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Transitioning Drag:  
A Comparative Reading of *Drag Race Thailand* and *RuPaul's Drag Race*

By

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## Abstract

This thesis undertakes a comparative reading of the two reality television competition series *Drag Race Thailand* (DRT) and *RuPaul's Drag Race* (RPDR). Drawing insights from Asian queer studies, this thesis attempts to negotiate the tension within gender studies as related to contemporary debates around trans identity within the world of drag performance. Featuring drag performance and queer culture, *Drag Race* has become a transnational cultural phenomenon with the rapid international expansion of the *Drag Race* franchise in recent years, and DRT is the only Asian platform as of this writing. Following the interdisciplinary matrix of Asian queer studies, this thesis compares and contrasts the representation of drag on DRT and RPDR with particular focus on Season 2 and Season 9, respectively. Reading the two series together raises the question of why these two versions of *Drag Race* embody drag in different relations to transgenderism. This thesis further traces the problematic statements against trans drag queens on RPDR and sets this negative perspective against the very different operating structures of the Thai gender system. Under the common name of drag, gender formations on the two series diverge in fundamental ways as a result of their distinct history and gender epistemologies. Comparing the two series in the *Drag Race* franchise therefore defies the assumption of Westernizing homogenization in drag and queer culture, and DRT provides insights into the criticism of transwomen exclusion on RPDR. Through the comparative study, this thesis demonstrates the need for the critical reading of Asian drag and Asian queer culture apart from America-based theorization and the further exploration of comparative *Drag Race* studies.

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### **Notes on Thai Transcription and Quotation**

All transcribed Thai words are noted by italics, including the direct phonetic translation from English to emphasize that they are not direct counterparts in the two languages. For instance, “*gay*” in Thai is not an equivalent to “gay” in modern English even though the etymology is related to the English word. Dashes are used to indicate different units in Thai phrases that are translated into single terms or sentences in English.

The series *Drag Race Thailand* discussed in this thesis is conducted in a mixture of Thai and English. The quotations of the aired episodes are based on English subtitles provided by the online streaming platform WOW Presents Plus. The italicized Thai transcription in the parentheses is based on the words spoken in Thai by the speakers. Slashes are sometimes used to give a more literal translation in English different from official subtitles.

## Introduction

Featuring drag performances and queer culture in America, *RuPaul's Drag Race* (RPDR) as a reality television competition has become a national cultural phenomenon since its premiere in 2009. As the show has expanded with television spin-offs and local versions of *Drag Race* in the past few years, RPDR has also become an international phenomenon. The locally produced international spin-offs include *The Switch Drag Race* (2015) in Chile, *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* (2019) in the UK, *Canada's Drag Race* (2020) in Canada, *Drag Race Holland* (2020) in the Netherlands, and *RuPaul's Drag Race Down Under* (2021) in Australia and New Zealand. While most spin-offs are produced in the Anglophone West, the *Drag Race* franchise introduced its first and only Asian series as of this writing, *Drag Race Thailand* (DRT) in 2018. As the only Asian platform, DRT provides a unique lens for interrogating what “Asian drag” means and to compare and contrast the representation of drag on the Thai version and its American counterpart. In this thesis, I compare DRT with RPDR to explore what drag means in the two cultural contexts situated in distinct historical backgrounds. The comparative reading of the two *Drag Race* series provides insights into gender formation around drag outside the American version and help to address some of the issues, especially the complicated relation between transgenderism and drag in the *Drag Race* franchise. Drawing insights from Asian queer studies, I attempt to negotiate the tension within gender studies as related to contemporary debates around trans identity within the world of drag performance. In Chapter One, I investigate the aired episodes of the two series, DRT and RPDR with particular focus on Season 2 and Season 9, respectively. In Chapter Two, I trace the history of RPDR's binary approach to gender at its resultant in potentially anti-trans stances, and then set this western model in conversation with the more complex gender formation around drag in Thai gender discourse. It is my contention

that reading the two sister series together can help to decenter RuPaul's gender-binary drag brand as the only valid drag.

### ***RuPaul's Drag Race Scholarship***

A growing body of scholarly works on RPDR and its cultural impact has been emerging alongside the rising worldwide popularity of the show, including master's and doctorate's degree theses and dissertations, anthologies, and peer-reviewed journal articles. In Carl Schottmiller's Dissertation *Reading RuPaul's Drag Race: Queer Memory, Camp Capitalism, and RuPaul's Drag Empire* (2017), he reviews scholarly work on the *Drag Race* franchise and observes that there are four key approaches to the franchise. The four major areas of inquiry include studies on intertextual referencing, drag linguistics, capitalist consumerism, and television representation (Schottmiller, 2017, pp. 30-31). For instance, David Gudelunas (2016) demonstrates that RPDR uses "culture jamming" to disrupt the typical reality television format. Ramey Moore (2013) develops Judith Butler's argument on drag and proposes that "linguistic drag" has the potential to resist hegemonic gender discourse. Lori Hall-Araujo (2016) argues that RuPaul exemplifies RPDR's ambivalent relation to capitalist consumerism so as to market RuPaul's drag brand and expand the *Drag Race* franchise. Jorge C. González and Kameron C. Cavazos (2016) demonstrate how, although the portrayal of gender minorities on television programs has evolved from negative stereotyping to holistic representations, RPDR continues to build on the mockery at the expense of non-heteronormative individuals.

From a diachronic perspective, it is noticeable that scholarship on *Drag Race* moves from in-depth examination of the television program towards the investigation of shifting drag culture more broadly and the cultural impact of the *Drag Race* franchise. Three anthologies reflect this shift in focus. *The Makeup of RuPaul's Drag Race: Essays on the Queen of Reality Shows*

(Daems, 2014) examines the RPDR as its primary source. RuPaul's *Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture* (Brennan & Gudelunas, 2017) starts to document drag culture on proliferating media platforms that are no longer limited to the American television networks. *The Cultural Impact of RuPaul's Drag Race: Why Are We All Gaggling?* (Crookston, 2021b) largely focuses on the cultural impact beyond the television series and observes the transformation of drag in local drag scenes, exploring the labor of drag, and fan cultures, *inter alia* (Crookston, 2021a).

