thinking, "What are you talking about?" And then I was like, oh yeah, I forgot.

CS: And then what was your experience when the season first started to air?

JM: [long pause] Good and bad because when they first released our pictures, oh we got it. When I tell you we got the bad of the bad, we got the *bad* of the bad.

CS: In what way?

JM: Social media. We got a lot of hate mail. A lot of, "Kill yourselves" and "You're not gonna win." I got a lot of like racist remarks. It was just like, "Woah!" And this is just when they say, "These are our Season Seven." We never said a word to anybody. All they did was got a picture and, I tell you, every last one of us who have ever been on that show, still to this day get hate mail. To this day. And, I know they kids, they're like twelve, ten, nine, you know, a fifteen-year-old. Cause who else got that much time? You know, we got bills to pay, so they're sitting at home with parents. Then you get a little love, but it's just hate, hate. Every social media you have is hate. Nothing nice, just all hate. And it's just like, "What the hell?" I never had experienced that type of hate before, so it's like, all I can do is smoke weed and laugh.

(JM laughs)

JM: That's all I can do. It was sad. Don't get me wrong, it was very sad, but it was just like, wow. People are really teaching their kids this stuff. Cause I'm trying to think, what would drive somebody in their mind to say this stuff to someone? If you wasn't brought up thinking that way? You know, we only know what we're taught. And when they showed our pictures saying we was on the show, it was mind-blowing. Still is. Even on the new season, they're killing the girls now on Season Nine. Telling them to kill themselves and it's like, come on, what are you all doing?

CS: Do you think that's an issue with the younger generation in particular, or is it an issue with social media? Cause I've noticed consistently over the seasons people hide behind the computer

screen. They hide behind the anonymity of social media to say nasty things.

JM: Mm-hmm. Well, what I did on Twitter was, because they love to cuss me out. Cause they know I'll reply back. Well, I used to. I started telling them, "You don't even love yourself to have your own face in your own profile. So before you even talk to me, show your face. If you gonna cuss me out and talk about me, let me see you and then we can go back-and-forth." But I can't cuss out Snoopy.

(CS laughs)

JM: I like Snoopy, so I can't get mad at Snoopy. But let me see yourself. Show me that you love yourself enough to cuss me out, and I can see you. And they're not gonna be happy until somebody on *Drag Race* commits suicide. Because girls already talk about it. I heard some already tried to attempt it. I know a couple of them now that it's still in their mind cause it's so much pressure. And they're not making things better for us, so I told them don't even get on social media. If you can't handle it, don't get on it because they're gonna rip your ass to shreds. Famous or not.

CS: How do you think the show impacts your image in terms of, like a lot of the queens over the years have talked about the editing on the show, the way that they're portrayed. What's your opinion on the way that the show portrays contestants?

JM: Shitty. So, this is why I say that. Cause you picture you have let's say three days of filming, and each day we do fourteen to twelve hours of just filming. But you have to put all of that into one hour. Really forty-five, forty minutes when you add the commercial time. How can you put the truth, so much truth, into an hour? You really can't unless you focus on one image. You still can't put so much in there. If people paid attention to how the show is sliced and kind of put together, cause it's not smooth, they can really see oh, well what happened before the situation? It's always something that happened before to make a person say or do what they did. So you always got to say, "What happened *before*? *Why* did this happen?" Don't show me just this part. You can easily make somebody sound like a villain. It's easy to do it.

CS: Mm-hmm.

JM: But when you trying to edit someone like me, it can easily make me sound bad. Easily. Cause people edit my videos that I have on YouTube and have me sounding all type of different ways. I'm like, "Oh, shit, did I say that?" But then I have to go back and watch the real video because they sliced it up. And with the show, that's what they do. They slice up pieces and make a story. Things like three, four days, a week later, and they would put it all into the first episode. Like, for instance, when I said, "I'm here. H-E-R-E, here!"<sup>125</sup> That was when we came back for episode seven. I said that then, but they put that in the first episode.

CS: Mm-hmm.

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<sup>125</sup> During the mini-challenge of Season Seven, Episode One, the queens must display different seasonal looks on a catwalk ("Born Naked" 2015). As Jasmine walks, the footage cuts to a confessional scene during which she proclaims, "I'm here! H-E-R-E, bitch. I am here!"

JM: So that just goes to show how much they can chop and add whatever. Like during all of our confessionals, we had the same clothes on. The reason why we have the same clothes on is so they can use all of whatever we said and put it how they want to, to build a story. They made it seem like I hated Violet. I didn't hate Violet. If you're gonna ask me how do I feel about somebody when they say something about me and then the cameras are recording, so I'm responding but y'all recording everything. So I'm responding to something you guys asked me, but you all just took that out and just showed my reaction. They're gonna ask her how does she feel about this person saying something, then I find out they never even said that about me.

CS: Hmm.

JM: Other than that, the show like I always say is a great opportunity for anyone who do the work we do, but they don't need to do so much editing. Just let it be what it is. What they doing is they are putting people's lives in danger when they do that. We get hate anyway, but you make someone like a villain on a TV show, you got everybody all over the world. So when they're making these characters out of people who not the same way, making villains out of people, making some people look like they so quiet, that's not good to do. It's not good because it's the opposite. When you meet someone who they made a villain, they be the sweetest person.

CS: Mm-hmm.

JM: It's like why would you do that? All drag queens are not saints. And all of us don't have the best attitudes. But, if you're trying to show the world what we do, why are you bringing us drama? We've got enough drama with some people judging us and treating us like shit. Why would you put drama with us on the TV screen? They so focused on drama, and so that's what they want to do is have drama on the show. I just want to do my job. My job is to perform and take care of me and my family. That's what I do. Just let us be who we are. If we bitches, let us be bitches. But don't make us into bitches. It's like, come on.

CS: After the show's aired, how would you say it has affected your drag career?

JM: It definitely has opened more doors for me. A lot more people know who I am. People knew who I was from my videos before *Drag Race*, so it had definitely opened up a lot of doors. I get to do a lot more traveling for free, do what I love to do and see the world. It's always a good thing to do it, it just has its negatives. The main thing is we have so many opportunities, and we have a good platform to use.

CS: And what effect does it have on bookings?

JM: The bookings are amazing because, like I tell people, you have to realize if you're working in your local bar, you're making from \$50 to say \$200 a night in your show. And that's just in your city. If somebody's paying you, say six, seven hundred dollars to fly somewhere for free, put you in a room for free, all you have to do is go do two numbers, get tips, take pictures with people. Why wouldn't you do that? If you're sitting at home working for \$75 a night and you do about four or five numbers, why not take a free trip? So it's like the bookings are amazing to me.

I love them. Keep 'em coming.

CS: Does the increase [in booking fees] for the queens depend on where they land in terms of if you're in the Top Three, if you're in the middle?

JM: That's only when you're traveling around the world. They may coordinate to have you there because they feel like the queens who maybe was in the Top Three/Top Four, they will pay them more. And they feel like sometimes some of them will bring in more of an audience to where they could really flip their money over a couple of times. And there's sometimes you get the ones who do number three or they go home number four, number five, and they can do the same thing. And they pay them a little more because they definitely get their money back. And then sometimes their rate is just this is what I pay every girl. This is the rate. If you want it, take it. If not, we'll get somebody else. It depends on the club itself. But I'm pretty sure the girls who win, their management gets them a little more than anybody else. I'm not mad about it, though. Get your money.

CS: So, I interviewed Cake Moss a couple weeks ago, and we were talking about her interest in being on the show, and I want to get your opinion on something that she said.

JM: Okay.

CS: She said that she really wants to be on the show, but if she were eliminated early, it would destroy her career. For someone who's been on the show, what do you think about that?

JM: I think it's sad to think that. Cause you have to understand, you have twenty million drag queens. From eighteen to say seventy-five who are still auditioning for this show. For you to get picked out of twenty million tapes to get on this show is a blessing. Whether you go home first, whether you go home last. It's still a big blessing. You're still a step above a whole twenty million more people in the back. Your pay raise goes up. You have a platform. You have doors that you can go in. It don't matter if you go home first, just get on the damn show. And do your best. If you go home first, you still have the opportunity to build yourself up. It don't matter if you go home first. And I have friends who's going through that same situation. How's your career going to be destroyed if you go home first? You went home first, but look how many people have not got on the show.

CS: Mm-hmm.

JM: Their careers not destroyed. You destroy your own career, not the TV show if you go home first. I hate when people say that.

CS: It's not the show, it's what you make of the opportunity.

JM: Yeah, it's what you make of the opportunity. Cause once you're on there, you're on there. You've got the title, *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Put that damn stamp on there and keep going. Like, you got it. Sometimes going home first can be the best thing for you to do cause if you stay longer, you know, they may turn you into something you're not. I just hate when girls say that or

think that. I don't want to go home first, but I wouldn't have felt like my life was over or my career was done. It's just beginning. It's a whole new chapter. Build from it.

CS: Tell me a little bit about what you're seeing in LA drag culture since the show has aired.

JM: A lot of the same faces. There's a lot of queens who look like other queens. I was in a club one time, I didn't know which one was Raven and which one wasn't. I'm just chit-chatting with somebody thinking it's Raven, and then she goes, "Girl, I'm not Raven." Well, bitch, why do you look like her?

(CS laughs)

JM: You don't even look like her out of this, so how did you have her exact face? I'm like, why did you copy that? And that's what I see more. It's all the same look. It's the leotards in the winter, holy stockings, these platform heels. Everybody got five inches and liquid liner. These lines going across their cheeks. Everybody look the same. It's more lookalikes in LA now than I don't know what to do. Half of them don't even know each other, they not friends. But they all look alike. How can all y'all wake up and look alike? That ain't possible.

