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The Construction of Character and Authenticity on *RuPaul's Drag Race*

by

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Introduction

One of the most common instructions delivered to the drag queens competing on *RuPaul's Drag Race* is to show their "true self." No matter their background or drag style, each queen is encouraged to present a performance to the judges and audience that feels authentic. At first glance, *RuPaul's Drag Race* foregrounds authenticity and individuality, but it does so through a constructed lens that shapes its contestants into characters. The show also serves as an exercise in personal branding, in which the contestants are motivated to shape themselves into commodities, facilitated by the editing and structure of the show. Queens often get labeled immediately, not based on who they are, but on where they come from or what they look like. While storylines and characterizations on the show are necessarily informed by the queen's actions, they are heavily shaped by editing.

In this essay, I will be exploring the ways in which authenticity manifests itself throughout several seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (shortened as *Drag Race* or *RPDR*). To analyze this, each episode of Season Seven, Eight and Nine was watched with special attention directed towards how each season built up character arcs and storylines. These seasons sit in the middle of the existing seasons of *Drag Race*, and also cover the emergence of *Drag Race* into the mainstream, with Season 9 airing on a different, more popular network. Additionally, I will be explaining the various ways in which real people are turned into characters through the process of the show. Authentic and vulnerable moments are exploited by the reality TV format and turn the real people competing into characters with episodic storylines. I argue that neoliberal values shape the way that *RPDR* characterizes its contestants and shapes the ideal drag queen.

Authenticity comes up regularly in scholarship surrounding reality TV. In “Keeping it Real? Social Class, Young People and ‘Authenticity’ in Reality TV,” Kim Allen and Heather Mendick run a study in England focused on viewer’s perceptions of reality TV participants. They find that being judged by the audience as authentic is desirable in reality TV, i.e. audiences liked contestants who they perceived as authentic more than contestants they perceived as inauthentic (Allen and Mendick). In “Talking Alone: Reality TV, Emotions and Authenticity” Aslama and Pantii argue that for reality TV, the “key attraction is the revelation of ‘true emotions’” (Aslama and Pantii 168). Specifically, they look at how the confessional – the space in which a contestant sits alone and addresses the camera directly– functions as a space for (emotional) truth to be revealed. They also call attention to the construction of authenticity on reality TV shows in order to appeal to audience desires for intimacy.

In “Reality TV: its contents and discontents,” Misha Kavka notes another concept that has risen in popularity; the “neoliberal turn” in reality TV scholarship. Many scholars (Kavka, Allen and Mendick, Couldry, Chetwynd) argue that neoliberalism presents itself frequently in reality tv shows. Kavka explains that the“transformational promise of reality TV is based in the neoliberal values of personal responsibility, entrepreneurialism and self-empowerment through self management” (Kavka 4). Reality TV provides a platform for its contestants to transform and market themselves to a viewing audience. While providing this platform, the TV show can also function as a neoliberal workspace, in which contestants must display traits such as resilience, individualization, a positive attitude, and team conformity in order to succeed.

Queens on *RuPaul's Drag Race* are often immediately placed into a box of what their drag looks like, and are then cemented into that box throughout the season. The most common kinds of drag queen as categorized on *RPDR* are: comedy queen, fashion girl, pageant girl, big girl and Latin queen. On the show, one of the most common categories that the queens get placed into (outside of what kind of drag they do) is ethnicity and culture. Notably, queens being from Puerto Rico is referenced frequently, often in association with Latin stereotypes. Another method of categorization commonly used is body size and shape, with the concept of the "big girl" being very prevalent on *RPDR.* The handful of plus size contestants on each season tend to identify as a "big girl" and associate themselves with the other plus size competitors. The editing often foregrounds these identities, for example, placing Latin music over footage of Puerto Rican queens, or by pairing confessional footage of queens describing themselves as a 'big girl' with footage of them entering the competition for the first time.

I will present a brief history of RuPaul, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and the overall structure of the show. I then cover a few select characters and storylines over three seasons, and explore the characterization of the top four competitors from each season. Finally, I will discuss some themes and issues that arise over multiple seasons regarding authenticity and its connections to Otherness and the neoliberal situation of *RPDR*.

RuPaul and *RuPaul's Drag Race*

RuPaul's Drag Race is headed by RuPaul Charles, who was born in California in 1960. RuPaul grew up in San Diego until he was 15 years old, at which point he moved to Atlanta to live with one of his older sisters. After the move, RuPaul got into the performing arts and eventually started performing in drag in the Atlanta clubs. "In 1987 he moved to New York City and began his career in go-go bars and on television on The Gong Show and MTV" (GreenI). After spending several years slowly gaining popularity in the NYC nightlife scenes, RuPaul got his major break into celebrity when he released the pop album "Supermodel of the World" in 1993. In the mid-nineties, he was a MAC Cosmetics spokesmodel, released his first book, and was the host of The RuPaul Show - a TV variety show (Picotti).

After about a decade out of the spotlight in the early 2000s, RuPaul and the production company World of Wonder brought *RuPaul's Drag Race* to life. The first episode – "Drag on a Dime" – aired on February 2nd, 2009, and introduced a cast of nine drag queen competitors to the world. Since then, the show has exploded, with 16 seasons of the main series, 9 seasons of its "All Stars" spin-off and other various spin-off series across the globe, including Thailand, Canada, the UK, France, and Italy. The first eight seasons of the show aired on Logo TV, with the ninth season moving to VH1. Since S15, the show has aired on MTV.

RuPaul still serves as one of the executive producers on the show, as well as its main judge and host. The rest of the judging panel is made up of Michelle Visage, Carson Kressley, Ross Matthews, and a variety of celebrity guest judges on an episode by episode basis. Michelle Visage was involved in the music industry (Seduction, The

S.O.U.L S.Y.S.T.E.M.) in the late 1980's and met RuPaul in the NYC nightlife scene. From 1996 to 2002 she hosted a radio talk show with RuPaul, and in 2011 she was brought onto *Drag Race* Season 3 as a permanent judge. Carson Kressley is most notable for his role as the fashion expert in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and starting his judging role for *Drag Race* in 2015 on Season 7. Ross Matthews gained popularity in 2001 as "Ross the Intern" on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* has held many different TV and web show roles. He has been a regular judge on *Drag Race* since Season 7, splitting the judging responsibilities with Carson Kressley.

The Show Structure

Each season of *Drag Race* features a new cast of drag queens from all over the country who compete for a cash prize and the title of "America's Next Drag Superstar." The main venue of the competition is the workroom, where queens work on acting challenges, construct outfits and do their makeup. Each episode finishes on the main stage with the panel of judges, where queens walk the runway, receive critiques and lipsync for their lives. The first episode of each season sees every new drag queen enter the workroom for the first time in full drag, accompanied by an out-of-drag confessional introducing themselves. In confessional, each queen is identified with a lower third name tag containing their drag name, age, and city of origin. Starting in Season 6, each queen wears the same outfit, accessories and hairstyle across all of their confessionals. This gives the confessional a more consistent look, but also means that confessional footage can be easily used out of context. Construction of character of the show is heavily reliant on the choice and placement of confessional footage,

especially since confessional footage can be used anywhere in the season to build storylines and character arcs.

Each episode features a main challenge introduced at the start of the episode, sometimes accompanied by a mini-challenge. While the queens are preparing for the main challenge in the workroom, RuPaul will walk through to check on their progress. The queens then perform the main challenge, do their makeup while talking about their childhood trauma, and walk the runway in that week's assigned theme. Queens receive critiques from the panel of judges, and the episode winner and the bottom two queens are announced. The bottom two then lip-sync for their lives, with one staying ("shantay, you stay") and one exiting the competition ("sashay away").