These anthologies document and investigate the radical transformation in the world of drag in the 12 years of broadcasting of RPDR. The *Drag Race* franchise spans from aired episodes of RPDR to spin-off series in America (*Drag U*, *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars*, *RuPaul's Celebrity Drag Race*, etc.) and international spin-offs (*Drag Race Thailand*, *RuPaul's Drag Race U.K.*, *Canada's Drag Race*, etc.). Additionally, the physical events include world tours, which feature *Drag Race* alumni queens, and DragCon, a convention for fans to meet and interact with the queens, to the countless merchandise, studio albums, and books released by RuPaul and queens as well as other frequent appearances in the entertainment and fashion industry such as music videos, television programs, and magazine covers, among others. The *Drag Race* franchise has expanded beyond the realm of reality television and become an unprecedented culture phenomenon across a wide range of digital and physical platforms and beyond national boundaries, and it continues to grow. Consequently, the shifting focus on off-screen influences in *Drag Race* studies could reflect the fact that the *Drag Race* phenomenon has a far-reaching impact on the landscapes of drag and queer cultures.



## **Queer Identities**

Many scholars in queer and gender studies have observed the proliferation of alternative and non-normative identities and the rupture among subsets in the LGBT community as a result of cultural exchange and capitalist globalization (Drucker, 2011; Jackson, 2009). Particularly significant is the work of scholars such as Peter Drucker (2011), who have shown how a unified global gay identity has been consolidated even as alternative identities, including queer and transgender identities, have proliferated in the past decades. As several historians have argued, contemporary gay and lesbian identities are closely tied to modernization and urbanization. Drucker (2011) observes gay identity was spread among the working and middle-classes as these classes were rapidly growing under Fordism, which is characterized by mass production and consumption that produced high economic growth from the 1940s to the 1970s. However, with the decline of Fordism, the gap between different classes started to increase, which put an imaginary unified gay identity under the pressure of neoliberal society. It was at this point that queer identities started to proliferate (Drucker, 2011). With the fractures in the LGBT community, Drucker (2011) observes the emerging alternative identities, however diverse, share the characteristic of non-conforming not only to heteronormativity but also to what Lisa Duggan defines as “homonormativity” (2002, as cited in Drucker, 2011, p. 5).

Not only has the developed West undergone such fracture of LGBT identities but also developing countries in Asia and Africa. As Drucker (2011) argues,

In capitalism both North and South in this time of crisis, then, lesbian/gay identity has been undergoing simultaneous construction and fracturing. A very diverse and diffuse set of alternative sexual identities has been diverging more and more from the post-Fordist,

gender-conformist, consumerist lesbian/gay mainstream, and in some cases challenge the very social and conceptual basis of straight or lesbian/gay self-definition. (p. 26)

Global North and South both undergo a similar process, and LGBT identities eventually rupture rendering neologisms for proliferating identities under neoliberal capitalism. Nonetheless, any discussion of gender identity in the Global South is incomplete if it does not take imperial colonialism as well as neocolonialism into consideration. In many regions in Southeast Asia, the high visibility of transgenderism has a strong linkage to the entertainment industry and sex tourism as residues of colonial past. Qian Hui Tan (2014) maintains that *kathoey*, a term loosely translated to transgender and/or transsexual, especially female transgenderism, in contemporary Thai discourse, have been “subservient subjects in a postcolonial political economy of sex tourism” (p. 146). *Kathoey* are often perceived as “commoditized bodies” (Tan, 2014, p. 147) and promoted in such imagery in order to cater to tourists’ expectations. Nonetheless, Peter Jackson (2011) argues that *kathoey*’s self-presentation of femininity also accords with their gender identity. Thus, the tourist zones frequented by foreigners in the Bangkok area open up a space for transgender and queer autonomy in Thailand. The entertainment spaces and tourist zones in the Bangkok area have become the place where non-normative individuals feel accepted. That is to say, while post-Fordism and neoliberal capitalism have led to the reconstruction of gender identity in Global North and Global South alike, the emergence of female transgender and queer identities in developing countries such as Thailand is further complicated by colonialism.

### **Asian Queer Studies**

The consolidation of global gay identity and the corresponding (re)construction of alternative gender and sexual identities is reflected within a scholarly context by the bifurcation

of queer theory and gay and lesbian studies (Drucker 2011). Queer studies emerged within Western academia in the 1990s and has since been in an ambivalent relationship with gender and sexuality studies on homosexuality. Queer theorists are discontented with gradually stabilized same-sex identities that fail to challenge a binary epistemology whose categorization leaves transgender and queer identities unnamed. Yet, queer theory is often criticized for lack of attention to materiality and an ignorance of political movements. Dennis Altman (1997, 2001) has argued that social movements of homosexual liberation establish the solid base for universal gay and lesbian identities and lifestyles for which queer theorists fail to account. He acknowledges queer theorists' ambition to break through the limitation of identity politics, yet warns that their projects could be potentially hindered by Eurocentrism and the emphases on discourse (Altman, 2001).

Alongside queer studies, area studies also emerged within Western academia in the post-Cold War period of capitalist globalization. These emerging academic disciplines at the turn of the century introduced new models of interdisciplinary scholarship paving the way for area studies and queer studies to converge toward a novel framework for theoretical critique in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The postmodernist appeal of queer studies, as Howard Chiang and Alvin K. Wong (2017) assert, is the turn toward intersectionality concerning the reconfiguration of queerness under neoliberalism. Chiang and Wong (2017) argue that queer theory and Asian studies both “share an acute sense of ambiguity, playfulness and non-determination” (p. 122). Thus, Chiang and Wong’s (2017) identify the question asked in 2005 by David L. Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, “What’s queer about queer studies now?” (as cited in Chiang & Wong, 2017, p. 121) as “a watershed moment in which queer theory shifted from questions of psychoanalysis and gender performativity to the geopolitical critique of

the US empire, imperialism and neoliberal homonormativity” (p. 121). This shift to geopolitical critique has also been spotted by Megan Sinnott (2010) who observes that scholarship defies the simplest interpretation of queer identities as a by-product of Westernization or as indigeneity of Asian locals. Alternatively, the queer diaspora often crosses national and cultural boundaries and does not align with an assumed linguistic and cultural homogeneity (Sinnott, 2010). That is, the proximity of Asian studies and queer studies leads to a paradigm shift away from Foucauldian sexuality, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Judith Butler on gender performance among others in queer theory. The paradigm and focus shifting from queer Anglo-America could also respond to prior critique of Eurocentrism and lack of political radicality in queer theory.

