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# “SHE IS NOT ACTING, SHE IS”

## The conflict between gender and racial realness on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*

Sabrina Strings and Long T. Bui

*This essay examines the popular television show RuPaul’s Drag Race to reveal the ways drag performance provides an ambivalent, contradictory space for wrestling with contentious issues surrounding cultural identity and authenticity in reality TV. Focusing on the show’s controversial season three, the authors demonstrate how drag queens subvert and play with ideas of gender “realness” but find an impasse in open discussions of race. The racial minstrelsy of some contestants we observe created antagonisms between black/brown characters and their white/Asian counterparts, exposing a rift in ideas about racial play despite the general acceptance of flexibility in gender bending. Recognizing that reality TV exploits and uncovers these tensions, we demonstrate that while drag performance enacts a subversive mode of queer performance, it provides a contested site and complex semiotic space for dealing with sensitive matters of race/ethnicity, especially when certain forms of stereotyping are rewarded over others.*

KEYWORDS drag queen; race; RuPaul; reality television; queer

### Introduction

Second wave feminists have long interrogated the issue of gender, suggesting it is not real or natural. Feminists of color have argued, however, that gender *and* race (among other identity markers) intersect to inform the experiences of “women” and “men” and that we cannot successfully problematize one while leaving the other(s) intact (Patricia Hill Collins 2000; Chandra Talpade Mohanty 1988; Chela Sandoval 1991). In feminist media scholarship, there continues to be a great deal of commentary about women’s marginalization and male privilege that fails to mention race. As Amanda Lotz notes, generally missing from discussions of the contradictory “televsual representations of gender politics” is the “subtext of race” (2001, 106, 108). Indeed, critical academic interventions on the *racialized* representations of femininity and masculinity in the media have been few and far between. To the extent that gender is problematized while race is either rendered invisible or naturalized, gender appears to be mutable, but race is made to look “real” or natural (K. S. Jewell 2012).

This essay examines the problematization, or lack thereof, of the intersecting identity markers of gender and race in televsual media. We use the popular television show *RuPaul’s Drag Race* as our case study. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is an ideal arena of investigation

into representations of race and gender. The show relies on drag's self-conscious positioning as an art form—traditionally involving men dressing up as women—which *contests* the fixity of identity through the appropriation or subversion of gender/sexual norms by way of cross-dressing, transvestitism, or female impersonation. While many scholars rightly observed that drag too has the ability to reproduce traditional understandings of “men’s” and “women’s” essential natures (Jill Dolan 1985; Marilyn Frye 1983; Steven Schacht 1998; Richard Tewksbury 1993), other scholars have noted that it can simultaneously *replicate and disrupt* sexual stereotypes (Judith Halberstam 1998; José Esteban Muñoz 1999; Leila Rupp & Verta Taylor 2003; Eve Shapiro 2007; Verta Taylor, Leila Rupp, & Joshua Gamson 2004).

In this paper, we argue that amid the gender play on *RuPaul's Drag Race* there is an adherence to racial “authenticity.” That is, while gender can be subverted, inverted, or reified, race must follow a protocol of “realness.” Moreover, for the black and brown characters on the show, racial realness means staying “true” to one’s off-stage ethnic/racial identity, a requirement not enforced for the white and Asian characters on the show. This policing of racial identity for certain minority characters re-inscribes them as fundamentally “Other” (F. Fanon 1967; Stuart Hall 1997), re-instating race as “natural” or “real” at the same moment as it undermines gender’s “realness.”

### Drag as a Contested Space of “Real” Meanings

*RuPaul's Drag Race* is a highly rated reality television show that airs once a week on the gay-friendly LOGO network. Its host, RuPaul (born Andre Charles), holds the distinction of being the first drag queen with a successful recording career. “Her”<sup>1</sup> popularity as a drag queen (and her status as one of the few recognizable black queer figures in US mainstream society) has contributed to the growth and popularity of the show.

Each week, contestants participate in a runway show as well as a mini and a main “challenge.” The challenges, or competitions, are calculated to test the contestants’ knowledge of, and skills relevant to, drag. As such, the challenges typically involve acting or playing a kind of game that requires a form of female improvisation, attesting to the scripted nature of gender (Marlon M. Bailey 2011, Judith Butler 1993, Dolan 1985).