Each season has a few expected challenges. Snatch Game often occurs towards the middle of a season, and is a play on the game show Match Game. Each queen does a celebrity impersonation and must participate in the game show as their chosen celebrity. The ball episodes have varying themes, but always involve multiple looks, with the queens making one of the looks in the workroom. Two mini challenges tend to come up every season - the puppet show and the reading challenge – which give the audience an opportunity to see what the queens really think of each other. Every main season has both an in-studio finale and a live finale shot in front of an audience. For the live finale, each possible winning queen is recorded celebrating her victory in order to not reveal the true winner to the live audience before the episode airs. This means that each possible winner performs her imagined reaction to winning, rather than experiencing it authentically. The authentic reaction comes later, as the finalists watch

the episode air on a livestream. The live finale is often accompanied by a reunion, where all the queens from the season recap their time on the show.

Season Seven

Season 7 has an overall storyline of old style drag vs. new style drag. The “Bitter Old Lady Brigade” (coined by Ginger Minj in S7EP3) is composed of older queens and queens that do more traditional pageant style drag. The other side - the “young kids” as described by Kennedy Davenport – is made up of young, skinny, white queens. Race and body serve as a dividing factor between the groups in addition to age and style of drag. As I mentioned above, all of the queens in the “young kids” category are white and thin, while the Bitter Old Lady Brigade has both more body diversity and racial diversity. In the S7 EP2 main challenge themed around airline stewardesses, Ginger Minj describes the other team – made up of the “young kids” – as “Aryan Airlines.” The rivalry between the two groups is brought up mostly in confessional footage throughout the season, and comes to a head in the S7 EP12 studio finale.

The final four of Season 7 are split evenly down the middle between the two sides. Kennedy Davenport and Ginger Minj represent the Bitter Old Lady Brigade, while the ‘young kids’ are represented by Violet Chachki and Pearl. The split can be seen visually in their EP12 in-studio finale runway looks. Violet decides not to wear a dress for the finale runway in order to stand out from “these pageant girls” and Pearl notes from confessional that Ginger and Kennedy are both wearing “huge, gigantic, pageant girl hair,” punctuated by footage of Ginger and Kennedy working on their large wigs. On the final runway, Ginger and Kennedy are both wearing expensive pageant gowns and

huge wigs. Violet wears pants, a corset and a beaded bustier top (Michelle Visage does not approve of the pants), and Pearl wears a lingerie-inspired ensemble. Apart from their visual differences in race and body size, the two sides are also set apart by the visuals of their drag.

Throughout EP12, Ginger and Kennedy tell Violet and Pearl that they aren't worthy of winning, because they haven't had enough experience. In the opening of the episode, the editing foregrounds a brief fight between the four queens about whether sewing is a necessary skill on *Drag Race* or not. Later, Ginger instigates a fight with Violet over the fact that Violet has struggled with choreography and acting in the past. The discussion happens both in real time in the workroom, and in back-and-forth confessional footage of Ginger and Violet. While working on the challenge, both Ginger and Pearl have wig malfunctions. Ginger's malfunction goes without comment from the other girls, but Pearl receives three different confessional reactions. One of Violet's earrings falls off, which also is paired with two confessionals about being unprepared. The mistakes made by the young kids get negative reactions from the older queens, but the mistakes made by the older queens pass by without much comment

The show often presents self-transformation arcs, and in Season 7, Violet and Pearl are both shown to have this arc while Ginger and Kennedy are not. While doing their makeup for the mainstage, Ginger and Kennedy talk for almost a minute uninterrupted about why Violet shouldn't win the season to which Violet simply replies "Okay. I understand more what you're saying." Pearl notes from confessional that Violet earlier in the season would have fought back but now she's listening and accepting criticism. In contrast, Ginger is shown in confessional stating "old school is the only

school.” Unlike Violet, Ginger is not shown to be open to change. EP12 specifically paints Ginger and Kennedy as more combative and less willing to accept criticism from the other girls.

This season (and the old vs.new storyline in particular) say something about the kind of drag that *RPDR* prioritizes. The editing of the season shows that the Bitter Old Lady Brigade are tied to the style of drag they grew up with, and aren’t open to new things. This is shown both in the direct statements they make (“old school is the only school”) and their attitude towards the other queens. Jasmine Masters (a member of the Bitter Old Lady Brigade) sums up her feelings from confessional - “I … don’t like shit about those young hoes.” While the young kids do have moments where they’re villainized, overall (and especially in EP12) they’re shown to be less combative and more open to different drag styles. S7 of *Drag Race* tells the audience that the future of drag is being prioritized. The priority is highlighted in the fact that Violet Chachki wins the season over Ginger Minj. In having Violet win the season, the show indirectly points to the new style of drag as more aligned with the show’s values.

In addition to the overall old vs. new drag storyline, Season 7 also deals more with the concept of femininity and what qualifies as drag more than Season 8 or 9. In S7EP1, on a nude illusion runway, Michelle Visage says that Violet Chacki “wasn’t feminine enough” because she didn’t use padding to mimic the shape of a woman. In the Snatch Game episode, Kennedy Davenport considers doing Little Richard for her celebrity impersonation but is shot down by Katya and Ginger Minj – “but he’s a man” (Despite their concerns, Kennedy ends up going with Little Richard and wins the episode). Even in these two isolated moments, we are shown the judges and queens

grappling with the connection between drag and femininity. Violet's lack of padding reveals her authentic, almost entirely nude body, a body that Michelle Visage deems too masculine despite the full makeup and wig attached. Kennedy's Snatch Game character includes all of the traditional hallmarks of drag – a wig, makeup, a full costume – but because the character she portrays is a masculine one, she falls under scrutiny.

It seems that S7 signals the start of a shift for *Drag Race*. Moving forward, the concept of femininity as it relates to drag still comes up, though it seems to appear less and less as the seasons progress. Even on Season 8, Naomi Smalls rarely wears padding but does not receive criticism for it. For Season 8's Snatch Game, Thorgy Thor does a Michael Jackson impression without any discussion of it being a male character. Bob the Drag Queen wears pants and a blazer for the studio finale, and the judges critiques are more about the pants being ugly than them being too masculine. Starting in S8, the explicit connection between drag and femininity becomes less clear. S7 and its relationship with the later seasons make it clear that *RPDR* operates under changing criteria for what is good drag (or what is authentic drag). I mention this concept here because I'll later discuss the idea of femininity and its relation to authenticity, Otherness and the body.

The first episode of Season 7 – "Born Naked" – introduces each of the 14 queens to the audience over the course of 40 minutes and 4 looks from each queen. Confessional footage in particular plays a huge role in introducing the queens. Ginger Minj introduces herself in her first confessional as an "overweight asthmatic chain smoking crossdresser from Orlando" and is immediately identified in the workroom by Jaidynn Diore Fierce as "another big girl." Part of Violet Chacki's overall storyline

through the season is that she's full of herself, which is set up immediately as she describes herself in confessional footage as "very visually appealing … is that conceited?" Kandy Ho gets Latin music for her entrance - aligning her drag persona with Latin culture. The editing choices made when a queen first enters the workroom are often indicative of how their character will work for the entire season. In order to establish an identity for each of the queens, the show tends to select certain trait(s) of each queen to highlight. The first moment we see each queen, the music that plays, and the confessional footage that we are presented with often point towards these chosen traits for each queen, establishing them as characters that the audience can follow through the season.

Culture as an identifier on Season 7 is used a few different ways. Kandy Ho is Puerto Rican, as we learn within a minute of her first appearance on screen. She is placed in a category with the past Puerto Rican queens on the show – in an EP1 walkthrough, Ru tells Kandy that "traditionally on our show, Puerto Ricans like to show a lot of body." RuPaul establishes the past habits of Puerto Rican queens and expects Kandy to follow these same tendencies. In the first episode alone, Kandy being Puerto Rican / of Spanish origin is mentioned no less than four times. These 'mentions' happen through confessional footage, RuPaul's comments, and music choices, all of which align Kandy completely with her Puerto Rican heritage.