The academic conference of Asian queer studies “Sexualities, Genders, and Rights in Asia: The First International Conference of Asian Queer Studies” held in Bangkok in 2005 became a touchstone of the field. The conference was supported by the AsiaPacifiQueer Network (APQ), an Australian-based scholarly project coordinated by Audrey Yue, Fran Martin, Mark McLelland, and Peter Jackson (Yue, 2014). According to their now-defunct website and the edited work on the conference, they aim to question the uneven distribution of discourse favoring the Anglophone West while remaining vacant in non-Western discourse (Yue, 2014). The co-conveners proposed the model “queer hybridization,” which denotes the “transformative potential of new subject positions and subversion” (as cited in Sinnott, 2010, p. 19). Writing on queer Asian cinema, Audrey Yue later (2014) proposed the terms “queer hybridity” and “critical regionality,” to challenge the double marginalization of queer studies and Asian studies.

According to Yue (2014), the two include:

(1) the new worlds of queer Asian media cultures created through the globalization of LGBT cultures and (2) the oblique spaces of non-heteronormativity reclaimed and reinvented on the margins of straight (mainstream, official, colonial) spaces (p. 149).

Yue (2014) defines the “queer hybridity” as a recognition of “the third space of incommensurability that has ensued as a result of the East-West cultural mix”; the “critical regionality” as the use of “‘disidentification’ as a critical practice for undoing encoded meanings” within heteronormativity (p. 149). She provides an outlook on how queer studies intersects area studies in a way that puts Asia queer studies in a more peripheral position, yet Asia queer studies can provide useful framework for gender and queer studies.

The tendency towards intersectional Asian queer studies has become salient since the 2000s for two major reasons. First, the rupture of identities within LGBT communities leads to the bifurcation of queer theory from gay and lesbian studies (Drucker, 2011). Second, Asian queer studies is no longer willing to be treated as “particular and secondary” (Yue, 2014, p. 145) and “the empirical objects of study in area studies” (Chiang & Wong, 2017, p. 123). Consequently, the field of Asian queer studies has drastically expanded in the past decades. The introduction of the special issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* titled “Trans-in-Asia, Asia-in-Trans” (Chiang et al., 2018) specifically addresses this nascent field. Howard Chiang, Todd A. Henry, and Helen Hok-Sze Leung (2018) point out that while the various LGBT identities have fractured in North America, they remain relatively intertwined in many Asian regions. They suggest conversing and bridging the gap between the two marginalized fields through the two anchor points “Trans-in-Asia” and “Asia-in-Trans” (Chiang et al., 2018). The former refers to the alternative identities and non-normative embodiments that are often pushed to the periphery in area studies in favor of imagined uniform communities in certain areas. The latter refers to

diverse trans narratives formulated in the non-West and Global South. The complexity of queer theory on the one hand and Asian studies on the other hand intricates and accelerates the need for Asian queer studies as an interdisciplinary field.

Following the seminal work of Chang, Henry, and Leung, I organize this thesis following the chiasmus “Trans-in-Asia, Asia-in-Trans.” In the first chapter “Drag in Trans,” I look into the two series in the *Drag Race* franchise— Season 2 of DRT and Season 9 of RPDR. I explore how drag is formulated into different narratives on the two shows and demonstrate how the expansion of the franchise propels drag from a single dominant narrative to a multivocal term. In the second chapter “Trans in Drag,” I explore the relation between transgenderism and drag, detailing how the two series portray distinct attitudes towards transgender women participating in the drag contest. I trace the problematic statements and actions against trans drag queens on RPDR and set this negative perspective against the very different operating structures of the Thai gender system. In doing so, I hope to illuminate, and thus help to remedy, the peripheral positions trans queens occupy on RPDR.

As mentioned above, *Drag Race* scholarship varies from in-depth analyses of drag as performance art, queer representation to the show’s economic entanglement with capitalist consumerism. However, a comparative reading of the *Drag Race* franchise outside of America has not previously been undertaken. Nonetheless, RuPaul not only has described herself as the “Supermodel of the World” (1993), which is the title of her 1992 album but also has repeatedly ensured the queens’ appearance on the show will introduce their drag career to the world. The marketing of RuPaul’s drag branding aims at the world mainstream audience beyond the boundaries of the Anglophone West.

Consequently, I would argue that the logistics of the *Drag Race* franchise do not lie in discovering the “Next Drag Superstar” in America or any countries of the spin-offs. Instead, the *Drag Race* franchise resembles a pageant competition in which the queens in international spin-offs are delegates who market the franchise to a bigger and more local audience, thus sustaining the growing franchise. Therefore, it is pivotal to consider these spin-offs as indispensable components of a holistic *Drag Race* franchise and to fill in the gap left by scholarly works that have largely viewed the franchise in the context of Anglo-America both geographically and culturally. The focus of my work is situated at the crossroad of *Drag Race*’s glocalization production in Thailand in which queer representation and drag performance distinctly exemplify themselves. I argue that comparing the Thai version to the US version can not only give insight into “homonormative hegemony” (Norris, 2014) on RPDR which excludes trans queens but also join the conversation in Asian queer studies that provide a critical framework in queer studies.

## Chapter One.

### **Drag in Trans: The *Drag Race* Franchise**

The format of most international *Drag Race* spin-offs is based on the original *RuPaul's Drag Race* (RPDR). However, as the television reality has been evolving, the template has been revised from season to season on the US version as well as on its international spin-offs. The basic format features ten to fourteen queens each season in the race to win the title of the “Next Drag Superstar” and the prizes that come along with it. Generally, each weekly episode is composed of one mini challenge, one main (maxi) challenge, one themed runway, and finally a lip-sync battle between the lowest performing queens. The winner of the mini challenge is usually granted smaller prizes and advantages in the maxi challenge. The maxi challenge varies from acting or dancing to standup comedy, along with a themed runway to showcase the queens’ self-designed garments on the main stage. On the judges’ panel, many who work in the entertainment and fashion industry are invited as guest judges alongside the main judges to evaluate the queens’ performances. At the end of each episode, the queen who wins the week is rewarded a prize while the bottom two queens have to battle against each other in a lip-sync to show their determination to stay in the competition. After the lip-sync, the chief judge decides which queen stays in the competition by saying “Shantay you stay” and which queen is eliminated and needs to “sashay away.” The template of the *Drag Race* franchise includes several catchphrases which are very often kept in localized versions. For instance, “Shantay you stay” and “Sashay away” are perhaps two of the signature catchphrases in the franchise.