CS: Tell me a little bit about your experience with DragCon. Cause that seems like, of all the opportunities *RuPaul's Drag Race* has opened up, that's a really unique one in the sense that it's this giant convention.

JM: You know, DragCon was amazing. But it was torture because we don't have security guards for us, so we're free for people to come to us, take pictures, talk to us. Which is fine. But I had to use the bathroom, and it took me two hours to go pee. Two hours. Cause you can't say no to the people, and then if you say no they're gonna treat you, "Oh, you were so mean." And then you taking pictures and it's exciting. Everybody's excited. It was a big event, but I would not go back. I said if I go back, I'm a hang out outside where there's a long line. Everybody's in line to go in. I would chit-chat while they wait. But going inside the venue, way too much. Too much to not have security.

CS: Mm-hmm.

JM: It's a great opportunity. But, see, then I'm not into merchandise. I just don't wanna have t-shirts and mugs. I don't like stuff around my house. So where's it gonna go? In my house. And I want it out, so I don't buy t-shirts and have that stuff made because I don't want it in my house. But DragCon, if you bring stuff there and they don't buy it, you have it at your house. And a lot of times they don't buy stuff, or they buy like the quote-unquote famous ones. All the girls who paint a certain way or are model-esque or whatever. They don't buy anything, not from us anyway.

CS: One of the things I've noticed in terms of how *Drag Race* is kind of changing drag characters, it seems like the RuPaul empire effect is making more of a commodity of the queen. In terms of, you need to have these products. You need to think about branding. You need to come on the show with a catchphrase, with a tagline. Have you noticed that *Drag Race* is turning



drag characters into merchandise or into branding opportunities?

JM: Yeah, cause once you're on it, you are a reality celebrity. You are a brand from that point, you know, so you have to treat yourself as a market, as a business because you're gonna be traveling. And you're getting paid to travel, so at that point you are a business. So you have to think, company-wise, you have to think of yourself as a brand because you are a brand now. And you are a brand of the *RuPaul's Drag Race*. And your name is out there, so people know who you are. They're watching everything you do, so you have to think about it like that. If you want to take it as you are a brand and you want to have merchandise, do it cause it's there for you. You have people that's gonna buy it, you know?

CS: Mm-hmm.

JM: When it comes to like catchphrases and stuff, I have noticed people seem like they've been studying they catchphrase so when they get on, they can keep saying it. People ask me, "Well, how long did it take you to come up with, "No Tea, No Shade, No Pink Lemonade"?"<sup>126</sup> I'm like, well, I've been saying that for sixteen years. That's old. Like, I say anything. Like, the "kuht kuht."<sup>127</sup> It has *worn me out*.

(CS laughs)

JM: When people kept saying, "Kuht kuht." I'm like, "What the hell is a kuht kuht?" Like, I am getting bothered cause everybody is, "kuht kuht kuht kuht." What the hell? So somebody sent me the clip of me saying "kuht kuht." I'm like, I don't remember saying that cause I say so much stuff anyway. I'm always saying something off the wall, so I don't come up with catchphrases, I just speak. And I can't cuss at the time, so I gotta say a little "woo ha," "yang yang," you know?

(CS laughs)

JM: Or something to talk about what I need to talk about cause I can't say it, so it never dawned on me that I'm saying a catchphrase or I'm making one up or somebody's gonna use it as one cause I'm just being me. But, they always trying to find a catchphrase, a hashtag. Which I get it cause it's part of our times right now, so the queens do go on there trying to come up with a catchphrase. It's like, it's not that serious. You can type up and hashtag a catchphrase and it'll go everywhere. But trying to come up with so many on TV, it looks like you're trying to do something or be something that you're not. But anything you say can become a catchphrase.

CS: It all depends on how they edit the show.

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<sup>126</sup> Jasmine says this phrase during the first episode of Season Seven, and it becomes one of her "signature lines" on the show ("Born Naked" 2015).

<sup>127</sup> During the first episode of Season Seven, the queens' main challenge requires them to create tear away costumes, under which they wear nude illusion bodysuits ("Born Naked" 2015). As Jasmine walks the runway, the episode has her voiceover, "You see a little bit of tits, you see a little ass, you see a little kuht kuht."

JM: Yeah. Whatever they want to make a catchphrase, they do.

CS: Is there anything else you think I should know or you want to say about your experience in drag, how *Drag Race* has impacted your relationship to drag or your drag persona?

JM: Um, what I will say is since being on the show, people have really been telling me like I am very inspiring to them. Like, I helped them get out of different situations. I get so many, *so many* messages and stuff from people in abusive relationships or wanting to commit suicide, or they're coming out to their parents. How I helped them through the process. I'm thinking like, I don't know that I'm saying something to help. And my messages I get from people telling me all they bad stories, and they come to me for advice. I'm not a counselor, but I try to tell them how to deal with the situation cause I've seen a lot. I haven't been through a lot, but I've seen a lot. So me seeing a lot taught me not to do certain things. Or, I don't want to go down that road because I know what's gonna happen. So when people come to me with stuff, I just say well you know this pretty much happens. For *Drag Race*, that has really opened up a big door for me. Now I'm doing comedy, standup comedian stuff like at *The Laugh Factory*.<sup>128</sup> So, it's been good. I mean, I accept it for everything. The good and the bad. It teaches us all something.

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<sup>128</sup> *The Laugh Factory* is a world-famous comedy club on The Sunset Strip. Since its opening in 1979, the club regularly features comedians, both relatively unknown LA locals and "A-list" stars. The club is by no means a gay subcultural space, but the "Comedy Realness" event Jasmine hosts was billed as the, "First Ever Girls and Gays Comedy Show at the Laugh Factory."

## Jasmine Masters Interview Synthesis

As a former contestant on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Jasmine understands the phenomenon as a cultural insider. Through her participation on the show, Jasmine gains access to the *Drag Race* brand. As she says, this association provides her with access to more social networks, which then translates into increased economic returns. Jasmine is able to book more gigs and charge more money because of her participation on the show. At the same time, however, Jasmine must invest more time and money to expand her business and character's brand. As she says when discussing DragCon, Jasmine must create any merchandise she wishes to sell. She must invest money and labor to manufacture any products. Although DragCon provides Jasmine with potential opportunities to earn money, she also must invest additional labor to store any unsold items at her home. Because attendees at DragCon tend to more often purchase products from "fan favorite" queens, Jasmine will not necessarily see the same economic returns as other artists. While the *RuPaul's Drag Race* brand provides Jasmine with access into an upper echelon of drag performers, the franchise does not benefit all the performers equally in terms of monetary gain and cultural status.

Additionally, participation on *RuPaul's Drag Race* opens contestants up to vitriolic behavior from some fans. As Jasmine says, many queens from the show receive death threats and hate messages through social media. Jasmine herself experienced a lot of anti-black racism from many members of the fan base. This violent behavior dehumanizes the contestants, and as a result, some *Drag Race* queens contemplate or attempt suicide. As Jasmine suggests, a social support system does not yet exist to adequately protect the contestants and address this violent fan behavior. Jasmine suggests that World of Wonder needs to address how the show's editing of performers can influence this violent behavior. Certain fans sometimes consume the show as

reality instead of as an edited game show. These viewers understand the characters displayed on the television show as accurate representations of the performers. As Jasmine suggests, editing plays a factor in this narrative construction. The aired footage cannot represent the entirety of the actual experiences: a forty-minute episode cannot account for all the events that happened over a fourteen hour filming. While *Drag Race* provides a platform for the contestants, this social visibility comes with increased violence via social media, which often manifests in anti-black racism. Violent behavior on the Internet and social media is a widespread issue in contemporary society, one which needs to be addressed within the *Drag Race* fandom.

As with Dani T and Cake Moss, Jasmine identifies how the *Drag Race* phenomenon changes local drag cultures. The show's popularity has increased the number of newer drag performers, but as Jasmine suggests, these younger artists tend to copy representations from the show. Jasmine notices how many newer queens paint their faces almost exactly like *RuPaul's Drag Race* contestant Raven. This emulation can lead to homogenization within the art form, as newer performers start to adopt similar aesthetics. Jasmine also identifies how current drag scenes are sometimes less inviting than they were in the past. When Jasmine started performing in Los Angeles, she worked with drag kings, straight women, trans men, and a diverse array of artists. The current scene does not always bring together these different artists and drag styles. These artists do not all gain the same level of access to *Drag Race's* emerging economy because they are not represented on the show. As *Drag Race* popularizes certain performers and styles, clubs can become less inviting and diverse.

Similarly, this popularization changes the demographics of audience members. Similar to Dani T and Cake Moss, Jasmine notices an increased presence of straight people at gay clubs, particularly straight women. On the one hand, this demographic change indicates a greater level

of social acceptance from certain straight people: they are curious to witness drag and/or really respect the art form. However, the presence of certain straight people at drag shows can change the power dynamic. As Jasmine suggests, when straight men come into gay clubs for drag performances, they can introduce a potential threat of violence into the subcultural space. Of course, not all straight men introduce this violence. The concern lies not with “straight men” per se but with “toxic heterosexual hypermasculinity,” most often embodied by straight men. As Jasmine says, if a straight man feels threatened by the drag performance, that individual could introduce violence into the safe queer subcultural space. As a gay black drag queen, Jasmine adopts certain techniques to make herself less threatening to these audience members. She desexualizes herself by playing up an attraction to the straight man’s girlfriend/wife, and she interacts with the man by adopting ironic masculine intonations and gestures. Jasmine’s discussion here raises significant questions about cultural outsiders entering queer subcultural spaces.