Kaya Zamolochikova is an interesting case regarding culture, because she uses Russian culture as part of her drag persona, without actually being Russian. Her entrance line is in Russian, and her first confessional is conducted in a Russian accent. Her entrance look is also Soviet themed with a hammer and sickle. For the purposes of

her drag, Katya (who is white and American) is a blank canvas that culture can be painted onto. Playing Russian is a choice she makes and continues through her performance. For Katya, culture is an intentional part of her drag character, while Kandy Ho is branded as a Puerto Rican queen without much effort from herself.

Miss Fame - another contestant on S7 and a self-proclaimed fashion model - demonstrates explicitly what is implicit for every queen on the show: the brand. Miss Fame constantly references her own brand; in one of her first confessionals in EP1, she identifies herself as a “classic chic fashion model.” Her self-driven branding comes up enough that the other queens call it out in EP5 - “The DESPY Awards.” When introducing Miss Fame as an award nominee, Jaidynn Diore Fierce jokes “Oh, the brand? Since when did the dollar store become a brand?” While Fame does get made fun of for how committed she is to her Miss Fame branding, it also exposes what many of the queens are on the show to do – establish a name, identity and following for themselves. The show serves as a boost for many careers, so the queens have an incentive to appear likable, identifiable and relatable to the *Drag Race* audience. Personal branding is a key piece of *Drag Race*, which I will circle back to later.

As I noted earlier, the final four of the season are split evenly between the old school vs. new school drag debate. Kennedy Davenport is the self described “dancing diva of Texas.” She is firmly in the pageant space, although she succeeds at challenges (such as comedy and acting) that push her outside of the pageant box. She aligns herself with Ginger Minj, especially in EP12, where she mentions Ginger as the only other contestant who is deserving to win. Ginger is a ‘big girl’ from the South who does

traditional pageant style drag. Ginger also succeeds at comedy and acting challenges through the season, but is never identified as a comedy queen.

Violet Chachki is the eventual winner of the season but is also the villain of the season, especially over the first half. She is mean, outspoken, and has a bad attitude approaching challenges that she isn't excited about. The top three traits assigned to Violet are that she's a fashion queen, outspoken, and skinny. Over the season, she has a character arc that's more tell than show. In EP8 – "Conjoined Queens" – the eliminated queens come back and get made over by the queens still in the competition. Kasha Davis - a previously eliminated queen observes from confessional: "I am most impressed with the change in Violet … She's just so much nicer." This statement is paired with footage of Kaha and Violet working at the same workroom table and Violet looking happy. When Katya works with Violet in EP10 she notes from confessional that Violet is way more likable than she originally thought. Outside of these secondhand observations about her character, we don't see a lot of change within Violet. The Violet Chachki is nice now agenda is pushed for a handful of episodes but by EP12 she is once again labeled as a bitch by Ginger and Kennedy.

Pearl is a "sleepwalker" who took a while to come out of her shell. This is the main trait that is assigned to Pearl, and is brought up every episode even after the other queens and judges agree that Pearl has gone through her arc of self transformation. Her live finale performance in EP14 is literally called "Sleepwalker." Pearl's arc also highlights something else about *RPDR* and reality TV in general – the drag (the performance you put on) matters, but your character flaws and the essence of who you are is also important. Julia Yudelman discusses Pearl's arc of self-transformation in

"The 'RuPaulitics' of Subjectification in *RuPaul's Drag Race*." For Yudelman, "Pearls' lack of self-motivation is positioned as the issue" in S7 as she is constantly told by the judges that she's not trying hard enough (Yudelman 25). Other queens also weigh in on her pitfalls from confessional and tend to agree with the judges - Pearl needs to display that she's interested in being in the competition. The Pearl storyline highlights a larger trend in *RuPaul's Drag Race*; "not only do contestants work hard in challenges; there is also mounting pressure for them to work on themselves as subjects" (Yudelman 25).The queens don't only need to showcase good drag, they also need to showcase good attitude, positive personalities, and the ability to work hard. In S7 EP5, Pearl has a standoff with RuPaul which kickstarts her transformation for the rest of the season. "Pearl's turning point is framed as a hard-lined intervention that incites her to take control of her actions and better manage herself" (Yudelman 26).

The S7 live finale features lipsync performances to original songs by the top three – Violet, Pearl and Ginger. Violet performs a burlesque number titled "Too Many Daddies," Pearls is called "Sleepwalker," and Ginger's is called "Pray and Slay." Pearl's number highlights her time in the season, Violet's number showcases her external aesthetic influences, and Ginger's calls back to her Southern and Christian roots. Violet wins the season.

Season Eight

Season 8 of *Drag Race* is unique in that it's a *very* short season with only 10 episodes. Storylines and character arcs in the season are incredibly concentrated and time is a premium. Season Eight Episode One – titled "Keeping It 100!" – is the show's

100th episode and opens with a montage of the first 99 episodes of the show. Like Season 7, the way that queens are first introduced into Season 8 gives the audience a good idea of how their character will function the rest of the season. One of the major categories of character in *RPDR* is culture and ethnicity. Cynthia Lee Fontaine's entrance is accompanied by Latin-style music, and in her first confessional she says she is originally from Puerto Rico. Naysha Lopez is immediately tied to Puerto Rico as well as Latin culture - her entrance line is "Hola! The beauty is here!" and the first question she gets asked in the workroom is if she, like Cynthia, is from Puerto Rico. The show emphasizes the ethnicity of both Naysha and Cynthia through the placement of confessional footage, music, and inclusion of the workroom discussion of Puerto Rico. Kim Chi's entrance line – "I came to chop suey the competition" – connects her to a general Asian background, while her drag name specifically connects her to South Korea, where she grew up. ChiChi DeVayne identifies her drag as "that real Southern dragged out style" and also immediately discloses to the other girls that she's a "cheap queen" - her entrance look is made out of trash bags.

The first episode of Season 8 also sets up villains and storylines that continue throughout the season. The ongoing rivalry between Bob the Drag Queen and Derrick Barry is established right after Derrick enters the workroom, when Bob (in confessional) says "Is Beyonce scared of Britney? Because Bob ain't scared of Derrick". Bob and Derrick have a frenemy-style relationship throughout the show. Derrick Barry villanizes herself partly through her objectionable understanding of race politics; she constantly calls Bob's drag ratchet in a negative connotation. The concept of ratchet / ghetto drag comes up fairly often on *Drag Race* and I will discuss this more later in the essay.

Acid Betty gets set up as a villain straight away partially by herself in confessional – “The main bullet point of Acid Betty is she’s a bitch” – and her entrance into the workroom is accompanied by ominous music cues. In addition, Betty’s first words to Thorgy Thor after she enters the workroom are “Fuck you, Thorgy.” A combination of both her actions in the workroom, the choice of her confessional introduction, and the music all inform the audience that Acid Betty doesn’t play well with others. Acid Betty is undeniably the villain for the first half of Season 8. In EP2 “Bitch Perfect”, Betty gets in a fight with ChiChi DeVayne while Thorgy Thor observes from confessional that Betty is a “fucking asshole” who is “demanding and mean to everyone.” In EP3 – “RuCo Empire” – Betty gets picked last when choosing teams, likely based on her performance as a team member in EP2. The viewing audience is treated to much more of Betty’s negativity through the choice of confessional footage shown. Through her time on the season, Betty’s confessional footage often includes her praying on the downfall of her fellow queens or making negative remarks about their performances. After Betty gets eliminated, Thorgy notes that Betty was always in a bad mood and that “she deserved to go.”

Laila McQueen’s main storyline throughout the season is her lack of self-confidence, and this is swiftly established in the first episode. In the mini challenge of EP1 (a photoshoot with the past winners) Laila fails to impress or stand out amongst the winners. When Laila is posing for the photoshoot, Ru comments “she’s a shy girl!” and later, when doing walkthroughs, Ru notes that Laila seems “a little shy.” Laila ends up getting eliminated from the show in EP2 - “Bitch Perfect” due to her weak performance in the maxi challenge lipsync number, and the whole episode is

interspersed with confessional footage from the other queens voicing their concerns that Laila doesn't stand out from the rest. Laila's fate almost seems predetermined, given how early and frequently her shyness is brought up in the show.