#### ***Drag Race Thailand Season 2***

With its first season aired in 2018, *Drag Race Thailand* (DRT) is the first official Asian spin-off in the *Drag Race* franchise. DRT is produced by the Thai television network LINE TV



and production company Kantana Group and the second season premiered in January 2019. While Season 1 is only available within Thailand, Season 2 is made internationally available with English subtitles on the streaming service platform World of Wonder Presents Plus, which indicates marketing towards a wider global audience. Therefore, I examine DRT Season 2 for its accessibility and its uniqueness as the only Asian platform in the franchise as of this writing.

One major feature of DRT are the show's co-hosts, Art Arya and Pangina Heals. The former is a well-known fashion stylist and drag performer, and the latter is an influential drag queen in Thailand who is referred to as "the RuPaul of Thailand" (Stein, 2020). When the show starts, the contestants gather in the workroom before receiving a video message from Art. In the video, Art shows up in drag with a riddle-like message that leaves the contestants confused and guessing what the challenges of the week might be. The short video message is immediately followed by the two co-hosts walking into the workroom out of drag, where they welcome and further introduce the contestants to the challenges of the episode. Notably, Art always appears in androgynous out-of-drag looks wearing lipstick and dresses while Pangina presents more of gender normative masculine look out of drag. The show calls attention to this difference when the two hosts switch personae and impersonate each other in Episode 6 (S02E06). Pangina wears blue lipstick, big earrings, and flamboyant sunglasses and mimics Art's voice with a purposely gentler intonation as she announces the challenges. On the contrary, Art puts on a blazer and acts with overtly clear gestures trying to imitate the normative masculinity that usually characterizes Pangina out of drag.

The diversity of the queens is another characteristic of DRT. The fourteen contestants of Season 2 come from a variety of nationalities: eleven from Thailand; Genie from America; Vanda Miss Joaquim from Singapore; and Mocha Diva from the Philippines and based in Hong

Kong. Furthermore, the cast presents several gender representations as two of the contestants, Angele Anang and Kandy Zyanide, are transgender women competing in the drag contest. It is notable that it was clearly stated in the official Season 2 audition promo that the show has no restrictions on gender, sexuality, nationality, or ethnicity as long as the applicant is over the legal age of 18 in Thailand. This announcement undoubtedly influenced the diverse cast of Season 2.

With diverse contestants coming from various backgrounds, the combination of the Thai and the English language thus becomes a unique feature of DRT. The show is mainly conducted in Thai and supported by English. This semi-bilingual approach of the show renders it more interesting in cross-culture exchange when the international contestants navigate through Thai cultures and elements, for DRT often incorporates elements of Thai culture in its challenges. For instance, in one episode the queens are assigned to do a Thai-cuisine-inspired runway (S02E07). In another, the contestants are challenged to make a theatrical crown headdress worn by characters in the tale of *Sang Thong*, one of the most popular tales of *Lakhon*<sup>1</sup> drama (S02E03).

In Episode 3 the maxi challenge is to take a photoshoot with a *Likay* performer playing as the prince and the contestants as the princesses. *Likay* is a folklore operetta popular in Thailand that can be performed on many occasions varying from temporary stages in temple fairs to permanent stages in a theater. As Jukka O Miettinen (2017e) explains, *Likay* makes use of “painted backdrops portraying, for example, palace halls gardens, or forests. The costumes are a blend of different epochs with glittering sequins, synthetic brocades, and the men’s plumed headdresses, all lending an unreal fairytale flavour to the whole” and the plots are “mostly quasi-

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<sup>1</sup>*Lakhon* is a collective of dance-drama forms. The subgenres include *lakhon nai*, which was usually performed for royalty, and *lakhon nok*, which was originally performed by professional male actors for the common audience. The Hindu deities and superhuman characters are some of the distinctive features of the genre since the plots of the genre are mostly based on the Buddhist *Jakata Stories* and folklores (Miettinen, 2018d). *Jakata Stories* is a collective folklore story from ancient Indian culture, including those of Buddha. The stories usually have moral lessons involving animal and fairylike characters. They are an important collection of stories in Theravada Buddhism and also a significant repertoire for theater performance (Miettinen, 2018b).

historical melodramas with separated lovers...[and] amorous intrigues” (Miettinen, 2018e). The performance is in lyric verses, and it is to be noted that the performers “rarely have any extensive degree of training, and the classical dance numbers are usually only alluded to” (Miettinen, 2018e). Miettinen (2017e) observes that *Likay* is a form of folklore operetta popular among the common people, and the actors can directly interact with the audience. *Likay* is distinguished from other forms of folklore theaters usually those performed in the court theater for the royalty such as *lakhon* and *khon*<sup>2</sup>. In the DRT maxi challenge, the contestants draw on different approaches to play out their role as a princess, invoking traditionally western figures such as Snow White and Cinderella alongside traditional Thai *Likay* princesses, to underscore the blending of time and space to “giv[e] satirical or ...absurd connotations to the whole” (Miettinen, 2018e).

The episode titled “White Elephants” (S02E11) invokes the creature considered to be sacred and related to royal power and moral legitimacy of the monarchy in Thai Theravada Buddhism. The white elephant in royal regalia is also present on three revised naval flags and state flags of the Kingdom of Siam through the 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> century and still on the flag of the Royal Thai Navy. The symbol of the white elephant is thus closely associated with the authority and royalty of the country. However, one of the Thai queens, Kana Warrior, offers a different reading of the emblem of Thailand’s national narrative on the themed runway and compares the marginalization of queerness to the rareness of the white elephant. While other contestants follow the orthodox narrative of seeing the white elephant as pure and auspicious,

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<sup>2</sup>*Khon* refers to a form of masked dance drama, often described as “the masked pantomime” (Miettinen, 2018c) in Southeast Asia. The actors perform using body gestures without speaking the lines. The plots are usually based on the *Ramakien* epic. The origin of *khon* is debatable, but it is believed that *khon* was performed in the court theater and related to the sacred rituals (Miettinen, 2018c).