### **Conclusion: Identifying Cultural, Economic, and Social Impacts of *RuPaul’s Drag Race***

Through these interviews, Dani T, Cake Moss, and Jasmine Masters identify some of the key tangible effects that *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is having on drag cultures, performers, and communities. For many younger drag artists, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* serves as their primary introduction to drag. The show’s representations of drag cultures and histories, therefore, has a direct impact on how these individuals understand drag as a queer artistic practice. As my informants suggest, younger performers sometimes emulate the aesthetic choices of *Drag Race* contestants. As a result, a homogenizing effect occurs wherein younger performers directly copy the catchphrases, makeup styles, or outfit choices featured on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. In these instances, the show’s representations become standardized as marks of “successful” drag.

Additionally, some younger performers and fans, who lack a broader knowledge of drag cultures and histories, interpret the show's representations as original. When these individuals do not know about bearded queens and genderfuck drag, they mistakenly suggest that contestants from *Drag Race* originated these styles. As a result, these younger performers/fans will sometimes accuse drag performers of copying or "ripping off" a *Drag Race* contestant. In actuality, the styles and cultures displayed on *RuPaul's Drag Race* are part of a longer historical and queer cultural lineage. These misinterpretations arise from a fundamental lack of queer cultural and historical knowledge.

The unprecedented commercial success of *RuPaul's Drag Race* has impacted local drag economies in both positive and negative ways. As my informants suggest, the show has inspired generations of new artists. As a result, a labor surplus of drag performers can occur, such as described by my informants. These newer queens usually have to build their social capital by "paying their dues" through tip spot and low-paying gigs. This process requires that performers invest a lot of money and time in building their careers, which can result in debt accrual. Over time, some performers gain access to drag social networks and steady club gigs. This accumulation of social capital can translate into economic gains as well. At the same time, however, club managers and promoters are sometimes hesitant to pay performers. As my informants suggest, drag artists can face economic exploitation from managers/promoters. Because drag is a non-unionized labor practice, the performers do not necessarily have safeguards to protect them. The popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race* often creates opportunities for drag artists to perform, but accumulating social and economic capital from the phenomenon requires investing time and money. Newer drag artists do not necessarily know these costs if they consume drag primarily through the television show.

For the more established performers, *RuPaul's Drag Race* presents both career boosts and hurdles. As my informants say, they all have increased opportunities to perform because of the show. At the same time, these opportunities vary according to their individual careers. For someone like Dani who is building her career, *Drag Race* represents a future career goal. Dani focuses on perfecting her craft through frequent gigs, with the hope of eventually becoming bigger than RuPaul. For a well-established local queen like Cake Moss the show creates a career barrier. Cake has achieved a high level of social status in West Hollywood, which comes with increased economic gain. *Drag Race* represents the next career level for Cake. In order to gain access to the upper echelon of *Drag Race* contestants, Cake must be accepted by RuPaul and World of Wonder. Until she gets onto the show, Cake cannot benefit as directly from opportunities that come with the *Drag Race* brand. By contrast, Jasmine Masters has earned the status that comes from appearing on the show. As a result, Jasmine enjoys more opportunities to travel, perform, and earn money. As my informants suggest, the expanding *Drag Race* economy creates both opportunities and barriers for these artists to accumulate social and economic capital as drag performers.

Additionally, Dani, Cake, and Jasmine all identify changing demographics within and disturbing behavior among their audiences. By popularizing drag queen performance, *RuPaul's Drag Race* encourages television viewers to consume drag. This consumption often translates into watching drag shows in LGBTQ venues. In LGBTQ clubs where they perform, my informants suggest that the audiences are becoming increasingly younger and heterosexual. The presence of straight people (particularly straight women) in these subcultural locations does not necessarily present a problem. Complications do arise, however, when the audiences fail to perform proper drag show etiquette. When straight audiences gawk at drag artists as a spectacle,

they bring a form of violence into the club. When audiences fail to tip drag performers, they treat live performance like a 2D television show (as Dani suggests). When straight men come into the club, they (unintentionally) bring with them the potential for violence, if they introduce toxic heterosexual masculinity into the space. While *Drag Race*'s popularity may increase the number of bodies at LGBTQ venues, these patrons do not always follow proper etiquette. As a result, their presence does not always benefit the drag artists or the LGBTQ establishment.

Perhaps the most disturbing trend identified by my informants is the vitriolic behavior some fans display via social media. As Dani, Cake, and Jasmine suggest, some *RuPaul's Drag Race* fans use their social media accounts to tear down drag artists. These fans send hateful messages to *Drag Race* contestants, including death threats and racist slurs. These viewers dehumanize the performers and treat them as subhuman. As of now, a safety system does not exist to protect the drag artists from this vitriol. The problem of violent social media behavior is rampant and by no means exclusive to the *RuPaul's Drag Race* phenomenon. Regardless, the behavior remains a problem. In my Conclusion, I consider what role scholars can play in addressing these various tangible effects that *RuPaul's Drag Race* is having on drag communities.



# Conclusion

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## “This history matters” Implications for *RuPaul’s Drag Race* Studies

As the *RuPaul’s Drag Race* franchise continues to expand beyond a single television show, the field of *Drag Race* Studies must also change to incorporate more complex research theories and methods. Thus far, the discourse predominantly incorporates content analysis of the television episodes in order to study issues of representation. While these studies provide invaluable perspectives on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, they do not always accurately account for how the franchise changes over time. For instance, scholars who study *Drag Race*’s early seasons often criticize the show’s representations of drag as too limited. Over time, however, the series has expanded to showcase different styles of drag including genderfuck and androgyny. These earlier studies can become inapplicable or outdated as the show itself changes beyond what scholars witnessed during the earlier seasons. My own analysis of the show had to change because I initially judged the entire *RuPaul’s Drag Race* franchise based on the show’s earliest iterations. Any good roux needs time to simmer, and I had to reevaluate my earlier judgments as the show evolved. As *RuPaul’s Drag Race* grows, I want to suggest a few ways in which *Drag Race* Studies should also change.

In particular, I use this dissertation to demonstrate how a critical Camp analysis and interdisciplinary research methods can push *Drag Race* discourse in new directions. Because Camp infuses every aspect of this queer reality television franchise, scholars should integrate Camp Theory more thoroughly into their studies because Camp provides the historical and subcultural background necessary for reading *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. My first two chapters demonstrate how Camp theory alters scholarly interpretations of the show’s intertextual features

and parodic consumerism. As I demonstrated in Chapter One, the show's intertextual features are a specific form of parodic Camp referencing that functions as a form of queer social memory. Historically, Camp referencing plays an integral role within queer communities as a way to form subcultural communities, fight against oppression, and transfer cultural knowledge. If we study the show's intertextual features without grounding these practices in Camp theory, then we risk forgetting this important subcultural history. *Drag Race* scholars can build upon my theory of Camp memory by analyzing additional encoded references. As I discussed in Chapter One, these processes of memory activation and oblivescence often differ according to the individual subject's intersectional identity. No one person can recognize all the references encoded in *RuPaul's Drag Race*, so I encourage *Drag Race* scholars to continuously decode and analyze the show's Camp references. The political implications for how audiences remember and forget these histories provide scholars with fruitful areas for future study, especially regarding how meaning is made and unmade.

With my second chapter, I demonstrated how RuPaul and World of Wonder utilize Camp Capitalism to build and expand RuPaul's commercial drag economy. My theory of Camp Capitalism provides scholars with a framework for analyzing the contradictions and complexities of RuPaul's parodic consumerism. Camp Capitalism shows how RuPaul's commercial drag can be simultaneously subversive and normative, and this theoretical framework provides a way for scholars to connect the television show's representations to fans' tangible consumption practices. I encourage *Drag Race* scholars to consider and build upon the concept of Camp Capitalism, particularly through more in-depth considerations of identity representation. In my chapter, I did not exhaust the discussion of how identity representations are deployed in RuPaul's Camp consumerism. When discussing the show's use of stereotypes, future scholars might consider

Camp Capitalism as a way to analyze these representations. Furthermore, scholars could analyze what forms of identity stereotypes the show deploys during the different stages of Camp Capitalism, as well as how these representations reify and/or subvert capitalism. Camp Capitalism provides scholars with a way to connect RuPaul's consumerism to issues of identity performance and representation, all grounded in the expansion of Ru's drag empire.

By incorporating ethnography into my project, I demonstrate how scholars can use interdisciplinary research methods in order to nuance their analyses and challenge their own positionalities. When I started this dissertation project, I analyzed how *RuPaul's Drag Race* represented drag cultures through the aired television episodes. I started with a very negative perspective on the show, in large part because the television episodes did not accurately represent the breadth of drag's history and diversity. The more time I spent researching the show, the more my perspective changed. Like Esther Newton, I had to reevaluate my own preconceived notions about *Drag Race* in order to more accurately analyze the phenomenon. By reading Camp scholarship, watching Camp films, and studying RuPaul's pre-*Drag Race* career, I gained a new understanding of the show's intricacy. I could not fully appreciate the show's use of Camp referencing because I lacked the necessary queer cultural knowledge. I had to become RuPaul's "pupil," in a sense, and embrace his queer Camp pedagogy. Having invested much time and energy into this process, I would like to think I have acquired more queer cultural capital. The show activates my memory differently now because I can recognize the referenced materials. This project takes on a political meaning for me because I want to remember and honor the lives, cultures, and histories *Drag Race* references.