Derrick Barry – whose main claim to fame was as a Britney Spears impersonator – faces constant pressure throughout the season to show herself, and not Britney. This storyline is also set up in Episode One, in which Derrick enters the workroom for the first time in a Britney Spears look. The judges, other queens, and Derrick herself constantly question her ability to separate herself from the Britney look and persona. During critiques in EP1, Michelle tells Derrick: "We've seen Britney now. My personal challenge to you is to show me everything else but Britney." Nearly every time Derrick receives critiques from the judges, her success or failure at separating herself from Britney is discussed. The desire for her to separate her own brand isn't consistent, however. For Snatch Game in EP5, Derrick considers doing a non-Britney Spears character – "This is my chance to show everyone that I'm more than just a Britney impersonator" – but RuPaul suggests that she should actually do Britney. She does, performs well, and gets praised by Michelle for her character choice.

On a show where individuality and 'being yourself' is of the highest importance, Derrick faces a unique challenge. Because Derrick is so tied to her Britney persona, she is deemed inauthentic by both her fellow queens and by the judges. When she tries to separate herself, she is told that she's fading into the background. In EP8 critiques Ross Matthews tells Derrick "I think you're getting lost in what we want. We want you to do you at this level. And I don't know that you're at this level." This critique illustrates the contradictory challenge that Derrick faces. In the constant inclusion of the judges and

other queen's remarks about Derrick not having her own identity, the audience, along with Derrick, are told that she needs to change. When she does change, Derrick is told that she blends in. And in Snatch Game, when she goes back to doing Britney, Derrick gets praised for her choice. In EP8, Derrick gets eliminated for not successfully establishing her own identity outside of Britney.

Looking at the final four can give us a better idea of how characters were built up over the course of the full season. By the penultimate episode, the audience is left with a top four who each have very identifiable backgrounds and traits. Bob is a comedy queen, Black and loud. Kim Chi is Korean, fat, and has a lisp. Naomi Smalls is a fashion girl, young, and skinny, ChiChi is Southern, country, and poor. These traits even come up when the queens portray each other in the EP8 puppet shows. In the puppet show, each queen is randomly assigned the puppet of another queen to put in drag and do a performance with. Bob gets Kim Chi, and the main points are that Kim is fat and has a speech impediment. Kim Chi gets ChiChi, and the main joke is that ChiChi is cheap. Derrick gets Naomi and says Naomi has no talent besides being pretty, while Naomi gets Derrick and capitalizes on the Derrick Barry = Britney Spears storyline. ChiChi gets Bob, who is funny but loud. The puppet show indicates that although characters are being constructed in the editing room, the characters are at least based on the queen's real actions.

Like Violet in S7, Bob is definitely shown as the villain for some competitors. The main complaint is that Bob talks too much. From Derrick – "it's just Bob talking is your point all the time," from Thorgy – "Bob, please shut up" and from Acid Betty "Bob and his mouth. He is like madness." To the other queens, Bob is loud and annoying. Bob

also becomes an enemy of the other queens because she succeeds too much in the competition. In EP6, Bob notes that the other queens are “sick of me winning all the time.” By having too much success without seeming to try that hard, Bob becomes a target that all of the other queens want to beat. Throgy’s mirror message after her elimination even reads “Please take down Bob. She’s terrible.”

In a S8 EP1 confessional, Bob the Drag Queen states “I’m hilarious, beautiful, talented and humble.” This line could be treated as a throwaway but it actually illustrates something about Bob’s time on *Drag Race*. Bob is constantly identified as funny - both by herself and by the judges. In EP5, Bob receives a caution from Michelle to not showboat, as she is doing very well in the competition. Bob does struggle with the “beautiful” aspect throughout the season; her drag gets consistently identified as more “ratchet” than glamor. In EP4, Michelle tells Bob “ratchet drag is your thing.” In the beginning of the next episode, Derrick Barry asks Bob “If I want to do ratchet drag next week, can you give me any tips?” Derrick brings the same comment up again in EP7 – when writing political smear campaigns, Derrick says “I'm obviously going to call you ratchet.” The implication by Derrick here is that ratchet is a bad thing to be, which is an opinion shared by the judges table (mostly Michelle Visage).

Kim Chi’s three traits of being Korean, plus size, and having a lisp are *excessively* leaned into by the show. The judges ask her to speak Korean on the runway and easily associate Kim with anime (which is mostly associated with Japan). KimChi associates herself with Korean culture and discusses the hardships of being raised in Korea, while the judges are delighted by her external displays of Asian culture. During a serious makeup moment in the workroom, Kim talks about the lack of queer

culture in Korea and her struggles with her mom not knowing about her drag career. Her lisp is mentioned almost every episode, often multiple times throughout the episode. Even in the live finale, RuPaul jokes that Kim Chi is about to “lisp-sync for her life.” The lisp does hinder her in some performances – notably in a political smear campaign, Kim Chi worries a lot about her enunciation. The lisp is an obvious difference between Kim Chi and the other queens, and because it’s present every time Kim Chi speaks it gets commented on even more than her weight or her Korean heritage. Kim’s arc through the season is one of self-confidence. By her final performance ‘Fat, Femme, and Asian’ Kim Chi has embraced the things she previously struggled with.

Naomi Smalls is a self described “fashion girl” whose main strong point is aesthetics. Her long legs are one of the first things she mentions in EP1, up until her finale performance (“Legs”). Most of Naomi’s recurring traits are focused on her physical appearance rather than her personality traits. Although she and Bob the Drag Queen have a candid discussion about black culture, Naomi is never identified closely with it by the show. Her storyline throughout the show sees her branching out from her fashion girl identity and learning what else she can succeed at.

ChiChi DeVayne in particular has an interesting storyline because class is a main factor in her struggles on the show. The first category ChiChi is placed into is that she’s from the country / the South. Her country background is highlighted heavily throughout the show - mostly by the judges in critiques and runway adlibs. The other box that ChiChi is placed into is that of the ‘cheap queen’ as she describes herself in EP1. In EP4, ChiChi fails at being a team player because she needs time to construct a new runway look for that week’s theme (she already wore her Neon look for a previous

runway). During critiques, ChiChi explains that she doesn't have money to buy outfits like the other queens do. Michelle criticizes ChiChi for using her lack of money as an excuse, saying that the show provides the queens with a wall of fabric. Because she doesn't have money, ChiChi needs another commodity – time– to construct garments. However, as shown in EP4, time is not a commodity that ChiChi has in the context of filming the show. She also gets criticized for wearing the same thigh high boots multiple times, an issue that directly reflects her inability to spend extra money on more pairs of shoes. The elephant in the room is that to succeed on *Drag Race*, especially in the recent era, you need a lot of money.

ChiChi's character arc on the show comes to a conclusion with her being able to accept where she comes from and see it as a strength, after much encouragement from the judges. During EP7 critiques, Carson tells ChiChi to "own that bayou charm" and ChiChi responds "I don't want to be ghetto." Also during EP7 critiques, Ru says to ChiChi "Just be you. Honey, that's why we sent you a plane ticket." The inclusion of the plane ticket point brings us back to ChiChi being financially unstable. In EP9, ChiChi says "I didn't realize how much I hated where I was from," and concludes that she is now able to find strength in the things about herself she previously tried to hide. Accepting your dark past or traits you hate about yourself is a fairly common storyline on *RPDR* (and even common in S8, with Kim Chi). ChiChi is eliminated in EP9 and does not make it to the live finale.

Like Season 7, the Season 8 finale has the top three queens performing a lipsync of an original song. Kim Chi's number "Fat, Femme and Asian" - which she performs in a hanbok, and features lyrics partially in Korean– highlights all of the traits

that have Othered Kim Chi throughout her life. Naomi Small performs “Legs” which is literally about how long her legs are, and the performance again aligns Naomi with modeling (“they tried to put me on the cover of Vogue, but my legs were too long”). Bob the Drag Queen, dressed in a jersey, jean shorts, heavy gold jewelry, and heeled Timberland boots, performs “I Don’t Like to Show Off” which is a song about Bob being good at everything. Both her performance outfit and one of her song’s lyrics – “all the other bitches call me ratchet’ – refute the idea that being ratchet is a bad thing to be. Each performance highlights the identities that have been built around each queen during the time on their season, while highlighting their growth. Bob wins the season.