*Ramakien* is the Thai localized version of the Indian epic Ramayana. *Ramakien* is rewritten and compiled by the order of King Rama I, and King Rama II revised it to be suitable for *khon* and *lakhon* performances. *Ramakien* remains one of the most important Thai literature works and the longest Thai verse composition (Miettinen, 2018a).

Kana's alternative approach to the theme reinvents the meaning of the emblem in a manner deviant from the intended signified and defies the one-way road of the nationalist narrative.

Another deeply Thai theme underpins the runway in the episode "Thai Musical" (S02E09), which is inspired by the late Thai country singer Pumpuang Duangjan. Pumpuang Duangjan was born in 1961 and became an influential figure in Thai popular music in the 1970s and 80s. From a humble background, she was forced to drop out of primary school at a young age to help with farming work in the sugarcane field. Although she was unable to finish education hence illiterate, she was good at memorizing lyrics and eventually was brought to Bangkok where her music career took off. Pumpuang Duangjan was the name given to her at the time which could variously be interpreted as "[the] chubby and beautiful [lady] like the full moon,' 'Pretty Boobs,' or 'Bountiful fruit' of the 'Moon'" (Sookkasikon, 2018b, p. 138). As a country singer, she is most known for modernizing the music genre *Luk Thong*, a genre of country music made popular after World War II and normally linked to the hardship of country life on the outskirts of Bangkok. Indeed, Duangjan is referred to as "the Queen of *Luk Thung*." Duangjan sang in the voice of the working-class, poor farmers, female migrants, and sex workers; groups segregated from the upper-class in metropolitan Bangkok. In her fashion styles and the openness of her private love life, she also served as a prototype for modern Thai women, becoming an icon among gay men and women at that time (Sookkasikon, 2018b). With the eroticized persona suggested in her name, Duangjan has become an irreplaceable idol who is modern but also has rustic roots in Thai country life.

Pahole Sookkasikon (2018b) argues that "Duangjan's queerness materializes as a position and strategy, enacting Thai femininity as a subversive approach, practice, and imaginative navigation of daily life inside and beyond Thailand's heteropatriarchy" (p. 154). For

Sookkasikon (2018b), Duangjan's revolution of *Luk Thong*, a music genre often labeled as vulgar and rustic, represents an act of defiance against the government's civilized state (*siwilai*) by drawing on the playfulness of sexual imagery in the lyrics. Duangjan as an icon thus opens up space to "reconstituting Thainess beyond its mainstreams definitions" (Sookkasikon, 2018a, p. 162). She is a "'generative force' that 'creates room' for others to simply exist under the harsh realities faced by many Thais under the weight of development, modernization, and global capitalism" (Sookkasikon, 2018b, p. 29).

Paying homage to the late singer on the runway in Episode 9 two queens, Srimala and Kana Warrior, do not put on wigs but show their natural short hair as tribute to the masculinity that Duangjan claimed for herself (Sookkasikon, 2018b). Duangjan left behind a legacy comparable to Selena Quintanilla-Pérez and her legacy of Tejano music in the 90s whose song also appears in the lip-sync in Episode 11. Sookkasikon (2018b) argues that "Duangjan's after/life is formative to the collective, as anonymous acts of representation and contestation that renegotiates what it means to be Thai against the definitions and exclusions of the Thai Buddhist state" (p. 137). The subversive forces thus are performed and embodied by the contestants of DRT on the runway, questioning a static, homogeneous bourgeois Bangkok and the Buddhist nation as a whole.

DRT not only features Thai culture but also is largely informed by American popular culture. Many of the queens on the show have even earned their reputation as successful impersonators of American female popular singers considered to be gay icons. So, in Episode 5, titled "Hollywood Inspirations," Angele Anang, known as "the Beyonce of Thailand," offers an impersonation of Beyonce on the main stage (S02E05). American music and singers are largely favored on the show and the lip-sync songs are half in Thai and half in English due to copyright

issues on a worldwide streaming platform according to the producer (S02E12). At least in the bars and clubs in tourist areas, the most commonly played music genres are either English pop music or K-pop as the latter genre has enjoyed a drastic expansion in the past decade (Käng, 2014b). Kandy Zyanide, on the other hand, enters the workroom impersonating Ariana Grande on the premiere episode and refers to herself on social media as “the Ariana Grande of Thailand” (S02E01). The co-host Pangina Heals herself is also known for her highly successful impersonations of Mariah Carey and Lady Gaga. The influence of American popular culture is noticeable from the beginning as the premiere episode is titled “Re-Born This Way” (S02E01), a direct reference to Lady Gaga’s hit song “Born This Way” with the first lip-sync song “Born Naked” by RuPaul. It is suggested that the impersonations of American singers are popular numbers for drag queens in Thailand, and it draws on cultural preferences recognizable not only to Thai audiences but also audiences around the globe, hence offering a façade of homogeneity of queer culture.

Based on the *Drag Race* template, DRT has several noticeable characteristics distinct from the US version. The catchphrases and slang are one of the most distinctive features in the *Drag Race* franchise. For example, “Sashy away” refers to the elimination of a queen, and “Shantay you stay” signals when a queen survives the final lip-sync and stays in the competition. On DRT, many catchphrases are either revised or omitted. As on RPDR, RuPaul signs off each episode by exclaiming “Can I get an Amen?” with the queens responding “Amen!”. However, since Thailand is a Buddhist nation, the phrase only shows up once in Episode 7. Later the hearty exclamation of the religious term is playfully revised by Pangina saying “Can I get a *Satu*?” with palms putting together (S02E10). Another iconic RuPaul catchphrase “Gentlemen, start your engines, and may the best woman win!” (used to set the logistics of the franchise and tell the