Similarly, attending RuPaul's DragCon changed my understanding of *Drag Race's* politics. By attending the panels, I witnessed radically queer political discussions that

emphasized the importance of intersectionality and activism. I saw how DragCon provided a platform for drag kings and underrepresented drag cultures and histories. In the midst of this decidedly commercial event, I found powerfully and politically queer elements. At the same time, I observed the imbalance in economic exchanges. By walking the floor, I saw how fans invest time and money into certain booths/drag artists more than others. Through my interviews and participant observations, I documented how fans consume the same event in vastly different ways. In addition, witnessing RuPaul's keynotes challenged my understanding of Camp Capitalism. When watching the television show, I analyzed Camp Capitalism as a specifically queer form of marketing and parodic consumerism. During the keynotes, however, I witnessed how the parodic elements did not always translate. During the Q&A sessions, some consumers sought help and comfort from RuPaul as a type of guRu figure. On the show, Ru frames his Camp consumerism in contrast to corporate consumerism: he does not market his products by telling viewers they need to fill a lack. In practice, however, this Camp consumerism still creates a lack that consumers want RuPaul to fill. Solely analyzing the television show alone could not account for these unintended real life consequences.

Had I not incorporated ethnographic methods into my project, I would not have developed this complex reading of the *Drag Race* franchise. I want to encourage scholars who study *RuPaul's Drag Race* to consider how ethnography can change our approaches to the phenomenon. While reading the television episodes is crucial for evaluating the show's politics, we should also analyze the growing economy. Participant observation and interviews provide more accurate methods for understanding how *RuPaul's Drag Race* impacts drag performers. Collaborating with informants provides scholars with opportunities to challenge their own understandings, learn from informants, and identify key concerns from stakeholders. Dani T,

Cake Moss, and Jasmine Masters all identify some of the tangible effects that *RuPaul's Drag Race* is having on their lives and communities. As a scholar who learned from and shared space with these generous queens, I can use my research to address their concerns, as an advocate and activist. In their interviews, my informants discuss how younger performers and fans lack knowledge about drag cultures and histories, as well as how audiences at LGBTQ clubs lack a necessary knowledge about performance etiquette. My dissertation addresses these tangible effects within drag communities.

As I argued in Chapter One, *RuPaul's Drag Race* uses Camp referencing as a form of queer social memory. Viewers who possess a collective cultural knowledge experience memory activation when watching the show, and RuPaul uses this process pedagogically to confer queer cultural status. However, the show very rarely explicitly provides *Drag Race* viewers with these cultural references. With my Introduction and Chapter One, I seek to provide much of this cultural knowledge to readers. I cite numerous studies from drag queen and king scholarship, I identify multiple references from the show, and I explicitly lay out how the show's Camp referencing process works. With this dissertation, I give readers a large chunk of this queer cultural knowledge because this history matters. Having invested the necessary time, energy, and money to conduct this research, I want readers to pass this knowledge along. I encourage fans of *RuPaul's Drag Race* to watch *Paris Is Burning* and read bell hooks' and Judith Butler's accompanying critiques. I give you my citations on drag king literature so that you may read about cultures not represented on the show. Above all else, I ask you to remember that *RuPaul's Drag Race* is rife with encoded Camp references. If fans assume that a contestant's drag aesthetic or performance is original and not a reference, they risk unintentionally forgetting the cultural history from which *Drag Race* springs.

For fans of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, I hope my dissertation can provide guidance on how to consume local drag shows. As Dani, Cake, and Jasmine suggest, some newer audiences lack an understanding of the appropriate performance etiquette. In Chapter Four, my informants identify the economic investment that goes into becoming a drag performer. These artists must spend enormous amounts of money on their characters, and they often do not achieve financial stability for several years. Even then, many drag performers accrue debt in order to practice this art form. Additionally, drag venues do not always pay these performers a living wage because drag is a non-unionized artistic practice. The interviews with Dani, Cake, and Jasmine provide audiences with a glimpse into the economic and social realities that go into drag. Individuals who enjoy going to local LGBTQ establishments to view drag shows should understand that these performers invest a surfeit of time and money into their craft. Audiences should always tip the performer because the investment usually takes years before resulting in economic payoff. As the *RuPaul's Drag Race* phenomenon continues to evolve into a multifaceted economy that impacts the lives of drag performers, I want to encourage scholars to consider how our studies can benefit stakeholders within these communities.

As I develop this dissertation into a book manuscript, I plan on adding three additional chapters that further develop the dissertation's foundation. One chapter will explore the show's use of Camp humor by analyzing the controversial Season Six "Female or Shemale" mini-challenge. I will situate the debates around this mini-challenge within a longer history of critiques against drag/Camp from second wave feminists, in order to explore how this history can illuminate/nuance the contemporary controversies. Another chapter will explore controversies around *Drag Race's* deployments of stereotypes in Camp humor. I will analyze the role stereotypes play in Camp humor historically, in order to explore how this history can inform

contemporary debates about the show's misogyny and racism. Finally, one chapter will analyze how three different businesses have grown through the *Drag Race*-based economy. This chapter will incorporate interviews with Drag Queen Merch and *Hey Qween*, as well as participant observations from attending the *Producer Entertainment Group* store in Los Angeles, in order to understand how the *Drag Race* phenomenon benefits these businesses. These additional chapters will address issues of identity representation on *RuPaul's Drag Race* and to expand my ethnographic analysis of the growing *Drag Race*-centric economy. Through this interdisciplinary analysis, I will continue to evaluate the benefits and pitfalls of RuPaul's commercial drag enterprise in order to identify the complexities and contradictions of reading *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

## Appendix A: RuPaul Music Used Within Episodes and Trailers/Promos

### Season One

- Promo: Unable to find promo
- Runway: *Cover Girl*
- Credits: *Cover Girl*
- Background Music:
  - Ep 1, “Drag On a Dime” – Episode opens with *Supermodel (You Betta Work)*
  - Ep 6, “Absolut Drag Ball” – *Cover Girl* plays during mini-challenge Vogue-off; *Cover Girl (RevoLucian’s I Am the Runway)* plays during Executive Realness runway; *Cover Girl (RevoLucian’s Ruskool)* plays during Extravaganza runway
  - Ep 7, “Extra Special Edition” – *Cover Girl (RevoLucian’s I Am The Runway)* plays over montage of drag performers
  - Ep 9, “Reunion” – *Lady Boy* plays when Ongina, Shannel, and Rebecca enter; *Jealous of my Boogie* plays when Nina enters and during the end credits; *Champion* plays when Bebe walks the runway; *Cover Girl* plays when Porkchop, Tammie, Akasha, and Jade walk the runway; *Devil Made Me Do It* plays when Nina is crowned Miss Congeniality
- Lip syncs:
  - Ep 1, “Drag On a Dime” – *Supermodel (You Betta Work)*
  - Ep 8, “Grand Finale” – *Cover Girl*
- Challenges:
  - Ep 8, “Grand Finale” – *Cover Girl* Music Video challenge

### Season Two

- Promo: *Jealous of my Boogie*
- Runway: *Jealous of my Boogie (Gomi & RasJek)*
- Credits: *Jealous of my Boogie (Gomi & RasJek)*
- Background Music:
  - Ep 2, “Starrbootylicious” – *Cover Girl (Put the Bass In Your Walk)* plays while queens introduce RuPaul dolls in mini-challenge
  - Ep 4, “The Snatch Game” – *Cover Girl (RevoLucian’s RuSkool) remix* plays in Previously On section
  - Ep 10, “The Main Event” – RuPaul Lip syncs to *Main Event* as the episode’s opening
  - Ep 11, “Grand Finale” – *Champion* plays when Tyra is crowned
  - Ep 12, “Reunion” – *Hit The Floor (Matt Moss’ Vidon Mix)* plays when the first set of queens enter, *Lady Boy (Bangkok Booty Mix)* plays when the second set of queens enter, *Cover Girl Macutchi’s TaterZ DeeP remix* plays when Jujubee enters, *J.O.M.B.2.0* plays when Raven enters, *Champion DJ BunJoe’s Olympic Mix* plays when Tyra enters, and *Main Event (Matt Pop 80’s Tribute)* plays during the credits
- Lip syncs:
  - Ep 1, “Gone With the Window” – *Cover Girl (Put the Bass In Your Walk)*
  - Ep 11, “Grand Finale” – *Jealous of my Boogie (Gomi & RasJek)*
- Challenges:



- Ep 2, “Starrbootylicious” – Main Challenge requires contestants perform dance/strip routines to *Tranny Chaser*
- Ep 6, “Rocker Chicks” – Main Challenge requires contestants sing *Lady Boy* live
- Ep 8, “Golden Gals” – Main Challenge requires contestants to choreograph routines to *Main Event*
- Ep 9, “The Diva Awards” – Main Challenge requires queens perform *The Diva Awards*
- Ep 11, “Grand Finale” – *Jealous of my Boogie* Music Video challenge