Season Nine

By 2017, *RPDR* was gaining popularity as it moved from LogoTv to its more popular sister network, VH1. The first episode of S9 (titled “Oh. My. Gaga!” and featuring Lady Gaga) “with close to one million viewers tuning in, became the most viewed episode in the show’s history” (Picotti). EP1 of the season also introduces the audience to 13 queens over the runtime, excluding Cynthia Lee Fontaine who was added back to the show fully in EP2.

The entrance lines for Season 9 can mostly be separated into three categories - culture, body, and outside influences. As far as culture, Valentina gets vaguely Latin music for her entrance, and introduces herself to Peppermint in Spanish, immediately identifying herself with Latin culture and Mexico. For body, Eureka O’Hara’s entrance line is “Give it up for the big girl!” and Trinity Taylor’s is “The body is here, bitches”, referring to her open use of plastic surgery. The influence of non-drag art forms also serves as an identity. Alexis Michelle tells the audience in her first confessional that

she's "New York City's premier Broadway queen" an identity which follows her throughout the show. Sasha Velour describes herself in her first confessional as a "bald fashiony artistic weird queen" and she wears an art-pop inspired look for her first runway of the episode. The first challenge is a pageant themed runway, with the first category being a look "inspired by your home city." Like the nametags in confessional, this category leans into the idea that where you're from dictates who you are in one way or another. Peppermint (from NYC) is Lady Liberty, Valentina (from East LA) wears a mariachi inspired set. Shea Coulee (from Chicago) wears a hot dog on her head and as previously mentioned, Sasha Velour (from Brooklyn) wears an art-pop blazer with corresponding props. Sasha gets continuously identified with an artistic identity, so using other artists as influence aligns with her brand.

The first episode also sets up storylines that continue into the season. Jaymes Mansfield is comparable to Laila McQueen in terms of the storyline and edit they both receive. While Jaymes enters the workroom for the first time (accompanied by awkward slow jazz), Sasha Velour observes from confessional that "Jaymes Mansfield looks scared and confused." In EP2, Nina picks Jaymes for her cheer team, stating "I have a heart for the underdog." Confessional footage of the other queens commenting on Jayme's struggle to stand out in the competition is scattered throughout EP1 and EP2. This confessional footage is often paired with b-roll of Jaymes looking confused or out of place, cementing the idea that Jaymes isn't performing well. The issue with Jaymes that the show brings up again and again – through both confessionals by the other queens and the judge's critiques – is that Jaymes lacks the ability to stand out because she doesn't know who she is. The concept of being yourself is very prevalent in S9. In

EP1, Sasha Velour gets praised by Ross because she “didn’t waste any time showing us who she is” while Jaymes is criticized for “hiding” and not “letting her true self shine through.” Jaymes and Sasha have opposite storylines - one succeeds through her comfort in herself, and one fails because she isn’t able to show what the judges deem to be her authentic self.

In the first episode, Nina Bonina Brown states from confessional “I just need for people to believe in me.” She ends up winning the first challenge and notes “validation complete.” Just these two lines set up how Nina will behave for the rest of the show; she needs external validation and doesn't believe in herself enough. In EP3, Nina gets picked last for a team challenge and explains from confessional that “I think the other queens see me as a Debbie Downer.” Nina’s performances through the season are continuously paired with confessional footage of Nina doubting herself or the other queens commenting on her bad attitude. She is unable to separate from her “Debbie Downer” identification during her entire run on the show, even her lipstick mirror message after her elimination in EP10 reads “Debbie Downer is gone.” Nina struggles her whole way through the season (and through to the reunion) with not believing in herself, believing that the other queens are out to get her, and having a bad attitude towards the competition. Nina is both the villain for part of the season due to her bad attitude and paranoia, but also becomes a villain to herself through self-sabotage.

The final four in S9 are a little more complicated in terms of character than the top 4 of S8. They don’t have as strongly defined identities as Season 8, but they do each have a backstory that is attached to them. Sasha is smart, serious and artistic. This is reinforced both by Sasha herself (she identifies herself in EP6 as “serious and

intense") and by RuPaul and the judges. The other main point of Sasha is that she knows who she is. In EP6 – "Snatch Game" – Ross Matthews notes "I love that Sasha knows her lane." Sasha's arc throughout the season mostly involves her learning how to have fun and not be so serious. Trinity Taylor is a pageant girl with a lot of plastic surgery who's from the country. Interestingly, Sasha Velour seems to push the country narrative more than the show itself does. During the puppet challenge, Sasha gives Trinity's puppet a generic country accent and in the next episode Sasha jokes about Trinity performing "barnyard noises" for the original verse challenge.

Shea and Peppermint on the other hand aren't as strongly defined in terms of character. Shea is Black, from Chicago, and a dancer. Peppermint is from NYC, sassy, and a trans woman. Even in the puppet show, which in S8 boiled down the queens to their most visible traits, we don't learn a lot. Trinity has the Shea puppet and Shea has the Peppermint one. Shea's jokes about Peppermint are mostly about her drag (bad costuming, lifted wig lace) and Trinity's jokes about Shea emphasize that she's from Chicago, and also the faults in her drag (bad wigs, bad makeup).

As I mentioned, each of the final four have a backstory connected to them. Sasha's mother never understood her drag, and passed away due to cancer before Sasha was able to connect with her about her drag career. Peppermint was the first openly trans woman to be cast on the show (others came out during or after filming) and the show spends a lot of her screetime in EP12 and the finale discussing her identity as a trans woman. Trinity Taylor was raised by her grandparents after her mother died and dropped out of high school to take care of her grandmother who later passed away. Shea Coulee's father was diagnosed with cancer before the season

started filming, and by the finale taping both her father and sister had died of cancer. The show has an ongoing trend of contrasting difficult events in the queen's lives with their performances as drag artists, which I will touch on again later.

Unlike S7 and S8, the S9 live finale does not consist of individual lip-sync performances to a custom song. Instead, the finale is a lip-sync showdown for the crown with pairs of queens competing to randomly chosen songs. Trinity and Peppermint lipsync to Britney Spears "Stronger" and Peppermint wins. Sasha Velour and Shea then lipsync to "So Emotional" by Whitney Houston, and Sasha does a (now infamous) reveal, pulling her wig off in a shower of rose petals. Sasha wins, and Shea gets a standing ovation as she leaves. Finally, Peppermint and Sasha lipsync to "It's Not Right, But It's Okay," with Sasha taking home the crown.

Otherness on *RuPaul's Drag Race*

As I've laid out in my analysis of Seasons 7-9 of *RPDR*, the show primarily characterizes its contestants through any traits that Other them. To analyze the treatment of culture and ethnicity on *RPDR*, I'm employing bell hooks' concept of Otherness that she lays out in her essay "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance". For hooks, the Other as an identity applies to anyone that lies outside of the majority identity in the West – hooks uses the term to refer to racial difference but it can also be applied to gender, sexual, and cultural differences. In "Eating the Other," hooks argues that the ruling class' desire for the Other (sexually or otherwise) is problematic in that Otherness is consumed by the majority and then erased. Hooks explains "the overriding fear is that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as

new dishes to enhance the white palate – that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten" (hooks 380). In the case of *RPDR*, the Other often consists of queens that come from outside the 50 US states, plus-size queens and queens who utilize non-white culture in their drag. The idea of Otherness as it applies to consumption and commodification are particularly relevant here.