One of the unspoken realities about the show is that these challenges draw heavily on elements of the drag ball subculture. At drag balls, female impersonators perform a type of femininity (or in some cases masculinity) that falls into a specific gender category (e.g., “butch queen” or “femme queen”). The participants are judged on their “realness” or their ability to convince the judges that they look and act the part of a typical woman (or man) who would inhabit said category. There are no competitions for racial realness at ballrooms, which are often populated by low-income people of color.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, performances of a particular type of “femme” or “butch” necessarily evoke a specific type of racialized and classed subject. Therefore, while there are no categories for “Black realness” or “Latino realness,” the performance of a “Thug” might call on understandings or stereotypes of blackness, while that of an “Executive” might draw on similar understandings of whiteness.

Significantly, season three of *RuPaul's Drag Race* makes *explicit* the understandings of race and class contained within ball-esque costume performances, fashioning racialized caricatures that helped expand its brand recognition. Leaping from its Logo launching pad, *Drag Race* began marketing elements of a minority subculture for mass consumption and mainstream titillation. In so doing, RuPaul and the other judges were compelled to call out

the (formerly implicit) racialized (and classed) aspects of categorical performances of gender. Such efforts were not for naught; while during the first two seasons, the show grew in popularity and captivated audiences with its zaniness, it was during the third season that the show began to generate a great deal of media attention and controversy, due in part to its race-based antics (Bradford Nordeen 2012).

The result of this "outing" of race was the investment on the part of RuPaul, and many of the other queens, in performances of gender that were treated as racially *essentialist*. This overt raceing became problematic for the contestants in two ways. First, coming from marginalized groups in society, the queens were sensitive to ethnic (mis)appropriation. Thus, they became defensive when cast members donned racial personas, viewing these performances as offensive forms of mockery or minstrelsy. Second, *black and brown cast members were more often required to perform stereotypical racial identities*. RuPaul would refer to such performances as giving "personality."

*Drag Race* is not unique in its stereotypical deployment and objectification of race. The reality TV apparatus itself bears great responsibility for *re-essentializing* race (Jay Clarkson 2005). As a genre of programming that purports to represent that which is "real," reality TV has been known to contribute to the naturalization of stereotypes, often done in an effort to create gossip-worthy moments on a show.

Indeed, other reality TV shows, including notably, *America's Next Top Model (ANTM)* have also been taken to task for employing stereotypes of race to "spice up" its content. As Amy Adele Hasinoff (2008) writes of *ANTM*,

The increased visibility of racial identities is deployed to commodify race and maintain its political invisibility. The show produces race as a superficial highly visible aspect of identity while erasing racisms and structural inequalities by glamorizing the process of moving from one racialized identity to another and promoting it as a key narrative arc on the show for a number of models. (326).

*Drag Race*, we assert, could be critiqued for a similar form of racial commodification. What makes *Drag Race* unique, however, is the emphasis on performativity and masquerade (inherent in drag) that purportedly makes stepping *outside* the bounds of normativity the requirement for a show-stopping routine. Instead, we find that by the third season of the show, performances that achieved a "genderfuck" (June L. Reich 1992) by emphasizing the fluidity of sex(uality), while maintaining racial "realness" were deemed avant-garde. This had the unfortunate effect not only of commodifying or stereotyping race, but also of reifying its presumed "naturalness."

The reality TV genre of "reality" follows an economy of personhood where "certain figures and bodies are loaded with more invective than others" (Beverly Skeggs & Helen Wood 2012, 9). While audiences can decode the "meaningful discourse" between content and form of the televisual message, reality TV participants too must negotiate their own meaningful discourse at the immediacy and very moment of their personal interactions with other participants. Although drag has always been staged and spectacularized with over-the-top behavior, the histrionics of reality TV retools and amplifies the art of drag, creating a multilayered fantasy of reality.

### Boogers vs Heathers: When “Keepin’ It Real” Goes Wrong

For Eir-Anne Edgar (2011) in her study of the first season of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, “queer legitimacy” and “successful drag” are terms often used to describe those queens who messily cross boundaries. Those drag performances viewed as successful (and ironically most subversive) are those where stereotypes are *deployed*. Edgar, however, does not discuss the politics of race, which are evident even on the first season. That is, Edgar fails to see that in drag—as it is presented on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*—it was not just any stereotypes that offered queer legitimacy, but the stereotypes that effectively troubled gender ideologies, while reifying racial ideologies. This was especially true for the black/brown characters on the show inhabiting bodies historically deemed inherently non-fungible or inassimilable to whiteness (Fanon 1967; Hall 1997).