### Season Three

- Promo: No RuPaul song
- Runway: *Champion (DJ Bun Joe’s Olympic Mix)*
- Credits: *Main Event (Matt Pop’s 80s Tribute)*
- Background Music:
  - Ep 15, “Reunited” – *Glamazon* plays as runway song when queens brought out for reunion
- Lip syncs:
  - Ep 14, “Grand Finale” – *Champion (DJ BunJoe’s Olympic Mix)*
- Challenges:
  - Ep 9, “The Diva Awards” – Mini-Challenge Ru-sical chairs requires queens listen to and guess lyrics of *Cover Girl (Put the Bass In Your Walk)*, *Jealous of my Boogie*, *Tranny Chaser*, *Main Event*, and *Lady Boy*. Main Challenge requires queens to sing/record *Superstar* in different genres: hip-hop, disco, reggae, punk, country, pop
  - Ep 14, “Grand Finale” – *Champion* Music Video challenge

### Season Four

- Promo: *Glamazon*
- Runway: *Glamazon*
- Credits: *The Beginning*
- Background Music:
  - Ep 1, “RuPocalypse Now!” – *The Beginning* plays during opening overview of season
  - Ep 3, “Glamazons vs. Champions” – *Champion* plays while Pia carried out. *If I Dream* plays while showing Piyah Martell’s video
  - Ep 6, “Float Your Boat” – *Sexy Drag Queen* plays during the mini-challenge wet t-shirt contest
  - Ep 12, “RuPaul Rewind” – *The Beginning* plays at episode’s beginning during Michelle’s lip sync, *Glamazon* plays during cast audition videos, *Cover Girl* plays during RuPaul’s runway look videos
  - Ep 14, “Reunion” – *Glamazon* plays as the queens enter and when going to/coming back from commercials, *Cover Girl* plays as Ru enters, *Live Forever* plays when Latrice crowned Miss Congeniality, *Champion* plays when Sharon crowned,
- Lip syncs:
  - Ep 8, “Frenemies” – RuPaul & Martha Wash – *It’s Raining Men (the sequel)*

- Ep 13, “Grand Finale” – *Glamazon*
- Challenges:
  - Ep 3, “Glamazons vs. Champions” – Main challenge requires contestants produce infomercials for *Glamazon*, *Superstar*, *Responsitrannity*, *The Beginning*, *Get Your Rebel On*, *Click Clack*, *If I Dream*, *Champion*, *Ladyboy*, *Main Event*, *Never Go Home Again*, *Jealous of my Boogie*, and *Cover Girl*
  - Ep 11, “The Fabulous Bitch Ball” – Main Challenge requires performing *Bitch Ball*
  - Ep 13, “Grand Finale” – *Glamazon* Music Video challenge

### All Stars One

- Promo: *Responsitrannity*
- Runway: *Sexy Drag Queen* (dootdoot ‘doot-swift’)
- Credits: *Responsitrannity* (Matt Pop’s edit)
- Background Music:
  - Ep 2, “RuPaul’s Gaff-In” – *Glamazon* and *Cover Girl* (RevoLucian’s Ruskool mix) play during filming of Laugh-In Challenge
  - Ep 3, “Queens Behaving Badly” – *Glamazon* plays at start of Hollywood Blvd prank challenge
- Lip syncs:
  - Ep 6, “The Grand Finale” – *Responsitrannity* (Matt Pop’s edit)
- Challenges:
  - Ep 4, “All Star Girl Groups” – Girl Group Lip sync performances to new covers of *Glamazon*, *Cover Girl*, and *Jealous of my Boogie*
  - Ep 5, “Dynamic Drag Duos” – Choreograph routine to song *Good vs. Evil*

### Season Five

- Promo: Not RuPaul Song
- Runway: *I Bring the Beat*
- Credits: *The Beginning*
- Background Music:
  - Ep 1, “RuPaullywood or Bust” – Faux Music Video for *Hollywood USA* when queens film bus cruise of Hollywood
  - Ep 11, “Sugar Ball” – *Sexy Drag Queen* plays during second runway Executive Realness category; *Cover Girl* (*Put the Bass In Your Walk*) remix plays during third runway Candy Realness category
  - Ep 13, “Countdown to the Crown” – *The Beginning* plays during opening of episode,
  - Ep 14, “RuPaul’s Drag Race: Reunited!” – *The Beginning* plays as queens walk runway, *Can I Get An Amen* plays as RuPaul enters, *Responsitrannity* and *Glamazon* used for transitions into/back from commercials, RuPaul plays LaToya Jackson a snippet of their son *I Feel Like Dancin*
- Lip syncs:
  - Ep 12, “The Final Three Hunty” – *The Beginning*
- Challenges:

- Ep 2, “Lip Synch Extravaganza Eleganza” – Mini-Challenge requires Lip syncing to *Trannychaser*, *Lady Boy*, and *Peanut Butter*
- Ep 4, “Black Swan: Why It Gotta Be Black?” – Mini-Challenge requires contestants perform a Soul Train Dance-Off to *Jealous of my Boogie (Ruru & Rozy Disco remix)*
- Ep 6, “Can I Get An Amen” – Main Challenge requires writing original verses for and singing *Can I Get An Amen*
- Ep 11, “Sugar Ball” – Main Challenge requires performing *Sugar Babies*
- Ep 12, “The Final Three Hunty” – *The Beginning* Music Video challenge

### Season Six

- Promo: *Glamazon* and *Modern Love*
- Runway: *Sissy That Walk*
- Credits: *Dance With U*
- Background Music:
  - Ep 1, “RuPaul’s Big Opening” – *Sexy Drag Queen (Jared Jones La Push remix)* plays briefly before queens enter workroom for first time
  - Ep 4, “Shade: The Rusical” – *Cover Girl (Macutchi’s TaterZ DeeP)* plays as the queens enter workroom for runway day
  - Ep 6, “Oh No She Betta Don’t” – *Modern Love* plays as background music during Previously On
  - Ep 9, “Queens of Talk” – *Here It Comes (Around Again)* plays as intro to RuPaul Talk Show
  - Ep 10, “Drag My Wedding” – *Geronimo* plays during mini-challenge
  - Ep 11, “Glitter Ball” – *Adrenaline* plays for first runway Banjee Girl Realness Category; *Fly Tonight* plays for second runway Executive Realness Category
  - Ep 13, “Countdown to the Crown” – *Sissy That Walk*, *Dance With U*, *Adrenaline*, *Geronimo*, *Click Clack*, *Fly Tonight*, and *Let the Music Play* during episode
  - Ep 14, “Reunited!” – *Adrenaline*, *Fly Tonight*, *Sissy That Walk*, *Freaky Money*, *Geronimo*, *Modern Love*, *Born Naked*, *Dance With U*, *Can I Get An Amen?*, *Let the Music Play*, *Glamazon*, *Oh No She Betta Don’t*, *Feel Like Dancin*, and *If I Dream* play during episode
- Lip syncs:
  - Ep 12, “Sissy That Walk” – *Sissy that Walk*
- Challenges:
  - Ep 3, “Scream Queens” – Mini-Challenge requires lip syncing to *Click Clack*
  - Ep 4, “Shade: The Rusical” – Main Challenge requires singing *Shade: The Rusical*
  - Ep 6, “Oh No She Betta Don’t” – Main Challenge requires rapping in *Oh No She Betta Don’t*
  - Ep 8, “Drag Queens of Comedy” – Mini-challenge requires Lip syncing *Get Your Rebel On*
  - Ep 11, “Glitter Ball” – Main Challenge requires performing *Always Wear a Jewel*
  - Ep 12, “Sissy That Walk” – *Sissy That Walk* Music Video challenge

## Season Seven

- Promo: *Geronimo*, *Sissy That Walk*, and *Modern Love*
- Runway: *Sissy That Walk*
- Credits: *Fly Tonight*
- Background Music
  - Ep 1, “Born Naked” – *Born Naked* plays briefly right before Miss Fame enters workroom, *Sexy Drag Queen* plays during mini-challenge runway, *Cover Girl (Macutchi’s Tater Z DeeP)* and *Modern Love* play
  - Ep 2, “Glamazonian Airways” – *Glamazonian Airways* challenge
  - Ep 4, “Spoof! There It Is” – *Cover Girl (Put the Bass In Your Walk)* plays when RuPaul introduces main challenge
  - Ep 6, “Ru Hollywood Stories” – *The Realness*, *L.A. Rhythm (feat. Michelle Visage and JROB)*, and *Throw Ya Hands Up (feat. Lady Bunny & Ellis Miah 2015)* play during the openings of the main challenge videos
  - Ep 9, “Divine Inspiration” – *L.A. Rhythm (feat. Michelle Visage & JROB)* plays as queens enter Werkroom
  - Ep 11, “Hello, Kitty Girls!” – *Color Me Love* briefly plays right before contestants enter work room after opening credits, *Sissy That Walk* and *The Realness* play during runway presentations
  - Ep 12, “And The Rest Is Drag” – *LGBT*, *L.A. Rhythm*, *If I Dream*, and *Fly Tonight* play
  - Ep 13, “Countdown to the Crown” – *Born Naked (feat. Clairy Browne stadium remix)*, *Modern Love*, *L.A. Rhythm (feat. Michelle Visage & JROB)*, *Sissy That Walk*, *Dance With U*, *Let the Music Play*, *Cover Girl remix*, *If I Dream*, *Sexy Drag Queen*, *Feel Like Dancin*, *Lick It Lollipop*, *Freaky Money*, *Adrenaline*, *L.A. Rhythm (feat. Michelle Visage & Matt Moss)*, *The Realness*, *Color Me Love*, and *Cover Girl*
  - Ep 14, “Reunited!” – *Born Naked (feat. Clairy Browne stadium remix)*, *The Realness*, *Modern Love*, *New York City Beat*, *Color Me Love*, *Step It Up*, *Dance With U*, *Die Tomorrow*, *Sissy That Walk*, *Throw Ya Hands Up*, *Jealous of My Boogie*, *LGBT*, *Glamazon*, *I Blame You*, *Let the Music Play*, *The Beginning*, *Champion*, and *If I Dream* play
- Lip syncs:
  - Ep 1, “Born Naked” – *Geronimo*
  - Ep 12, “And The Rest Is Drag” – *Born Naked*
- Challenges:
  - Ep 2, “Glamazonian Airways” – Main challenge requires performing *Glamazonian Airways* parts 1 & 2
  - Ep 3, “ShakesQueer” – Mini-challenge requires Soul Train dance-off in granny drag to *I Feel Like Dancin*
  - Ep 9, “Divine Inspiration” – Main challenge requires performing *Eggs*, *Cha Cha Hells*, and *Poo* from John Waters-inspired musicals
  - Ep 10, “Prancing Queens” – Main challenge requires dancing in pairs, background music of dances come in part from RuPaul songs, including: Charleston Twerk – *Freaky Money*; The Country Robot – *Lick It Lollipop*; the Tango Vogue – *Adrenaline*