RPDR exists firmly in the context of commodity culture. As seen in the discussion surrounding Miss Fame ("the brand"), queens are encouraged to package themselves for mass media consumption, and then are edited to concentrate their personhood to a few select traits. Hooks explains the issue of racial commodification:

> When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other. (hooks 367)

While hooks is addressing Otherness as a sexual dynamic, I argue that race and ethnicity are still used for pleasure – in this case, entertainment– on *RPDR*. Cultural and ethnic differences are used to differentiate the queens from each other and to build their personal characterizations on the show. Not only are the queens simplified into characters (or caricatures) of themselves, the cultures they represent are also essentialized for mainstream American consumption. On *RPDR*, the Other is primed for consumption and commodified by the structure and elements of the show itself. Choices like background music, placement of confessional clips and judges critiques all use the Otherness of certain contestants to brand them for a viewing audience.

Puerto Rico

One of the most prevalent ethnic identities on *RPDR* is that of the Puerto Rican queen, often explicitly identified as the Latin queen. In “Spicy. Exotic. Creature. Representations of Racial and Ethnic Minorities on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*” Sarah Tucker Jenkins explores the ways that *RPDR* reinforces or subverts racial and ethnic stereotypes. Much of Jenkin’s work focuses on the representation of Puerto Rican contestants on the show. *RPDR* has a legacy of Puerto Rican contestants, with Seasons One through Eleven all having at least one Puerto Rican queen on them, but the last queen living in Puerto Rico to be cast was Kandy Ho in S7. The show also has a history of labeling its queens from Puerto Rico as Latin queens whether they want that association or not. Alexis Mateo, a contestant on Season 3, immediately gets labeled by another contestant on S3 EP1 as a Puerto Rican/Latin queen to which she responds from confessional; “What I hate the most is that people label you the Latin queen. I’m not just the Latin queen, when I’m in drag, I’m a star.” The Puerto Rican label continues to Season 7, where RuPaul connects Kandy Ho to the tendencies of past Puerto Rican queens on the show by asking if she, like other Latin queens, will show a lot of body. In S8 EP1, Naysha Lopez and Cynthia Lee Fontaine immediately get grouped together by another queen simply because they are both Puerto Rican. Jenkins explains that “although *RPDR* promotes acceptance and inclusion, Alexis Mateo and other Puerto Rican queens are grouped together by their ethnicity, sometimes against their will” (Jenkins 81).

Cynthia Lee Fontaine from S8 is another example of the show being eager to Other contestants who are culturally or ethnically different. Less than thirty seconds into Cynthia's introduction to the audience on S8 EP1, the audience knows she is Latin and from Puerto Rico. Her entrance line - partly in Spanish, is combined with Latin music, and her first confessional tells the audience that she is originally from Puerto Rico. When Cynthia gets eliminated, Ru sends her off with "Puerto Rico, Austin, Santee Alley, and now the world" and when Naysha Lopez reflects on Cynthia's elimination she identifies Cynthia as her "Puerto Rican sister." Throughout her time on the show, Cynthia's pronunciation of words in English is consistently corrected by the other queens. In Season 8, she eventually gets eliminated because of her struggles with the English language, and she gets eliminated in Season 9 for failing to lip sync convincingly to an English language performance track. Jenkins notes that "the presence of an accent, or the use of Spanish, is unacceptable in American culture and is barely tolerated, especially within the mass media" (Jenkins 85). A Puerto Rican queen on *RPDR* faces a unique challenge – to overcome the cultural boundaries (language, accent) while also letting your culture define a large part of your character on the show. Cynthia is more exciting to the judges because of her accent and the comedic way she handles the English language, but she ends up failing on the show because of these very traits. Hooks notes that "within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (hooks 366). The queens from Puerto Rico are seen as just that - spicy, sexy, Othered.

The Body

Any plus-size competitor who enters the workroom on *Drag Race* will automatically be branded as a “big girl’ – Jaidynn Diore Fierce (S7), Ginger Minj (S7), and Eureka O’Hara(S9) all receive this label. Body type is used first and foremost to characterize plus-size queen’s drag, regardless of what style of drag they actually do. In “Postfeminist Hegemony in a Precarious World” Phoebe Chetwynd connects the preoccupation with the body and thinness on *RPDR* to the societal ideal of the feminine body. Because the ideal feminine form is a thin one, the same standards apply to impersonating femininity in drag. Chetwynd explains that “an analysis of the rules of realness established within *RPDR* reveals a privileging of a normatively attractive femininity. This can be seen in the judge’s attitudes to slim queens” (Chetwynd 3). For example, Violet Chachki is praised for her ability to corset down to 18 inches, which introduces “thinness” as a category in which a queen can either succeed or fail. Achieving an hourglass silhouette, or the silhouette of an ‘authentic’ woman, is an expected part of drag on *RPDR*. Ami Pomerantz notes in her book chapter “Big Girls Don’t Cry: Portrayals of the Fat Body in *RuPaul’s Drag Race*” that “to successfully perform the sexualization of their bodies, fat drag queens pick elements from the world of feminine imagery and female sexuality” often highlighting their curves or cleavage as their visual appeal (Pomerantz 117). In this sphere, femininity and weight are interconnected as queens must work with or against their weight to achieve a feminine ideal.

In the “privileging of a normatively attractive femininity,” larger bodies are Othered because they do not fit within the societal standard of attractiveness.

(Chetwynd 3). Outside of a handful of self-transformation arcs regarding weight loss, weight isn't explicitly moralized too much within the show. Fat jokes are told, but thin queens like Violet Chachki are also made fun of for their obsession with her own tiny waist. However, thinner queens are presented as the standard, while fat bodies are the Other in the context of *RPDR*. Being a 'big girl' is a label in itself, while thin queens are able to be labeled as comedy queens, fashion queens, or actresses.

Being Black, Being Ratchet

Blackness itself is not treated as Otherness in the way that other races and ethnicities are on *RPDR*. Black queens are not boxed into just being a Black queen, but are allowed to be comedy queens, fashion girls, or pageant girls, regardless of their race. Although being Black is certainly part of their identity, it remains a part and not the whole of their character on the show. However, being 'ratchet' or any representation of stereotypical black culture can easily become a defining characteristic of a queen on *Drag Race*.

A Thomas Speta interview with Aja – a contestant on Season Nine of *Drag Race* – discusses the intersectionality of drag, race and gender. Aja states that "a lot of people will niche your drag because you're ethnic, and look at *RuPaul's Drag Race*, like all the black girls that get on are pageant girls, or they're fucking ratchet" (Speta 11). In Season 7, the word "ghetto" is often used, both by contestants and by Michelle Visage but in Season 8 "ratchet" is the new word for the same concept. Ratchet and ghetto are descriptors reserved only for black queens (or white queens doing stereotypically black impersonations). On *RPDR*, being ghetto or ratchet is something that needs to be fixed

in order for a queen to succeed. As I discussed earlier, Derrick Barry calls Bob the Drag Queen ratchet fairly often, almost exclusively as an insult. In S8 EP4 Michelle Visage also identifies Bob The Drag Queen as “ratchet drag” and tells Bob that she needs to show glamor (the specific note is “less ratchet, more fashion”). In this case, Michelle is indicating that ratchet is the antithesis of glamor – that it is ugly and undesirable. This also reflects Aja’s thoughts on the subject - that Black queens on *RPDR* can either be beautiful pageant queens or be ratchet. For Michelle Visage, Bob The Drag Queen needs to transform from being ratchet into being glamorous in order to find success on *RPDR*.

Speta argues that RuPaul favors a whitewashed version of herself, and projects this white favoritism onto the contestants:

> RuPaul, while a black drag queen herself, portrays a persona that erases her ethnicity. Constantly sporting blonde hair and presenting an elegant composure, RuPaul’s glamour does not arise out of her own natural features and heritage, but is artificial and tweaked towards Western opinion on what is beautiful (Speta 10)

RuPaul is always dressed in expensive gowns, with perfect wigs and makeup – always glamor and never ratchet. Because RuPaul is the most famous drag queen in the world, as well as the head judge of the show, contestants are incentivised to shape themselves to her standard of drag.