Season three of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* provides a compelling space for examining this phenomenon due to the unspoken racial divide on the show that coalesces into two rival camps: the Heathers and the Boogers. The Heathers are the white (fair-skinned Latinos) and Asian characters on the show. The term “Heathers” derives from a 1988 movie of the same name in which three of the most “beautiful” and popular white girls (all named Heather) in a suburban high school create an exclusive clique, intimidating their peers with their looks and tenacity. Four queens—Carmen, Delta, Raja, and Manila—christened themselves “Heathers” because they believed that their talent stems from their beauty and audacity.

The black and brown characters on the show derogatorily were labeled “Boogers” by the Heathers. The Boogers were Alexis Mateo, Shangela Laquifa Wadley, Yara Sofia, and Stacy Layne Matthews. They were given this moniker because, in Manila’s words, they were “a busted, unpolished mess.” If the term “Heather” evokes whiteness and refinement, “Boogers” recalls the dirty, unrefined, and grotesque, that which should be purged or expunged from the (social) body (Mary Douglas 2002). In this case, the Heathers often banded together in the hopes of eliminating the Boogers one by one.

Even if we reject Manila’s assessment of the Boogers’ looks and talent, it is undeniable that they were more constrained in their drag performances. Comfortable with flipping gender, the Boogers nevertheless remained “true” to their race or ethnic heritage. Shangela Laquifa Wadley, for instance, is an African American cast member who originally hails from the south, but now lives in Los Angeles. Shangela would thus effectuate a kind of racialized “genderfuck,” playing an urban or southern black gender-ambiguous character. For example, in the stand-up comedy challenge Shangela plays “Laquifa the PMP,” or postmodern pimp/ho, wherein s/he appropriates both the masculine and feminine roles of this dyad. Donning long, fake nails, s/he leans into the camera, rolling her neck and saying “grrrrlllllll,” in the manner of a stereotypical black woman. But, as Shangela reminds the audience, she was more than a woman, as she calls out, “Yes, I’m still a pimp.” S/he shouts to a live crowd:

[Folks on the block] always saying “Laquifa . . . where yo hoes at?”  
I say, “Bitch, don’t you see I’m wearing four pair of hose right here holding back  
my d#%k?”

Wadley’s comedic chops enabled her to win this challenge, but so too did her new archetype of queer sex(uality) that mixed supposedly “authentic” elements of black masculinity and femininity. Shangela makes it clear throughout that the postmodern pimp/ho, while both man and woman, is nevertheless *not* “post-racial”; s/he is a clearly racialized

(read: black) subject. The continuous references to "folks on the block" and ostentatious gesticulations are reminiscent of another black female drag character, Sheneneh from the popular TV series *Martin*. The racially coded language speaks to identities that fall firmly within the archetype of The *Black* pimp/ho, wherein gender drifts and drags, but blackness is held constant (Rusty Barrett 1998; Stephen L. Mann 2011; T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting 2007).

If Shangela regularly worked within the bounds of blackness, the resident Latinas, Yara Sofia and Alexis Mateo, stuck to characters that underscored their pride for their Puerto Rican/Latin roots. Yara Sofia was born in Puerto Rico, and her stage name pays homage to a fierce Puerto Rican woman of the same name she knew from her hometown. S/he had a heavy Spanish accent, and often excelled in challenges in which she relied on her Spanish language skills or enacted a stereotypically "Latin" femininity.

During the first episode, Yara walks into the workroom and introduces herself to her fellow queens by saying "I'm the Puerto Rican one." The response to this statement of ethnic identification was immediate:

"I'm Asian" responds Manila.

"I'm from L.A. I'm Italian," replies Venus D-Lite.

"I'm from L.A. also, I'm black." Delta Work retorts.

Note that Manila replies with her racial affiliation, but neither of the white characters identify as "white." While Venus<sup>3</sup> skirts the question of race and avows an ethnic identification instead, Delta Work (a light-skinned Mexican) undermines the entire enterprise by claiming an obviously false racial status. All the queens find this latest revelation funny, and the ethno-racial sounding off comes to a brief end.

This exchange happened during the first six minutes of the first episode, and spoke volumes about the centrality of racial/ethnic identifications for the Boogers vs. Heathers. Ethnic identity is one of the first things we learn about Yara Sofia, as she walks into the workroom and begins a conversation that pulled a similar form of self-marking out of the others present. Delta, on the other hand, felt no pressure to remain ethnically or racially authentic. (Even though Manila here identifies herself as "Asian," we find in subsequent episodes that she appropriates a variety of Asian stereotypes, including those that have nothing to do with her own background.) This light-hearted interaction was but a prelude to the racial tensions to come; illuminating the relative comfort of the Heathers in escaping their racial affiliations.