contestants to prepare for the challenges) is expressed on DRT in a mixture of Thai and English “Ladies (*sao-sao*), start your engine, let’s go (*bai-ka*)!”. The removal of stress on the contestants’ biological sex and gender binaries (“gentlemen”/“woman”) in the Thai version could reflect the fact that not only are gay men competing but also transgender women and thus a conscious avoidance of gender roles with which many queens do not identify. Nonetheless, the catchphrase “You’ve got she-mail!” that has provoked controversy and was ultimately removed from the American version is kept on DRT. The usage of the pejorative term for transgender women, “shemale” faced severe backlash for the term’s sexual connotation and questioning of authentic womanhood. The reason why the catchphrase remains on DRT is not explicitly defended on the show, but it seems likely that its use is related to the normalization of *kathoey* as part of the drag scenes in Thailand. *Kathoey*<sup>3</sup> does not have an English equivalent so it can only be translated loosely to transgender and/or transsexual in Western norms. In contemporary Thai discourse, *kathoey* most commonly refers to female transgenderism. Thus, *kathoey* can refer to gender identity, an embodiment, and sometimes bears the connotation of sex worker which is implied in the anglophone word shemale. The term *kathoey* can also be used as an intimate inside joke within the community as Pangina Heals once refers to the contestants as “a group of bitches (*kathoey*).” Thus, the term *kathoey* can have several counterparts in English, and thus neutralizes the offensiveness of the term shemale in a Thai context since it is considered one of the possible translations of *kathoey*. Consequently, while the catchphrase is omitted on RPDR, it remains on DRT.

When it comes to the self-identity of transgender women, *kathoey* is used by one contestant, Kandy Zyamide, to refer to herself. She describes herself as a *kathoey* with a *kathoey*

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<sup>3</sup>The special place of *kathoey* in the Thai gender system will be further discussed in the next chapter.

singing voice in the challenge where she needs to sing and perform in a music video (S02E11). On the contrary, Angele Anang does not seem to refer to herself as *kathoey*. Rather, she says in the confessional that she intends to show “the real trans body” in body-revealing lingerie on the runway (S02E08). But when Pangina later compliments Angele’s runway look, she employs the term *kathoey*. In her criticism of those who would think “only men can do drag...[or that] you can’t do drag if you have boobs,” Pangina asserts that Angele’s performance proves “transgender (*kathoey-mee-nom/kathoey* who has boobs) has all the right to be a drag artist” and “anyone can do drag, anyone can be a drag artist, and trans people have their right to do this art as much as anyone” (S02E07).

Overall, DRT Season 2 is culturally infused in a way connecting the queer community to Thai culture while at the same time bearing a substantial influence of American popular culture without stressing the particularity of queerness. In this regard, DRT not only features drag as part of queer culture but also seamlessly naturalizes queer culture and gender minorities on the television program. Queerness does not saliently distinguish itself from the heteronormative mainstream in Thailand but is integrated into popular culture. For example, the country singer Pumpuang Duangjan is not only a gay icon but also an idol for the working-class, the rural countryside, and the migratory women (Sookkasikon, 2018b). In other words, Thai popular culture itself already shows what Yue (2014) calls “queer hybridity.” The naturalized diversity on DRT results from this hybridity and thus presents multiformity in a linguistic intermixture of the Thai and English language as well as Thai and American popular culture.



## ***RuPaul's Drag Race Season 9***

Aired in March 2017 on VH1, RPDR Season 9 started off with the show's increasing popularity and recognition as RuPaul<sup>4</sup> won her first Emmy award for Outstanding Host for a Reality or Reality-Competition Program in 2016. The award was RuPaul's first nomination in the eight seasons of RPDR. Notably, Season 9 was the first season of RPDR moved from Logo TV, a channel targeting LGBT audiences, to VH1, a more mainstream channel in the same cooperation. As Carl Schottmiller (2017) points out, the channel change contributed to the exploding number of viewers to a record high at that point. Season 9 is thus a watershed in the show's history and the rising popularity of the show also brings forth closer examination and debates over the show.

The *Drag Race* format slightly changes on each season of RPDR. The basic template includes a mini challenge, maxi challenge, the runway, and finally a lip-sync performance with RuPaul herself as the host and the chief judge. The two main spaces shown to the audiences are the workroom and the main stage. The workroom is the place where the transition from the queens' casual wear to their full drag happens. The main stage is where the queens rehearse and stage their performance numbers, whether they are standup comedy, musical performance, or lip-sync battles, and eventually where the queens receive critiques from the judges. Another space is the untuck lounge, which is developed into a spin-off program *Untucked* showing the queens taking off their drag personae and bickering behind the scenes while waiting for the judges to deliberate. To give the show a greater sense of reality, the confessional room is the other significant space on the show where the queens, out of drag, give their thoughts and opinion on certain situations and fellow queens. The confessional room helps build up a sense of reality and

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<sup>4</sup>RuPaul has openly stated that she does not care which pronoun people use to refer to her. In this thesis, I thereby go with she/her pronoun for coherence.

engagement in the genre of reality television by giving voice-over and contestant commentary on given scenarios. Typically, one queen is interviewed at a time in the confessional room but occasionally an anonymous interviewer chimes in to clarify a word or interact with the queens. In Episode 12 when Peppermint is asked about her thoughts in the confessional, the voice from behind the camera talks to her in a faint voice with captions marking the identity of that voice as belong to a producer on set. The producer remains only vaguely audible and always invisible. RuPaul is co-listed as the executive producer and as the chief host for RPDR and remains highly visible throughout the show. RuPaul's visibility stands in marked contrast to director/producer Jennie Livingston in *Paris Is Burning* (Livingston, 1991), a film in which Livingston, a white female director, remains invisible and for which she has been accused of cultural appropriation. *Paris Is Burning*, a classic of New Queer Cinema in the 1990s, has always been the canon that RuPaul refers to as the core of RPDR, treating the television series as a direct beneficiary and successor of the ballroom culture. Directed and produced by Jennie Livingston, *Paris Is Burning* documents the drag balls in New York City in the 80s. The balls feature predominantly African American and Latinx queers "walking" in different categories and serving "realness," meaning the aspiration to pass as desired objects through imitative performance and clothing.

As drag is often linked to a parodic and theatrical performance of gender, the format of RPDR is also sealed in parodic references from the opening, signaling the rationale behind the show is a parody. Starting from the title, *Drag Race* refers to the contest of drag queens, but it also invokes the more traditional meaning of motor vehicles races in which two vehicles race to the finish line with the winners continuing to race until one winner remains. The title *Drag Race* is thus a double entendre and the show's opening sequence features graphics of RuPaul in a racer suit holding two checkered racing flags along with the screeching wheels soundtrack, a car's

rearview mirror reflecting herself or guest judges of the episode. The racer theme runs through the whole show with a shelf of statuettes of RuPaul in a similar racer suit holding two checkered flags in the workroom. Additionally, the theme perpetuates through the show as the same checkered flag image can be spotted in the transitioning of scenes with a giant flag flying through the screen.