There is a marked distinction between race and ethnicity on *RPDR*. Race doesn’t necessarily matter, but ethnicity (or cultural background) does. Being Black isn’t a trait the show will utilize for characterization, but representing Black culture or being from

Africa will be exploited. We see this in Bob the Drag Queen, who, because she is Black, faces an additional challenge of not being ratchet. Another example is Bebe Zahara Benet - the winner of Season One. BeBe is from Cameroon, which is mentioned often in the season (the judges consistently call out 'Cameroon!' as she walks the runway). Bebe becomes a representative for all of Africa through the season, a brand that is constructed both by herself and by the show. She is "constantly asked to invoke her childhood and adolescence in Cameroon with repeated references and allusions to her dress as 'authentic' and/or 'animalistic'" (Kohlsdorf 81). She wears animal print on the runway, and is referred to as the "leopard queen" and "lion queen" in S1 EP3, suggesting that Africa is the land of wild animals, not human beings. For the purposes of the show, it doesn't matter that Bebe is black, but it does matter that she grew up in Cameroon. It doesn't matter that Bob the Drag Queen is black, but it does matter that she's ratchet.

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism has been offered frequently in scholarship as an explanation for why reality TV functions as it does. Allen and Mendick understand the reality TV subject as a neoliberal subject who is "*compelled* to engage in techniques of self-knowledge and self-examination to 'realise' their 'true' self" (Allen and Mendick 461). They argue that authenticity is produced, but the image of authenticity is important in a neoliberal space that prioritizes self-reflection and self-transformation. Chetwynd discusses how neoliberalism presents itself in relation to post-feminism, specifically in the context of *Drag Race*. Chetwynd sees neoliberalism present itself in the "show's valorisation of

empowerment, individualism and resilience in terms of a retreat from notions of structural dissent" (Chetwynd 6). While Julia Yudelman doesn't use the term 'neoliberalism' specifically, it seems that she understands *Drag Race* similarly to Chetwynd. She argues that by Season 7, "entrepreneurial self-betterment and self-individualization emerge as dominant techniques … replacing earlier emphases on tactics of working together and helping others" (Yudelman 16). Scholars understand that identity work and authenticity are important parts of how the neoliberal subject operates in reality TV. I use the term neoliberal here to cover a societal ideology that places more emphasis on the individual than the collective, that values self-transformation and that places individual gain as an ultimate goal.

I argue that the reason behind the *Drag Race*'s portrayal of characters is due to neoliberal values. Based on my research, the storylines and marks of success within the show reveal neoliberalism as the driving force behind *RPDR*. For *Drag Race*, success is not solely reliant on the drag performances that each queen presents, but also how they conduct themselves behind the scenes as people. Pearl is a great example of this – she is judged for both the drag she presents on the mainstage and for her 'performance' in the workroom out of drag. The judgment of a queen's out-of-drag behavior often is based on the neoliberal values I've outlined above.

Nick Couldry's "Reality TV, or The Secret Theater of Neoliberalism" draws parallels between a traditional neoliberal workspace, and the reality TV environment. While his analysis is focused on Big Brother, the argument can be applied to *RPDR*. Couldry argues that "the performance 'values' of Big Brother are striking also for their fit with the demands imposed by neoliberal practice on workers (not just consumers), once

we ‘factor out’ the features intrinsic to the entertainment form” (Couldry 11). Values of the neoliberal workspace – such as individualization, resilience, a positive attitude, and performance of authenticity – are also important in the reality TV space. Each of these traits come up in *Drag Race* in different ways.

Individualization

One of the structural implications of neoliberalism is that “instead of focusing on structural change, the individual is expected to succeed or be blamed for failure” (Chetwynd 7). We see this many times throughout *RPDR* where queens are expected to rise to the top regardless of their personal histories, or personal issues. The case of ChiChi DeVayne, as I discussed earlier, is one example of this. ChiChi is expected to serve the same level of fashion on the runway as the other queens, who have more money and resources than her. The show wants to exploit her tragic past while offering little to no structural support for the issues she faces.

Individualism also is highlighted in the fact that most *RPDR* queens are on the show to build their personal brand in some capacity. They need to stand out from the rest of the cast and appeal to the viewing audience in order to move up the social order. The show is not necessarily meant to build a community of drag queens, but to let certain drag queens of each season propel themselves into stardom. Chetwynd states that

> The contestants’ attempts to build genuine community are undermined by one of the show’s key catchphrases: ‘This is not RuPaul’s best friends’ race’ … The catchphrase can further be understood to call upon the viewer to understand

> themselves as an individual within a competitive society, rather than as an individual within a potential community. (Chetwynd 8)

The show, by its design, pits queer performers against each other and slowly destroys any community they created through eliminations. The primary purpose of *RPDR* as a reality TV show is to have one queen rise to the top and get rewarded with a monetary prize. Each queen needs to stand out from the rest and individualize herself to gain the attention of a viewing audience.

Resilience

Resilience goes hand in hand with individualism in the neoliberal framework. Because you have to rely on just yourself to move up in society, you also have to be able to pull yourself through trauma, structural inequality,and any past baggage attached to you. On *RPDR*, resilience presents itself in stories of hardship that are almost always brought to a positive end. This concept can be succinctly demonstrated in one example. In S9 EP3, Peppermint does a runway look that is inspired by a memory of when she set the kitchen on fire as a teenager. Later in critiques, RuPaul notes “She used something that wasn’t a really good memory and turned it into a plus… I thought that was very smart.” This quote demonstrates RuPaul’s attitude towards trauma - it’s commendable to exploit it for personal gain. Using your past trauma as a motivator is common for *Drag Race* queens across multiple contexts.

In Season 9, Cynthia Lee Fontaine is brought back after competing in S8, and reveals in S9 EP2 that she was battling stage one liver cancer during the break between seasons (by the time she returned to Season 9 she was in remission). Sasha Velour,

from confessional weighs in on Cynthia's cancer journey – "If anything she's stronger competing now. It has given her a drive to really succeed." Cynthia's cancer diagnosis is simultaneously framed as a tragic occurrence, and also as a motivator for her performance as a fabulous, humorous drag queen. As I touched on earlier, Kim Chi's finale number for Season 8 is about all of the things that she was bullied or Othered for throughout her life – being fat, being feminine, being Asian. Through the framework of the show, she turns these things into part of her brand. Trixie Mattel on Season 7 tells a story about how her abusive stepfather used to call her a trixie when she was being too feminine. By reclaiming the derogatory term as part of her drag name, Trixie turns her past trauma and hardship into a key piece of her brand identity and something she can celebrate. In each of these examples, we see the show framing and highlighting the moments in which queens discuss their hardships, and using these moments to provide a motive or identity for each queen. While resilience in the face of hardship being celebrated, lack of resilience is condemned. In S9 EP4, Nina Bonina Brown breaks into tears during the critiques. She is then criticized for not being resilient enough with Michelle saying her "vulnerability is so raw" and Ross Matthews telling Nina "you're gonna need a thicker skin." Both of these comments tell the audience that external displays of vulnerability are not welcome on *Drag Race* and are instead seen as a personal flaw of a queen.

Resilience as a value is even highlighted through the very structure of the show. Often, the most vulnerable or emotional moments for the queens come while they're doing their runway makeup. In what seem to be constructed moments, queens discuss all kinds of past trauma, parental relations, cancer diagnosis, being LGBT+ , being

Othered. One reason that these moments feel so constructed is that the audience enters the scene just as one queen asks another a leading question about their past. The fact that these questions almost always lead to a tragic story contributes to the produced feeling of the moment. After queens discuss their pasts, they emerge on the other side both emotionally and physically transformed as we watch them walk the runway – a "depiction of confident resilient femininity" (Chetwynd 5). It's clear that the show wants the contestants to discuss sad and serious topics, and contrast that discussion against footage of them in full drag on the runway. The very structure of the show prioritizes resilience, as queens immediately put aside their suffering to display high fashion and confidence.