Neither Yara nor the other so-called "Boogers" had much discretion to engage in racial free-play. The black and brown actors were continuously encouraged to "race it up" by the judges. On episode four, for instance, Yara plays an exercise guru. Advised by judge Susan Powter to use the sexiness of her ethnic background, she decides to do her routine entirely in Spanish. This performance received rave reviews, showing the circumscribed nature of acceptable types of drag for darker cast members. On the very next episode, RuPaul reminds the viewers of the centrality of race/ethnicity to Yara's identity on and off stage, as he walks up to Yara during a preparation session and says "Hey Shakira," likening her to a Latina superstar (who she never played in any of the challenges). Ru then starts counting in Spanish, "uno, dos, tres . . . escandalo."

Yara did not usually object to these ethnically-based identifications. Like Shangela's comfort within the black box, Yara often willingly works her "Latina thing." But, Yara does find herself frustrated in her inability to move past her ethnicity on episode six, when she

decides to perform as white soul-singer, Amy Winehouse. Ru, instantly skeptical of this choice, doubts her abilities to take on this drag racial identity: "You're from Puerto Rico. She's from England. How're you going to do that?" Ru's incredulity is heightened when he hears Yara Sofia practice her faux-British accent and cranes forward with laughter at its execution. The performance, in the end, falls flat because as one judge put it, no one could understand Yara given her thick Puerto Rican accent. This is peculiar, since not being able to understand Yara was seemingly not a problem when she spoke in Spanish for other challenges, even though there were very few Spanish speakers on the judges' panel. For them, Yara was at her drag best when she sounded sexy, exotic and most importantly authentic. This revealed the importance for Yara, of being both convincingly feminine *and* Latin.

### **"Race It Up": Successfully Exploiting Race to Win the Race**

While clearly racialized performances of femininity were those that received the most accolades, not all of the contestants on the show stepped into character with such ease. Unlike Yara, fellow "Booger" Alexis Mateo expressed disdain for the identity politics of the show. Identified by Manila during their first meeting as "another Puerto Rican one," Alexis expresses resentment at being pigeonholed. In the interview room, she voiced her concern, suggesting that she did not want to be pushed into a racial archetype by the other contestants or the judges, and stating that she did not want to be pegged a "Latin Queen."

But, Alexis too, on subsequent episodes, relents and decides to "race it up." By the infamous QNN episode, Alexis has taken on her persona as a "Latin Queen." Finding that stereotypes work for her as much as they do for others, Alexis explains her presentation on the catwalk as such: "I'm just giving RuPaul a lot of personality and being very 'cha cha' very Latina." The term "personality" was often a code word on the show for race. In her assessments, RuPaul often told contestants that they didn't give enough "personality" but the form of personality preferred on this campy show for drag queens often meant stereotypically "race-y" self-expression. Alexis' presentation of the racially authentic self pleases the judges, as is evident when judge Debbie Matenopoulos, says "Go 'head Charo."

Alexis Mateo makes it further in the competition than any of the other "Boogers," arguably because of her effective ability to appropriate the markers of femininity without attempting to transgress her racial/ethnic identity. She, like Yara, was often praised for being a beautiful and sexy "woman" who nevertheless kept it "true" to her cultural background. This was nowhere more evident than in the "Life, Liberty and Pursuit of Style" challenge, which required contestants to make a short public service announcement for US troops stationed abroad. Effectively recasting her sexual identity, Alexis plays a carefree Latina. Flirtatious and giggly, she tickles the judges' fancy with her feminine wiles; all the while her colorful costume and outrageous dancing were calculated to read (stereotypically) "Puerto Rican." Juxtaposed to her somber Marine soldier garb on that same episode, Alexis appears to be the sincere patriotic Latin(a). S/he is convincingly reserved when playing the role of the man, and expressive when playing that of the woman. She, like a good drag queen must, effectively shuttles between "butch" and "femme" realness, in a fashion that both replicates and disrupts traditional notions of gender (Halberstam 1998; Muñoz 1999; Rupp & Taylor 2003; Shapiro 2007; Taylor, Rupp, & Gamson 2004). But, Alexis achieves this gender drift in a way that is in tune with what the judges already project on her as a racialized cast member. Alexis wins this challenge.



For the Boogers, one's drag persona is thus very much over-determined by their non-drag racial identity. The one seeming exception to this rule is Stacy Layne Matthews. Also derogatorily labeled a Booger, Stacy is a voluptuous queen hailing from Back Swamp, North Carolina. She reveals after several episodes that she is Native American, but curiously enough, her southern credentials, skin color, and weight mark her black by association. Therefore, Stacy manages to excel when she performs two prominent stereotypes of black femininity: The Mammy and Sapphire.