- Ep 12, “And The Rest Is Drag” – *Born Naked* Music Video challenge
- Ep 14, “Reunited!” – Top three contestants perform *Sleepwalker*, *Too Many Daddies*, and *Pray & Slay*

### Season Eight

- Promo: *U Wear It Well*
- Runway: *The Realness*
- Credits: *Die Tomorrow*
- Background Music:
  - Ep 1, “Keeping it 100!” – During intro of main challenge categories, have former queens walk runway while these songs play: *Cover Girl (Put the Bass In Your Walk)*, *I Bring the Beat*, *Glamazon*, and *Jealous of my Boogie*
  - Ep 7, “Shady Politics” – *Sister Brother* plays when queens enter Werkroom
  - Ep 8, “RuPaul Book Ball” – *U Wear It Well* plays when queens enter workroom, *Be Someone*, *Sister Brother*, and *The Realness* used during runway presentation
  - Ep 9, “The Realness” – *Be Someone* and *Legends* play when queens enter Werkroom
  - Ep 10, “Grand Finale” – *The Realness*, *U Wear It Well*, *I Don’t Like to Show Off*, *Cha Cha Bitch*, *Modern Love*, *Champion*, *Born Naked remix*, *Fat Fem & Asian*, *Be Someone*, *Legs*, *Cover Girl (Put the Bass In Your Walk)*, *Jealous of my Boogie*, *Legends*, *Throw Ya Hands Up*, and *If I Dream* play
- Lip syncs:
  - Ep 9, “The Realness” – *The Realness*
- Challenges:
  - Ep 2, “Bitch Perfect” – Mini-challenge requires lip sync to *Cha Cha Bitch*. Main challenge require Lip sync to *Rucapella (Bitch Perfect)*
  - Ep 6, “Wizards of Drag” – Main challenge requires lip sync to *If I Dream*
  - Ep 9, “ – *The Realness* Music Video challenge

### RuPaul’s Green Screen Christmas

- Promo: *From Your Heart*
- Music Videos: *Jingle Dem Bells*, *From Your Heart*, *Nothing for Christmas*, and *Brand New Year*

### All Stars Two

- Promo: *Nothing Nice*
- Runway: *Sexy Drag Queen (dootdoot ‘doot-swift’)*
- Credits: *Throw Ya Hands Up*
- Background Music
  - Ep 1, “All Star Talent Show Extravaganza” – Episode starts with *Category Is*
  - Ep 8, “All Stars Supergroup” – *Be Someone (Matt Pop edit)* plays while queens walk into Werkroom, *Champion* plays
  - Ep 9, “Reunited” – *U Wear It Well*, *Champion*, *Be Someone (Matt Pop edit)*, *Champion (DJ BunJoe’s Olympic Mix)*, *Sexy Drag Queen*, and *Throw Ya Hands Up* play
- Lip syncs:

- Ep 7, “Family That Drags Together” – *Step It Up*
- Challenges:
  - Ep 3, “HERstory of the World” – Lip sync song *The Baddest Bitches in Herstory*
  - Ep 7, “Family That Drags Together” – Choreograph routine to *LA Rhythm (featuring Michelle Visage & Matt Moss)*
  - Ep 8, “All Stars Supergroup” – *Read U Wrote U (Ellis Miah Mix)*

### Season Nine

- Promo: *(Rock It) To the Moon* and *A Little Bit of Love*
- Runway:
  - Unreleased *Category Is* remix
- Credits:
  - *Be Someone (Matt Pop edit)* (Episodes 2, 3)
  - *Kitty Girl* (Episode 4 and on)
- Background Music:
  - Ep 1, “Oh. My. Gaga!” – *Snapshot (feat. Macutchi)* plays during Lady Gaga drag runway
  - Ep 2, “She Done Already Done Brought It On” – *Call Me Mother* used as queens enter Werkroom
  - Ep 4, “Good Morning Bitches” – *A Little Bit of Love (feat. Kummingspeck)* and *Free 2 Be* used when queens enter Werkroom
  - Ep 5, “Reality Stars: The Musical” – *Rock It (To The Moon)* plays when contestants enter Werkroom
  - Ep 7, “9021-HO” – *American* plays when contestants enter Werkroom
  - Ep 8, “RuPaul Roast” – *Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve, and Talent* plays when contestants enter Werkroom
  - Ep 9, “Your Pilot’s On Fire” – *Mighty Love (feat. Matt Pop)* plays when contestants enter Werkroom
  - Ep 11, “Gayest Ball Ever” – *A Little Bit of Love (feat. Kummingspeck)* used for Rainbow runway; *Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve, and Talent* used for Unicorn runway
  - Ep 13, “Reunited” – *Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve, and Talent* plays as transition to-and-from commercial break; *American* plays during the Kris Jenner video; *Call Me Mother* plays as transition into commercials; *Click Clack* plays during the 204 events segment; *Let the Music Play* used during Miss Congeniality crowning; *I Bring the Beat* plays during the first Toot or Boot segment; *Cover Girl (Put the Bass In Your Walk)* plays during the second and third Toot or Boot segments; *Glamazon* plays during the fourth and fifth Toot or Boot segments; and *Kitty Girl* plays during the ending sequence
  - Ep 14, “Grand Finale” – *American* plays for the opening runway, *Call Me Mother* plays for RuPaul’s entrance, *Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve, and Talent* plays as transition from Act I to II, *Kitty Girl* plays as transition from Act II to III, *U Wear It Well* plays as transition into Act III, *Category Is* plays as transition from Act III to IV, *The Beginning* plays as transition into Act IV, *Spotlight* plays as transition from Act IV to V, *(Rock It) To The Moon* plays as transition into Act V, *The*

*Realness* plays for Bob's entrance and transition from Act V to VI, *Mighty Love* plays as transition into Act VI, *If I Dream* plays for crowning and ending

- Lip syncs:
  - Ep 12, "Category Is" – *U Wear It Well*
- Challenges:
  - Ep 9, "Your Pilot's On Fire" – *Kitty Girl* plays during Valentina and Nina's maxi challenge video
  - Ep 10, "Makeovers: Crew Better Work" – Contestants must perform a routine to *Click Clack*
  - Ep 11, "Gayest Ball Ever" – *Legends (feat. Margo Thunder and Ellis Miah)* plays during rhythmic gymnastics
  - Ep 12, "Category Is" – Contestants must write, record, and perform original raps for the remix version of RuPaul's *Category Is*

## **Appendix B. DragCon 2015 Interview Questions**

### Personal Background Questions

1. How do you spell your name?
2. What is your current age?
3. What do you consider to be your gender identity?
4. What do you consider to be your racial identity?
5. What do you consider to be your nationality?
6. What do you consider to be your sexual identity or sexuality?

### Reason For Attending *DragCon*

1. What is your primary reason for attending *DragCon*?

### Logistical Questions

1. Where did you travel from to visit *DragCon*?
2. This weekend, do you plan on attending any drag-related events in Los Angeles that are not associated with *RuPaul's Drag Race*?

### Learning About *DragCon*

1. How did you learn about *DragCon*?

### *DragCon* Tickets<sup>129</sup>

1. Which *DragCon* tickets did you purchase?
  - a. 2-Day Weekend Pass (**\$50.00**)
  - b. 1-Day Pass for Saturday, May 16<sup>th</sup> (**\$30.00**)
  - c. 1-Day Pass for Sunday, May 17<sup>th</sup> (**\$30.00**)
  - d. ADD-ON: Official *DragCon* Grand Opening Ball (Friday night, at The Conga Room) (**\$10.00**)
  - e. ADD-ON: *RuPaul's Ultimate Kai Kai* VIP Pass (**\$425.00**)
  - f. ADD-ON: *RuPaul* VIP Experience (**\$150.00**)
  - g. ADD-ON *DragCon* VIP Pass (**\$40.00**)
  - h. ADD-ON: *RuPaul's Drag Race Reunited – Diamond Package* (**\$400.00**)
  - i. ADD-ON: *RuPaul's Drag Race Reunited – VIP Orchestra* (**\$200.00**)
  - j. ADD-ON: *RuPaul's Drag Race Reunited Gift Bag* (**\$75.00**)

### *DragCon* Spending Habits

1. Approximately how much money (including ticket prices) did you allocate for *DragCon*?
2. What do you anticipate spending money on?