Resilience as a priority can also be seen in the way that negative and positive attitudes are treated on the show. On *Drag Race* having a bad attitude is a fatal flaw. Within the show, "contestants are encouraged to minimize negative mental attitudes such as rage, insecurity or vulnerability" (Chetwynd 4). A negative attitude is often paired with failure, illustrating for the audience that remaining positive through hardship is the only way to succeed. Nina Bonina Brown, Violet Chachki, Acid Betty and ChiChi DeVayne all get criticized by the judges or by the other queens for their bad attitudes. While their fates are all different, it's clear that not being open to any challenge and any teammate is a negative on *Drag Race.*

Performing Authenticity

"Know who you are and deliver it at all times" – both a RuPaul tweet from 2013 and a judges table comment from Season 2 – illustrates what a queen's success on *Drag Race* is dependent upon. One of the marks of a winner on *RPDR* is a queen who

is able to show her true self as part of her brand. The idea of the self comes up constantly in the show, with the judges urging the queens to let their “true self shine through.” In cases like Derrick Barry, Jaymes Mansfield, and Laila McQueen, showing their real, authentic selves to the judges is their biggest obstacle on the show. They are constantly encouraged to let their real selves shine, and often end up failing because the judges don’t feel they’re being authentic.

However, what the judges deem to be authentic isn’t consistent. I’m going to outline this by comparing the storylines of Max – a S7 contestant– and Sasha Velour – the winner of S9. Max operates in a space between the real and fake. She maintains a seemingly inauthentic mid-atlantic accent throughout her time on the season. This is called out in the S7 finale when Trixie Mattel – another contestant, who went to college with Max – is asked “Did Max speak with that fake-ass British accent then?” to which Trixie replies “Uh, I don't think she did.” Throughout the season Max only wears gray or white wigs, which Michelle Visage hates. Michelle asks Max multiple times to wear a different hair color on the runway. Max eventually wears a black wig on the runway but is eliminated the same episode. By adhering too closely to her previously established brand - which was considered as inauthentic by the judges and her fellow queens – Max fails in the structure of *Drag Race.*

On the other hand Sasha Velour is praised throughout the season for staying true to herself, as I mentioned earlier. She is able to lean on her intelligence, walk the runway without a wig, and adapt challenges to her specific skill set. Sasha is never asked by the judges to dramatically change her drag - the change is mostly self-motivated as she recognizes that she needs to be less serious. Sasha succeeds

because she stays true to herself throughout the season, while Max fails because she is too committed to what the judges deem to be an non-authentic version of herself.

The first part of success on *Drag Race* is knowing who you are. As I've briefly shown here, 'who you are' can mean different things for different queens. The next mark of success on *Drag Race* is being able to deliver the authentic version of yourself "at all times." Queens are encouraged to brand themselves for consumption, often exploiting any differences presented in their personhood or their drag. Chetwynd ties the idea of personal branding back to neoliberalism - "neoliberalism produces new forms of subjectivity whereby subjects understand themselves as a form of human capital that needs to be constantly improved in order to be better able to compete" (Chetwynd 22). To be able to "deliver" at all times is to be able to understand yourself, improve yourself, and sell yourself.

RuPaul

Arguably, one of RuPaul's most authentic moments in *Drag Race* comes during the Season Ten reunion episode. The Vixen (a black girl from Chicago) was one of the most controversial queens of the season and got into fights with various (mostly white) queens throughout her time on the show. In the reunion episode, after RuPaul and the other queens spend over ten minutes replaying and re-discussing the fights that The Vixen had been involved in, The Vixen announces she's done and walks out. After she walks out, the discussion between the remaining queens and RuPaul continues, and culminates in RuPaul speaking for over a minute straight about her frustration with the Vixen's attitude:

> I come from the same goddamn place she comes from and here I am, you see me walking out? No, I'm not walking out. I fucking learned how to act around people and how to deal with shit … Let me tell you something, I have been discriminated against by white people for being black, by black people for being gay, by gay people for being too femme. Did I let that stop me from getting to this chair? No, I had to separate what I feel or what my impression of the situation is to put my focus on the goal … You know, the world is hard. It's hard to live on this planet. But we all have to learn how to deal with it. (RuPaul, S10 EP13)

RuPaul places himself in the shoes of the Vixen growing up as a black queer man. However, RuPaul rose above the discrimination and hardship faced by the sheer force of willpower and learning how to "deal with shit." RuPaul "is proud that he learned how to display a positive mental attitude and silence his own experience of injustice" and is mad at The Vixen for not exercising the same positive attitude while being told how she should've reacted to being provoked (Chetwynd 7).

The narrative of RuPaul rising from hardship to global stardom by working hard and staying focused is not a new one. The very first episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race* opens with a collection of childhood photos of RuPaul accompanied by his narration – "I, RuPaul, was born a poor black child in the Brewster Housing Projects of San Diego, California but baby, (you better work) look at me now!" (By all accounts, RuPaul did not grow up in the Brewster Projects as they were located in Detroit, not San Diego). In the intro, RuPaul then explains that he now wants to share the success he's achieved with other drag queens by bringing them onto TV. From the first moments of *Drag Race*, RuPaul begins building a narrative around himself - that drag queens should be able to

become global superstars by working hard and being resilient. It seems to me that RuPaul applies neoliberal values towards his own life, and this might be a big reason why they're reproduced on *RPDR*. RuPaul, in his rant aimed at The Vixen, isn't advocating for a society where there is less discrimination, where a queen doesn't have to separate what they feel in order to succeed. Rather, he is telling The Vixen, and all the remaining queens, that they need to pull themselves up by the bootstraps and not let societal injustices keep them down. In other words, "don't wear your victimhood as a badge of honor," as RuPaul states in S9 EP5. While it's hard to identify how much of *Drag Race* is controlled by RuPaul himself, it is telling that the face of the show holds such strong opinions about how queens should conduct themselves when dealing with hardship.

Conclusion

When thinking about how *RuPaul's Drag Race* constructs character and authenticity, I've outlined several arguments. First, storylines and character arcs are constructed for queens through the show's use of formal reality tv conventions and editing choices. *Drag Race* repeatedly references certain character traits of each queen to frame them and build connections between these traits and their characterizations. Elements such as music, confessional footage, and inclusion of judges' comments all work to characterize each queen. Storylines are built throughout an episode or throughout a whole season, and often involve a queen's need to show who they really are, believe in themselves, and brand themselves for public consumption.

Second, In the case of characterization and branding, anything that Others a certain queen is exploited by the show and in some cases the queens themselves. While thin white queens are able to identify themselves as a celebrity impersonator, an actor, an artist or a model, other queens can be constrained by their otherness. A queen from Puerto Rico is first and foremost a Latin queen, no matter what else she does. A plus size queen is first and foremost a big girl, with no regard to what style of drag she does. Speta argues that “the ‘typical’ drag queen now seems to be one who is white” (Speta 10). As I’ve laid out above, the ‘typical’ drag queen for *RPDR* is not only white, but thin, from the US, and able to operate as an individual and a commodity under a neoliberal framework.

Third, success on *RPDR* operates under a series of neoliberal values. To be seen as authentic, and as a serious competitor, a queen must display traits such as individualism, resilience, and a positive attitude. A queen's success on the show is not solely based on her drag performances, but on how she operates as an individual behind the scenes. Self-transformation is a necessity for some queens if they want to show their ‘real’ selves. Additionally, because *RPDR* acts as a force to propel drag queens into stardom, every queen on the show is incentivized to set themselves apart from the rest and brand themselves and their drag for consumption.

Of course, it’s both compelling and a sign of continued progress that every year, each main season of *RPDR* offers an opportunity for ~14 queer performers from many walks of life to showcase their art on an international stage. However, the show has a responsibility to the performers that appear on it. When dealing with drag queens who are minorities or come from disenfranchised backgrounds, it’s diminishing to reduce

them to those identities alone. *Drag Race* faces the same challenge as any other reality TV show of how to represent a complex person in 42-60 minute episodes of weekly TV. Recognizing this challenge and the issues present on *Drag Race* gives the viewer a critical lens to view the show while visualizing a way forward to better representation for all.

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