Evidence of this is seen as early as the first few episodes, as RuPaul constantly criticizes Stacy for not giving enough "personality" in her drag performances and costumes. She redeems herself in Ru's eyes during episode four, entitled "Totally Leotarded." On this episode, Stacy drags-up as a heavy-set black woman doing an exercise video. Introducing herself with a bit of black vernacular: "well, how you doin'?" Stacy begins the scene seated, holding a shake-weight in one hand and a plate of food in another. While shaking her weight, she encourages other girls to get into the routine by exclaiming "Come on girls!" letting her whole body shake while simultaneously leaning over to take a bite of a chicken wing.

Stacy in this challenge not only uses black vernacular, she utilizes well-known and invidious stereotypes of black people having a poultry fixation. She further draws on tropes of black women in particular being large because they love to eat and encouraging others to do the same (Nargis Fontaine 2011). In these ways, Stacy's performance readily recalls the archetypal Mammy (Fontaine 2011; Andrea Shaw 2006). In enlisting these tropes for comedic effect, Stacy thoroughly entertains and wins over the judges.

This is not the only time Stacy uses stereotypes of black femininity to give Ru the requisite "personality." For a challenge called the "Snatch" game, in which contestants have to drag-up as a celebrity and offer humorous if somewhat realistic impersonations of a character, Stacy Layne's original plan was to perform as white model-cum-socialite Anna Nicole Smith. But Ru expresses reservations about Stacy's ability to pull off the role of a white blonde former Playboy bunny:

"How are you going to portray Anna Nicole Smith?"

"With the fabulous shoes with the pink on 'em . . ."

"So you're going to rely on your purse and your shoes? Listen, I got to tell you I'm not sold."

Experiencing the sting of racial typecasting that also kept Yara hemmed in, Stacy is dissuaded from performing her original choice of Anna Nicole Smith. She chooses instead to reprise the character played by Oscar-winning actress Mo'nique in the movie *Precious*. Taking on a movie persona that some critics deemed "too close to minstrelsy for comfort" (Michael Phillips 2009), Stacy scores big in this role. She embodied the archetype of the Sapphire—for which Mo'nique had already been critiqued—with her eye and neck rolling, and the implicit threat of violence typical of a "baaad" black woman. Stacy pleases the judges with her outrageous antics. This is the only challenge that Stacy Layne wins.

For the Boogers, "successful drag" is predicated on the curious mixture of gender play and racial authenticity. They were called upon to be compellingly accurate embodiments of *racialized* male and female archetypes. When they succeed in this racially authentic gendering, they had given Ru and the other judges the "personality" they were looking for. While issues of race (or racism) could be analyzed in all seasons of the show, season three was optimal for observing race in all its controversy. By this time, the show had transformed

from a curious addition to the already crowded reality TV landscape to a bonafide pop phenomenon. Since controversy sells on reality TV, and the question of what's "real" is subject to interpretation, the outrageous and carnivalesque gets the airtime. The fetishization of "Otherness" certainly falls into this category, and *Drag Race* made extensive use of this strategy in its third season. But again, the call for racial authenticity dogged the contestants who were brown, black, and black by association. The white and Asian "Heathers" could transcend their racial/ethnic affiliations, and be rewarded.

Thus, on this show, what we hear is not necessarily concrete or permanent. The linguistic analyses by scholars like Rusty Barrett (1998) on the style-switching language of African American drag queens suggests the usage of racially-coded language (white girl speech, black talk) does not directly correspond to actual identity (Mann 2011). Reality TV may act like a fishbowl where social meanings appear enclosed, but the production of drag is a polymorphous, concentric process where meanings *drag* across discrepant points of understanding, which do not always intersect. Contestants seem to misunderstand each other frequently on the show but the question is always if their expressed confusion is genuine or purely for show. A national TV program like *Drag Race* brings together individuals from different regions and communities into a shared space of mass mediated competition where they might otherwise not meet in real-life (hence, RuPaul's accusation of Alexis Mateo as a "regional" drag queen rather than a cosmopolitan, national one). This type of broad-based social "mediation" can open up a host of problems.