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<sup>129</sup> The VIP pass includes early floor access, priority seating for panels, priority lines for autographs/photographs, and a collector's edition poster. The *RuPaul* VIP Experience includes the aforementioned, as well as VIP access to the *RuPaul* autograph/photograph line. The *Ultimate Kai Kai* VIP Pass includes the aforementioned, as well as VIP seating for the Season Seven Finale Taping. When purchasing *DragCon* 2015 tickets, one could also purchase additional add-ons, including a \$75 gift bag, \$10 tickets to the Opening Night ball, \$200 VIP seating at the Season 7 Finale Taping, and a \$400 *Reunited Diamond Package* that offered VIP perks at the Season 7 Finale Taping.



## Appendix C. DragCon 2015 Interview Results

- Number of Interviewees: 33 total informants

### Question Set I – Personal Background

- Ages:
  - Under 20 – 2 respondents
    - 18 – One; 19 – One
  - In their 20s – 20 respondents
    - 20 – Two; 21 – Three; 23 – Seven; 24 – Six; 28 – One; 29 – One
  - In their 30s – 7 Total respondents
    - 30 – One; 32 – Three; 37 – One; 38 – Two
  - In their 40s – 4 Total Respondents
    - 41 – One; 43 – One; 44 – One; 45 – One
- Self-Identified Gender Identity:
  - Male – 15 respondents
  - Female – 18 respondents
- Self-Identified Sexuality/Sexual Identity:
  - Asexual/Pansexual – 1 respondent
  - Bisexual – 2 respondents
  - Bisexual/Pansexual – 1 respondent
  - Heterosexual/Straight – 8 respondents
  - Homosexual – 1 respondent
  - Gay – 15 respondents
  - Gay/Lesbian – 1 respondent
  - Lesbian – 3 respondents
  - Pansexual – 1 respondent
- Self-Identified Racial Identity:
  - African American – 1 respondent
  - Caucasian – 4 respondents
  - Cuban and Argentinian – 1 respondent
  - Hispanic – 2 respondents
  - Latina/o – 5 respondents
  - Latin American – 1 respondents
  - Mexican – 3 respondents
  - Mexican and Kuwaiti – 1 respondent
  - Mixed – 3 respondents
  - Multiracial – 1 respondent
  - Native American and French – 1 respondent
  - Pacific Islander – 1 respondent
  - White – 9 respondents
- Nationality:
  - American – 32 respondents
  - Canadian – 1 respondent

### Question Set II – Logistical Questions

- Primary reason(s) for attending:

- To see/meet the queens in person – 20 respondents
- Fan of *RuPaul's Drag Race* – 8 respondents
- See what the convention is all about – 4 respondents
- Love RuPaul – 3 respondents
- Drag culture – 2 respondents
- Obsession with drag queens – 2 respondents
- Love drag – 2 respondents
- Appreciation for gender expression – 1 respondents
- To be in an environment with other fans – 1 respondents
- To catch up with friends – 1 respondent
- To experience multiple drag queens at once. Do not attend shows regularly since extreme introvert– 1 respondents
- Fun – 1
- To purchase products – 1 respondent
- To see RuPaul in person – 1 respondents
- Traveling from:
  - California – 26 Total respondents
    - Anaheim – One; Bellflower – One; Berkeley – One; Downey – One; Fresno – One; Hanford – Two; Irvine – Four; Lemoore – Two; Long Beach – Two; Los Angeles – Six; Orange County – One; Unspecified – Three; San Francisco – One
  - Canada – 1 respondent
  - Atlanta, GA – 2 respondents
  - New Jersey – 1 respondent
  - Seattle, WA – 3 respondents
- Attending other non-*RPDR* related drag events:
  - Yes – 4 respondents
  - No – 29 respondents

#### Question Set III – Learning About *DragCon*

- Learned from:
  - Facebook – 11 respondents
  - Friend (word-of-mouth) – 7 respondents
  - Instagram – 4 respondents
  - WOWPRESENTS YouTube – 9 respondents
  - Reddit – 1 respondent
  - Twitter – 1 respondent

#### Question Set IV – *DragCon* Tickets

- 2-Day Weekend Pass (\$50) – 23 respondents
- 1-Day Saturday Pass (\$30) – 5 respondents
- 1-Day Sunday Pass (\$30) – 3 respondents
- Grand Opening Ball (\$10) – 2 respondents
- Ultimate Kai Kai VIP Pass (\$425) – 2 respondents
- RuPaul VIP Experience Pass (\$150) – 1 respondent
- VIP Pass (\$40) – 1 respondent

- RuPaul’s Drag Race Reunited Diamond Package (\$400) – 0 respondents
- RuPaul’s Drag Race Reunited Orchestra Package (\$200) – 1 respondent
- Gift Bag (\$75) – 1 respondent

#### Question Set VI – Spending Habits

- Approximate Allocation:
  - Under \$100 – 3 respondents
    - \$60 – One respondent; \$70 – One; \$90 – One
  - \$100-200 – 14 respondents
    - Few hundred dollars – Two; \$100 – Two; \$120 – Two; \$100-130 – Two; \$150 – Five; \$175 – One
  - \$200-300 – 9 respondents
    - \$200-250 – One; \$200 – Four; \$250 – Four
  - \$400 – 1 respondent
  - \$500 – 3 respondents
  - \$1,250 – 2 respondents
  - \$2,500 – 1
- Anticipate Spending on:
  - *RPDR* Queen Merchandise – 23 respondents
  - Other Merchandise – 5 respondents
  - Photo Ops – 5 respondents
  - RuPaul Merchandise – 4 respondents
  - Autographs – 3 respondents
  - Food – 2 respondents
  - Meet and Greets – 2 respondents

## **Appendix D. DragCon 2016 Interview Questions**

### Personal Background Questions

7. How do you spell your name?
8. What is your current age?
9. What do you consider to be your gender identity?
10. What do you consider to be your racial identity?
11. What do you consider to be your nationality?
12. What do you consider to be your sexual identity or sexuality?

### Logistical Questions

3. What is your primary reason for attending DragCon?
4. Where did you travel from to visit DragCon?
5. This weekend, do you plan on attending any drag-related events in Los Angeles that are not associated with *RuPaul's Drag Race*?
6. How often do you attend drag shows not related to *RuPaul's Drag Race*?
7. How often do you attend drag shows related to *RuPaul's Drag Race*?

### Learning About DragCon

2. How did you learn about DragCon?
3. Did you attend DragCon 2015?
4. Do you plan on attending DragCon 2017?

### DragCon Tickets<sup>130</sup>

2. Which DragCon tickets did you purchase?
  - a. 2-Day Weekend Pass (**\$50.00**)
  - b. 1-Day Pass for Saturday, May 16<sup>th</sup> (**\$30.00**)
  - c. 1-Day Pass for Sunday, May 17<sup>th</sup> (**\$30.00**)
  - d. ADD-ON: Official DragCon Grand Opening Night Spectacular (**\$40.00**)
  - e. ADD-ON: RuPaul VIP Experience (**\$150.00**)
  - f. ADD-ON: WOW Presents (**\$100.00**)
  - g. ADD-ON DragCon VIP Pass (**\$50.00**)
  - h. ADD-ON: DragCon Gift Bag (**\$60.00**)

### DragCon Spending Habits

3. Approximately how much money (including ticket prices) did you allocate for DragCon?
4. What do you anticipate spending money on at DragCon?

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<sup>130</sup> The VIP pass includes entry into the Friday Preview Night, early floor access, priority seating for panels, priority lines for autographs/photographs, and a collector's edition program. The RuPaul VIP Experience includes the aforementioned, as well as VIP access to the RuPaul autograph/photograph line. The WOWPRESENTS package includes the VIP experience perks plus a WOWPRESENTS t-shirt and access to a WOWPRESENTS panel. When purchasing DragCon 2016 tickets, one could also purchase additional add-ons, including a \$60 gift bag and \$40-65 tickets to the Opening Night Spectacular show.

## Appendix E. DragCon 2016 Interview Results

- Number of Interviewees: 39 total informants

### Question Set I – Personal Background

- Ages:
  - Under 20 – 4 respondents
    - 16 – One; 19 – Three
  - In their 20s – 16 respondents
    - 20 – One; 21 – Two; 22 – Three; 23 – One; 24 – One; 25 – Five; 26 – One; 28 – Two
  - In their 30s – 10 respondents
    - 31 – Two; 32 – Two; 33 – One; 34 – One; 38 – Two; 39 – Two
  - In their 40s – 7 Respondents
    - 41 – Two; 44 – One; 47 – One; 48 – Two; 49 - One
  - In their 50s – 2 respondents
    - 52 – One; 59 – One
- Self-Identified Gender Identity:
  - Female – 21 respondents
  - Male – 18 respondents
  - Trans man – 1 respondent
- Self-Identified Sexuality/Sexual Identity:
  - Bisexual – 1 respondent
  - Heterosexual/Straight – 19 respondents
  - Homosexual – 2 respondents
  - Gay – 14 respondents
  - Pansexual – 1 respondent
  - Queer – 2 respondents
- Self-Identified Racial Identity:
  - Asian – 2 respondents
  - Black – 1 respondent
  - Caucasian – 3 respondents
  - Chicana – 1 respondent
  - Chinese – 1 respondent
  - Hispanic – 4 respondents
  - Latino – 1 respondent
  - Native American – 1 respondent
  - Pākehā – 2 respondents
  - White Lebanese – 1 respondent
  - White – 18 respondents
  - White Hispanic – 12 respondents
- Nationality:
  - American – 20 respondents
  - New Zealander – 3 respondents
  - Mexican – 2 respondents
  - Canadian – 1 respondent
  - Chinese – 1 respondent