In addition to car racing, the opening also shows a giant lipstick alongside the sponsorship cosmetic brand. The product placement reflects the sponsorship in the nature of reality television, and more importantly, it shows that the race is more about dressing up with cosmetics rather than car racing. Interwoven with the seemingly masculine elements, the opening playfully features the title of the show in bright pink font and sparkling visual effects with the background song singing “May the best woman win!” and a giant tiara hanging behind. The clashing juxtaposition of images and sounds concisely summarizes the show’s logistics—playing of gendered codes in drag performance. The envelope of parody also borrows from other massively popular reality competition shows in America, such as *America’s Next Top Model* (2003-) and *Project Runway* (2004-) for its formatting<sup>5</sup>.

The premiere episode of Season 9 starts with queens entering the workroom for their first appearance on national television. The queens walk in with looks and a few lines that best represent their drag personae and performance styles. The entrance looks usually come with a voice-over of that queen in confessional interviews where the contestants are out of their drag makeup, clothing, wig, and body padding, and briefly introduce themselves as to their origin city, age, and how they would describe their drag. The cuts immediately disclose the “real” gender of the queens and expose the binary logic of drag on RPDR which directly echoes the

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<sup>5</sup>See Chapter One in Carl Schottmiller’s *Reading RuPaul’s Drag Race: Queer Memory, Camp Capitalism, and RuPaul’s Drag Empire* for other cultural referencing and intertextuality.

opening song and the signature catchphrase “Gentlemen, start your engines, and may the best woman win!”<sup>6</sup>. That is to say, the queens’ drag is based on gender binary prescribed in the RPDR premise and they go from gender normative male body and identity to female embodiment.

Yet, the premise is cracked in Season 9 when Lady Gaga enters the workroom as if a contestant on the show, rather than (as she in fact is) the special guest on the first episode. With Charlie Hides commenting “that is a damn good Lady Gaga impersonator,” Lady Gaga reveals her true identity (S09E01). Lady Gaga surprises all the queens, especially Eureka who sobs out how Lady Gaga’s works have saved her from feeling outcast. Lady Gaga responds that drag is also her escape from reality when it is too harsh for her. Best known for her campy fashion, music, and visual works, Lady Gaga validates and claims her performance as drag. Strides have been made as Lady Gaga crosses the gate of the workroom since her presence and words contradict the RPDR logistics of male performing feminine drag. The appearance of Lady Gaga marks the onset of Season 9 as a special season for diverse contestants as one of the most renowned queens competing that year, Peppermint, has come out as a transwoman before participating in the show. Her appearance along with the rising popularity of RPDR render Season 9 a unique narrative that frequently touches upon issues such as gender in the drag scene.

As an openly transgender woman before entering the show, Peppermint is not the first, but one of the most open about her identity and her reflections on participating in a drag contest as a transwoman. She first discusses her experience as a transgender woman in Episode 6 where

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<sup>6</sup>This catchphrase was modified on *RuPaul’s Drag Race All Stars* Season 4 (2018) on which Gia Gunn, a transgender woman, competes into “Ladies and gentlemen, start your engines, and may the best all-star win!”. On Season 13 (2021), it is changed to “Racers, start your engines, and may the best drag queen win!”.

she talks about how she can explore and embody the womanhood she yearns for through drag and says,

It's actually through my drag that I realized my trans-ness. I'm trans. I am a transwoman...It took me a long time to really sort out gender. And at a really early age, I was able to latch on to drag, and that was how I was able to express my femininity. But I kind of evolved to realize that all the drag things that I wanted to do, it always led back to the realization that I'm a transwoman. (S09E06)

Nonetheless, she admits in the confessional her insecurity and fear being a transwoman drag queen on the show and explains,

There's a lot of people who think that drag queens are not trans and shouldn't be. And there's a lot of trans people who think that drag queens have no place in the trans community. I wanted to really get to know the girls before I came out to them. I was afraid. (S09E06)

With other queens supporting Peppermint, the show portrays an accepting attitude in the drag scene in the workroom. The struggles and dilemmas of doing drag as a transwoman are further touched upon when Peppermint guest stars on RuPaul and Michelle Visage's podcast *RuPaul: What's the Tee with Michelle Visage* in Episode 12. Peppermint talks about how she has struggled in her life between the day and the night. She recalls the time when a renowned drag queen in New York told her that she would support Peppermint's transitioning on a personal level, but that Peppermint could no longer be accepted in the drag scene. Michelle Visage, the permanent judge on RPDR since Season 3, immediately disagrees, saying "that's not true" (S09E12). Peppermint expresses the anxiety and concerns she had before participating in RPDR as to how to be a transwoman and also a drag queen, saying she had to "push them to opposite

ends of the room” (S09E12). Michelle Visage says, “You don’t ever need to be one or another. Nobody has to put anybody in any kind of a box” (S09E12). RuPaul further confirms that it is possible to do drag as a transgender woman. Peppermint concludes in the confessional, “I definitely didn’t think being a drag queen and a transwoman would ever mix. And now, after the experience, I know that those two things can coexist if that’s who you are and that’s who I am” (S09E12).

In the same episode, the four finalists stand on the main stage while RuPaul holds the childhood photos of each queen and asks what they would tell their younger selves. RuPaul names the three other queens’ boy birthnames but does not do so for Peppermint. RuPaul does not gender Peppermint like she does other queens and only refers to Peppermint’s throwback picture as her “four-year-old self” (S09E12). In her tearful message to her younger self, Peppermint says “what you are feeling on the inside is right” (S09E12). Peppermint’s words stress the importance of internal self-definition instead of other external factors when it comes to gendering.