### **Throwin' Some Shade: On the Performance of Authentic "Otherness"**

Embodying stereotypes of racial/ethnic minorities could help the show's queens strike comedic gold in the competition. But, whereas the Boogers needed to remain racially "authentic" with their stereotypes, the Heathers fared well when they took on the tropes of the racial "Other." Fair-skinned Latinas, Heathers Carmen Carrera and Delta Work, typically chose to play white or racially unmarked female characters. Their routines typically came off as flat with the judges. Illustrative of this is the feedback often given to Delta Work. Delta, whose drag name is a play on the name of white actress Delta Burke, commonly put on a blonde wig in the approximation of mainstream aesthetic ideals. At other times Delta went for the brunette drag icon, Cher. As a critique of her performance of Cher, like most of Delta's other performances, Ru and the other judges expressed concern that she did not give enough "personality." Despite her proximity to whiteness, her seeming "authenticity" in playing whiteness did her little good in the challenges.

Carmen Carrera, a half Puerto-Rican, half white Heather fared similarly when she took on racially-unmarked female characters. Choosing to sex it up rather than race it up, Carmen routinely played up her curvaceous physique in body-hugging or barely-there costumes. While her sexiness (read: "feminine wiles") was commended by the judges, she was often criticized for not giving enough "personality." Because she would not to play up her "Latina side," Carmen ultimately dissatisfied not just the judges, but also Puerto Rican "Boogers" Yara and Alexis. In a confrontation that took place in the workroom, Yara and Alexis encouraged Carmen to start speaking Spanish in her acts. Carmen responds, "I don't speak Spanish." Yara and Alexis protest that she's only pretending. In the interview room, Carmen Carrera reveals that she doesn't appreciate the other girls treating her like she's "not Puerto-Rican enough."

Carmen's racially-unmarked vamp is arguably a product of her biraciality. As the literature on biraciality indicates, she may feel she has feet in both racial groups, and therefore does not necessarily need to choose one over the other (Kristen Renn 2000). Moreover, her light skin and lack of Spanish accent give her access to whiteness (via racial ambiguity) that Yara and Alexis do not have. Still, while her dual racial identity and access to whiteness may speak to her discomfort in assuming the identity of the "Latin Queen," this proves problematic for Carmen. Like fellow white-adjacent Latina Delta, her performances of what could be seen as her "authentic" racial self, for all their sexuality, do not prove racy enough for the judges. Carmen, like Delta, was eventually eliminated for not giving enough "personality."

The contestants who manage to give the requisite personality are the show's two Asian American contestants: Raja and Manila Luzon. Raja gravitates to out of the box drag that effectively flips both gender and race. As it pertains to gender, Raja's svelte physique and background as a "runway girl" gives her the uncanny ability to look like a female model. Strutting down the catwalk like a lean supermodel, the rail-thin Raja convincingly embodies the attitude, fierceness, and femininity needed to walk away with the crown. But, what makes Raja's drag cutting-edge is that she does not choose to do pretty-girl or ultra-femme types. Persuasively performing "femme realness" no less than Carmen Carrera, she one-ups her fellow Heather by giving the judges more than a little bit of androgyny. Far from being put off by this, Ru and the other judges are titillated. Her characters break down the femme/butch binary not by performing as one and then the other, but by embodying *both* and thus neither. Proving gender to be thoroughly performative (Butler 1993), something that can be concealed or revealed and therefore lacking an internal cohesion or "essence," Raja is commended by the judges, who deem her avant-garde presentations to be the next evolution of drag.

As it pertains to race, being a dark-skinned Indonesian, Raja could convincingly assume more races while in drag. Raja's appearance makes her racial positioning ambiguous, enabling her to persuasively mimic the likes of black supermodel Tyra Banks (in the form of The Tragic Mulatta character), work a Mayan-inspired look modeled after characters in the film *Apocalypto*, and play a Sioux Indian American. (After donning the latter costume, Judge Santino Rice made a clicking "tribal sound" to display his appreciation and approval of Raja's talents of simulating exotica.) Raja's so-called "National Geographic drag" was a success because of her ability to embody a plethora of non-white racial Others. With the exception of her Marie Antoinette costume (for which she applied whiteface), she played a hodge-podge of "global" women. Raja, in short, effects not only a genderfuck, but also a "racial-fuck" of sorts, one that was unavailable to the Boogers. This played very well with the judges.

Importantly, Raja's successful embodiment of various racial others hinged on her not doing a typical racial *performance*. She did not act out racial stereotypes in the manner of fellow Heather, Manila Luzon. Manila went for the "balls out" performance of racial Otherness. She fashioned herself into certain "high-fashion" racial prototypes to look stunning to audiences and judges. While the judges cheered her seeming fearlessness, her performances were seen as stereotypical and racially inauthentic by the black and brown contestants on the show, creating antagonisms between Manila and the Boogers.