- Irish – 1 respondent
- Japanese – 1 respondent

### Question Set II – Logistical Questions

- Primary reason(s) for attending:
  - Loves *RPDR* – 10 respondents
  - See the queens – 6 respondents
  - Finding your tribe – 2 respondents
  - Loves drag queens and drag culture – 2 respondents
  - Mother-daughter weekend – 2 respondents
  - Be around energy of people who love drag – 1 respondent
  - Being around artists/role models – 1 respondent
  - Came last year – 1 respondent
  - Curiosity – 1 respondent
  - Enjoys giant convention based around drag – 1 respondent
  - Enjoys the “uniqueness” of people coming together; don’t know what you’ll see – 1 respondent
  - Enlightening – 1 respondent
  - Expand knowledge of drag culture – 1 respondent
  - Family trip – 1 respondent
  - For eleven-year-old daughter – 1 respondent
  - For emotional gain being around likeminded people – 1 respondent
  - Fun – 1 respondent
  - Go with friends – 1 respondent
  - Hangout together – 1 respondent
  - Huge fan of *RPDR* – 1 respondent
  - Impact on the community – 1 respondent
  - It’s the only open celebration of queer culture, convention-wise – 1 respondent
  - Likes the open community (can be who you want; not misgendered) – 1 respondent
  - Loves creativity of drag – 1 respondent
  - Loves entertainment of convention – 1 respondent
  - Loves RuPaul – 1 respondent
  - Loves the queens – 1 respondent
  - See everybody be who they are – 1 respondent
  - See people – 1 respondent
  - Shopping – 1 respondent
  - Son – 1 respondent
  - Thinks it’s a good experience to understand people’s views on what they like – 1 respondent
  - Vacation/Gaycation – 1 respondent
  - Vacation for the year – 1 respondent
  - Wants to hear unmoderated/edited words from queens
  - Wants to put self in different environment – 1 respondent
  - Wants to see queens in person – 1 respondent
  - The whole experience – 1 respondent

- Traveling from:
  - California – 21 respondents
    - Anderson – One; Bell Gardens – One; Burbank – One; La Puente – One; Los Angeles – Six; Orange County – Two; Sacramento – One; San Jose – Two; San Diego – One; San Francisco – One; San Gabriel Valley – One; Torrance – One; West Covina – One
  - Massachusetts – 2 respondents
  - New Zealand – 2 respondents
  - Portland, Maine – 2 respondents
  - Salt Lake City, UT – 2 respondents
  - Athens, Alabama – 1 respondent
  - Chicago – 1 respondent
  - Dallas – 1 respondent
  - Long Island, New York – 1 respondent
  - North Carolina – 1 respondent
  - Oregon – 1 respondent
  - Prince Edward Island, Canada – 1 respondent
  - Texas – 1 respondent
  - Washington, DC – 1 respondent
- Attending other non-*RPDR* related drag events:
  - Yes – 14 respondents
  - No – 22 respondents
- How often attend non-*RPDR* related drag events:
  - Never (First Time) – 9 respondents
  - 1-2/month – 7 respondents
  - Rarely/Not Often – 7 respondents
  - 1-2/year – 5 respondents
  - 1-2/week – 4 respondents
  - Can't go (underage) – 2 respondents
  - Every few weeks – 2 respondents
  - Every few months – 2 respondents
  - Often – 1 respondent
- How often attend *RPDR* related drag events:
  - Never – 12 respondents
  - As often as possible – 11 respondents
  - 1-2/year – 11 respondents
  - 1-2/week – 4 respondents
  - Rarely – 4 respondents
  - Few times per month – 2 respondents
  - Few times per season – 3 respondents
  - 1-2/month – 1 respondent

### Question Set III – Learning About *DragCon*

- Learned from:
  - *RuPaul's Drag Race* – 14 respondents
  - Social Media – 8 respondents

- WOWPRESENTS – 4 respondents
- Friend – 3 respondents
- Facebook – 2 respondents
- Cousins – 1 respondent
- Daughter – 1 respondent
- Friends in drag community – 1 respondent
- Internet – 1 respondent
- Mother – 1 respondent
- RuPaul’s Instagram – 1 respondent
- Sister – 1 respondent
- Son – 1 respondent
- Attended 2015 *DragCon*:
  - Yes – 11 respondents
  - No – 28 respondents
- Will attend 2017 *DragCon*:
  - Yes – 31 respondents
  - Maybe – 5 respondents
  - No – 3 respondents

Question Set IV – *DragCon* Tickets

- 2-Day Weekend Pass – 37 respondents
- VIP Pass – 13 respondents
- Grand Opening Party – 8 respondents
- RuPaul VIP Pass – 7 respondents
- WOW Presents VIP Pass – 3 respondents
- Gift Bag – 2 respondents
- 1-Day Sunday Pass – 1 respondent
- 1-Day Saturday Pass – 0 respondents

Question Set VI – Spending Habits

- Approximate Allocation:
  - Under \$100 – 5 respondents
    - \$60 – Four; \$90 – One
  - \$100-200 – 5 respondents
    - \$100 – 4; \$150 – One
  - \$200-300 – 5 respondents
    - \$200 – Four; \$250 – One
  - \$300 – 2 respondents
  - \$500 – 2 respondents
  - \$800 – 2 respondents
  - \$900 – 2 respondents
  - \$1,000 – 4 respondents
  - Over \$1,000 – 11 respondents
    - \$1,500 – Four; \$1,500-2,500 – One; \$2,000 – Two; \$3,000 – Two; A couple thousand – Two
- Anticipate Spending on:



- *RPDR* Queen Merchandise – 18 respondents
- Other Merchandise – 11 respondents
- Meet and Greets – 4 respondents
- Nothing – 4 respondents
- Autographs – 2 respondents
- Photo Ops – 2 respondents
- RuPaul Merchandise – 1 respondent
- Experiences/Performances – 1 respondent

### **List of Informants**

Over the course of my fieldwork, I had the privilege to interview multiple Los Angeles-based drag artists, RuPaul's DragCon attendees, and individuals associated with drag-oriented businesses. While every informant's interview does not appear in this version of my project, I list each individual alphabetically here. Their generous insight guided and informed my project.

Alejandro Granados, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Alyssa Holguin, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Anastasia Soosa, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Andre (Andy) Ochoa, personal communication, May 16, 2015.

Andrew J. Coughlin, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Ashabau Frauen, personal communication, May 17, 2015

Ben Cabrera, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Benjamin Laizure, personal communication, May 6, 2016.

Brian Martinez, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Brian Moe, personal communication, February 23, 2017.

Cake Moss, personal communication, February 13, 2017.

Carlos Hernández, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Cassidy Hoffman, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Chloe Gonzalez, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Christian Martinez, personal communication, May 16, 2015.

Colleen Bostick, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Craig Carey, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Dana Al-Ghahim, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Dani T, personal communication, February 26, 2017.

Darcy King, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Dauphne Bellesy, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

David Gottlieb, personal communication, May 23, 2017.

Deb Dawhunt, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Debra Eczell, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Debra Walsh, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Douglas Bettencourt, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Douglas Knutson, personal communication, June 4, 2015.

Dwan Wilson, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Erin Harris, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Essence Rabago, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Evan Conaway, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Faustino Fico, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Grace Leung, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Gwendolyn Harter, personal communication, May 6, 2016.

Ian MacKinnon, personal communication, March 2, 2017.

Jacob Virgin, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Jacqueline Souza, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Jaime Ramirez, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Jasmine Masters, personal communication, February 22, 2017.

Jason R. Foster, personal communication, May 7, 2016.

Jeffrey Wylie, personal communication, February 25, 2017.

Jessica Hernandez, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Jessica Ouellette, personal communication, May 7, 2016.

Jennifer Busby, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Jessica Levin, personal communication, May 7, 2017.

Jocelyn Menendez, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Jose Lopez, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Justin D. Nichols, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Justin O'Neill, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Karina Martinez, personal communication, May 16, 2015.

Kathleen Parker, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Kevin Yee, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Kim Stockman, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Lisa Anne (LA) Gozzard, personal communication, May 26, 2015.

Lance Mulcahey, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Laura Yoones, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Leslye Osegudi, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Martin Rodriguez, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Max Saltarelli, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Melania Vargas, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Meredith Crandell, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Meredith Mirmow, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Michael L. Silas, personal communication, May 16, 2015.

Michelle Shive, personal communication, May 9, 2016.

Minnie Chen, personal communication, May 6, 2017.

Morgan Rozenboom, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Navarro Parker, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Nicholas Whalen, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Phantom, personal communication, March 3, 2017.

Richard Ogawa, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Rohin Lee, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Roya Khouie, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Samantha Starr, personal communication, March 2, 2017.

Sam Couch, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Sebastian Reddy, personal communication, May 7, 2017.

Selena Blackwater, personal communication, March 2, 2017.

Simone Glorie, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Stephanie Logan, personal communication, May 16, 2015.

Stephanie Yellowhair, personal communication, July 13, 2016.

Stephany Gallegos, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Stephen Bowzer, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Steven Lothar Zvenskes, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Thomas Elliott, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Tommi Avicolti Mecca, personal communication, March 5, 2017.

Tyler Milune, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Val Rodriguez, personal communication, May 17, 2015.

Vivienne Colindros, personal communication, May 8, 2016.

Walter Delmar, personal communication, May 10, 2017.

Zack Gottlieb, personal communication, May 23, 2017.

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