The most striking example of Manila's apparent racial faux pas comes from "QNN News," the weekly challenge for episode five. The contestants were required to act as reporters in a mock newsroom. Manila decided to play an Asian female reporter who had to

interview a celebrity guest. Speaking in a heavy Chinese accent by not correctly pronouncing her Ls and Rs, Luzon took her role to a wacky extreme that RuPaul initially did not think wise, but eventually approved.

In the workroom after the show, the Boogers confer with one another about the inappropriateness of Manila's performance. This leads to a tense conversation about the issue of race and racial authenticity on the show:

Alexis Mateo: "God, Manila won the challenge."

Carmen (a "Heather"): "I thought she did really good."

Alexis: "You don't think it was a little bit, risky? That she was making fun of a culture that was not hers?"

Shangela: "Oh, it was definitely risky. She was making fun of a culture that she looks to be a part of, but she's not. You know, it just made me uncomfortable, but the judges seemed to enjoy that, so Hallelloo."

Here, the Boogers express resentment over the sense that Manila is playing a race/culture that is not her own, hence Shangela claiming Manila might "look" the part of an Asian-American, but being Filipino, she has no right to this performance since she is not Chinese. Manila enters this dialogue about the incident.

Manila: "Girl, it's just like Margaret Cho, you know she makes fun of her Asian mom all the time."

Shangela: "But she is *of* that culture. That's her mom."

Invoking the famous Asian American queer comic Margaret Cho as a way of highlighting the value of politically incorrect comedy, Manila defends satire as the basis for her stereotypical performances. Seeing her glib excuse having little effect on her naysayers, Manila tells Shangela:

"It's really no different than you doing Black southern lady."

Shangela responds: "Well, but I'm black, and I'm from the south."

Alexis then responds: "She is not acting, she *is*."

Unlike gender, race for the black/brown participants is viewed as fixed and embodied. This is manifest in the ways they are perceived, in the ways they perceive others. Racial authenticity is a requisite, it attests to who they "are" or where they come from and that they have a right to a certain drag persona because that correlates with their off-stage racial and cultural affiliations. This is due not only to the colonial history of Othering black and brown persons (Fanon 1967; Hall 1997), but the historical need of communities to *reclaim* their identities as sources of pride (Sharon P. Holland 2005; Amalia Pallares & Nilda Flores-González 2010; Orlando Patterson 1971).

### **Verging on Fake: Being "Difference" and Beating the Competition**

Since both femininity (or masculinity) and race/ethnicity were to be evident in the performances, Manila's misstep, per the Boogers, was to perform a caricature of a racial/ethnic group that was not her own. While Shangela also performs in ways that could be read as stereotypical, her off-stage identity as an African American gives the "right" to this performance since black people are often legible as racial subjects in the country. In this way, Shangela "is" a black southern lady in the eyes of the black/brown characters, despite

the fact that s/he is not a biological woman. Here, even as gender is treated as a social category that can be manipulated and mimed, race takes on the value of something *inherent* not to be broached.

Through these arguments, the actors reveal the fine line between drag as playing with gender and drag as playing with fire. Attempts to undermine hegemonic (sex)ual identity formation are part of the long and celebrated history of drag. But, a similar type of racial play recalls all too readily the violent history of minstrelsy, and creates legitimate concerns for the black and brown contestants about damning representations of Other social groups. Unfortunately, this racial rigidity remakes race into the biologically fixed category from which gender has just escaped. In other words, race is naturalized even as the gender is destabilized.

Raja, in the interview room, reflects harshly on the exchange: "I think the whole conversation was bullshit. If a black girl was asked be funny the first thing they immediately do is get ghetto, get country, and I love it. What's the difference, really?" Like Shangela, Raja draws a parallel between (biological) women and men impersonating women. In this way, the Heathers (as the Boogers) view gender as fluid, seeing no difference in its embodiment between drag queens and women. The difference, it seems, is the Heathers' sense that race is a mutable characteristic. Not constrained by the history of racial marking in the same way as the black and brown persons, they feel comfortable stepping out of their racial cast, and trying on various racial/ethnic hats.

Manila's appropriation is not seen by the Heathers as inappropriate and verging on racist (the implicit charge of the Boogers), but only as gutsy, intrepid, and performative. In other words, they view it as drag *de novo*. In the workroom, Manila and Delta intone "Some of us were doing it as . . . Drag Queens." She walks over to Delta and says the following: "They're just making it this race thing and it's not!" Delta replies "It's soo not." For the Heathers, race, when in drag, is malleable. It is equally open to performance as gender. Their ability to engage in "racial play" on the show as a way of escaping their off-stage racial affiliation differs markedly from the experiences (and related views) of the Boogers. And while black/brown Boogers might have found the Heathers' performances problematic, such racial mimesis was a big hit with the judges. RuPaul may not have initially agreed with Manila's drag decision in the QNN challenge, but she nevertheless found this performance "bold." At the judges table, RuPaul told the contestant in a sarcastic voice, "Manila, you perpetuated stereotypes, *condragulations* you are the winner of this challenge."

Manila's win spoke volumes about the expectations and relative freedom of the white/Asian characters in performing race. The Heathers could shrug off their race and take on other, stereotypical, racial identities, and do well in the challenges. They were no less dogged by the need for racial "realness" (or "personality"), but their realness was not predicated on authenticity, as it was for the Boogers. Manila was able to win multiple challenges by convincingly draping herself in new racial garb. When, for example, the challenge required the drag queens to turn straight jocks into their "drag sisters," Manila chose to turn herself and her hetero-partner into geishas, complete with folding fans and kimonos. RuPaul exclaimed, "You served up two China dolls and 20 minutes later, we're still hungry for more." In a pan-Asian elision of difference (since geishas are Japanese), Ru rewards Manila for this "gutsy" choice, making her the winner of this challenge.

The one notable Orientalist trope that did not get Manila the win was her portrayal of Imelda Marcos during the Snatch game. Marcos, the oft-discredited (if colorful) former first lady of the Philippines, was a visible Asian character—if less recognizable than a Geisha or

China Doll. She is moreover, Filipina, the same racial/ethnic background as Manila. This character did not play well with the judges. Despite its “authenticity” it apparently lacked “personality.” The performance not only brought to light the invisibility of certain Asian female stereotypes, it also underscored the *need* for highly visible racial/ethnic stereotypes within the challenges. Manila lost this challenge, and her performance was considered “safe.” For the Heathers, questions of racial “realness” were no less pressing than they were for the Boogers. The difference was in what was appropriately real. For the Boogers, realness was about “keeping it real” but for the Heathers, it revolved around how well one can embody the racial “Other.” Such queer logics and aesthetics do not reflect a postmodern attitude where anything goes, but the limits of performance, identity, and representation in the age of reality TV where little is “real” despite appearances to the contrary.

### Conclusion

Our analysis of the third season of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* excavates the messiness of contemporary identity politics. It points to a growing acceptance for the explosion of sex (ual) boundaries *alongside* the re-negotiation of racial “difference.” It appears that this tension is what makes the show scintillating to so many viewers (and certainly to the judges). A study of drag on reality TV bears significance for studying a non-traditional community and the moral dilemmas of its public spectatorship. As shown by other authors, reality TV is a creative device for exploiting fissures within and among competing identities that do not figure easily into our traditional notions of “interracial conflict” or politics of identity (Clarkson 2005).

While the flexibility of gender and the constraint of race appear curious within queer performance, we argue that it may mirror, to a certain extent, what can be found in other sectors of society. The drag subculture, like the larger gay community, remains largely divided by race, gender, and class—a schism most famously depicted in the 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning* (Bailey 2011; Marlon P. Ross 2005). Moreover, at the very moment in which there is a growing movement against GLBTQ discrimination (as seen in challenges to gay marriage laws), there is also the presumed lack of need (on the part of many media pundits) to consider issues of racial injustice, as if this issue has been resolved. The post-Obama election argument that we have entered a “post-racial” society has circulated heavily in the media, and has been widely criticized by scholars as an easy way out of the race question that still troubles American society (E. Bonilla-Silva 2006; Tim Wise 2010). This depoliticization of race is an undercurrent on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, authorizing essentialist postures, even as being “queer” is treated as a normal state of affairs.<sup>4</sup>

### NOTES

1. In the art of drag, performers are sometimes referred to using the masculine pronoun, “he” and at other times using the feminine pronoun “she.” In this paper, we use “he” when a character is not in drag, and “she” when describing a character in drag, following the convention often used by the queens themselves on the show.
2. In *Paris is Burning*, the famous 1990 documentary film that introduced people to the ballroom “voguing” dance style appropriated by Madonna, the director exposed these subaltern sentiments through the expressed desires of drag performers seeking to attain or

approximate the privileges of middle-class whiteness even as they remain proud of their ethnic background.

3. Not all of the white characters on the show were in the Heathers. The group coalesced several episodes into the show. Some characters on the show were thus neither Boogers nor Heathers.
4. Just as the early nineteenth century social movements threatened the racial order and provided the impetus for the popularity of minstrelsy, the "post-racial" moment has encouraged those who might be uneasy with the dissolution of race to re-place race at the center of one's identity.

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