Peppermint also mentions the experience when she had to take off her wig at an airport because she was “presenting female” and did not match the gender on her passport. She talks about the humiliation she felt but then says that “it did not take away [her] womanhood” (S09E08). Peppermint exemplifies her attitude toward her identity by separating the way she presents from her identification of womanhood. She does not define her gender by physicality and appearance. In the season finale, Peppermint sits with RuPaul in front of a live audience in a brief retrospective of her performances throughout the season. The question regarding her identity comes up again, and Peppermint once again rejects the mutual exclusion of doing drag and being a transgender woman. She claims that “transwomen have always contributed to the

wonderful art form of drag since the beginning of time. This is not new and my contribution to drag is as powerful as any gay man” (S09E14). In Peppermint’s account, she identifies as a transgender woman based on her self-determination of womanhood instead of other indexes such as clothing and physicality. In a video message to Peppermint in the season finale, transgender actress and advocate Laverne Cox says that “being a proud transgender woman is not incompatible with being America’s next drag superstar” (S09E14). The message could be a perfect sign-off for Season 9.

Despite the accepting and all-welcoming attitude on Season 9, the airing of the season was followed by an infamous interview article in *The Guardian* in which RuPaul specifically linked Peppermint’s inclusion on RPDR with her lack of breasts at the time and said “Peppermint didn’t get breast implants until after she left our show; she was identifying as a woman, but she hadn’t really transitioned” (Aitkenhead, 2018). In RuPaul’s conception, the physical embodiment is vital to drag. Even though she acknowledges Peppermint’s self-identification as a transgender woman, she only accepts her on the show because she had not completely transitioned during the filming. Therefore, Peppermint’s body at the moment was considered to be male by RuPaul’s standards. The same reasoning goes for not including bio-queens, biological women doing drag, on the show. Here, RuPaul does not set the standards on gender identity but the physical body and embodiment. Only those who are considered to pass as possessing gender normative male bodies can compete on the show. The standards are seemingly based on outwardly visible secondary sex characteristics, namely breasts. RuPaul mentions several queens on the show have undergone plastic surgery and had fillers added in their hips and faces, such as Trinity on Season 9 who takes pride in her curvy figure. However, such changes to other body parts do not alter their ability to pass as male, and thus they can still compete on the

show. Facing a severe backlash for her remarks, RuPaul soon apologized on social media and later that year cast *Drag Race* alumna Gia Gunn, a transwoman who had undergone gender confirmation surgery, for the show's spin-off *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars* Season 4 (2018).



## Chapter Two.

### Trans in Drag: Gender Formations Around Drag

As explored in the previous chapter, Season 2 of *Drag Race Thailand* (DRT) and Season 9 of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (RPDR) exemplify drag in different relations to transgenderism. DRT presents drag in the sense that a range of gender and embodiment is naturalized and shows a rather loose connection between gender formation and drag performance. Namely, non-normative identities are well included as two transgender contestants are cast in the Thai version, and their participation in the drag contest is not presented as conflicting. By contrast, RPDR shows a relatively unfriendly attitude against female embodiment and transgenderism in the world of drag. Therefore, the question regarding the validity of Peppermint's trans identity and her drag remains central to the main narrative of the season. The facts that Peppermint has to come out and constantly addresses the seemingly incompatibility of doing drag and being a transwoman reflects the peripheral position of transgender queens on the platform. Comparing the sister series raises questions: Why do the two versions of *Drag Race* embody drag in different relations to transgenderism, and how could the US version evolve from its current male-dominant narrative around drag?

To address these questions, it is crucial to understand that under the common name of drag, gender formations diverge in fundamental ways depending on whether they adhere to Asian norms or American ones. On the one hand, DRT represents drag not only as geographically and linguistically diverse but also related to the gender politics in Thailand as influenced by several forms of colonialism and globalization. On the other hand, RPDR is based on and accedes to the underground ball culture of queer people of color in New York City in the 70s and the 80s, and drag has since evolved and transformed along with LGBT social

movements in America. As a result, the two series in the *Drag Race* franchise present distinct gender norms and multifaceted versions of drag to their audiences. In this chapter, I will start with *Paris Is Burning* (Livingston, 1991), the acknowledged foundation of drag culture of RPDR, and finally talk about the transgender representation on the US version. Then I will move forward to the Thai gender system and its evolution since WWII. I employ resources largely from anthropological field work and historical research to delineate the basic historical contours of Thailand's gender system in the modern era dating from post-World War II to the present day.

### **“In the great tradition of *Paris Is Burning*”**

“In the great tradition of *Paris Is Burning*,” RuPaul says, “the library is open.” The line is then followed by a classic challenge named “The Library Is Open” in which fellow queens start “reading,” a slang term for insulting one another couched in humor. The introduction of this classic challenge is one of the most memorable lines on RPDR, for RuPaul acknowledges the inheritance of drag culture from the classic queer film *Paris Is Burning* (Livingston, 1991) and treats the film as the biblical text on her show. *Paris Is Burning* is a queer documentary that has had a broad cultural impact since its release, including the introduction of vogue, a genre of dance accelerated by Madonna's music video “Vogue,” to the mainstream. It inspires the ball walking format and many catchphrases on RPDR. RPDR as the self-claimed heiress to *Paris Is Burning* connects the two through intertextual referencing and *Paris Is Burning* thus becomes an important text to understand queer culture, drag balls, and the *Drag Race* franchise. The documentary has become one of the most successful and popular queer films and important queer texts. It has appealed not only to the everyday audience but also academic alike as it touches upon issues of race, gender, sexuality, class, and subaltern cultures.

Despite being a classic queer film and its financial success, *Paris Is Burning* has received divided responses and criticism. Many critics of the film take issue at the director Jennie Livingston, who is a white female filmmaker, and criticize her for documenting the subculture largely shared by queer people of color for the entertainment of white straight mainstream audiences and satisfying their voyeuristic desire. Critic bell hooks (2014) argues that Livingston lacked sensitivity, failing to see how “white supremacy shaped culture production” and thus how the film could run the risk of turning “the black drag ball into a spectacle for the entertainment of those presumed to be on the outside of this experience looking in” (p. 152). Furthermore, *Paris Is Burning* is accused of exploiting the participants. The ball walkers in *Paris Is Burning* did not share in the financial profits despite the film’s commercial success, and many attempted to file a lawsuit against Livingston before about \$55,000 was granted to some of the major participants featured in the film (Hilderbrand, 2013, p. 140). As Livingston successfully claimed *Paris Is Burning* as her intellectual property, Phillip Brian Harper (1994) notes the inevitable exploitation of Livingston’s project as the film limited the ball walkers’ subjective agency. Harper (1994) points out the danger of attributing subversion to the ball walkers’ drag and ignoring their living situation since the ball walkers were excluded from sharing in the film’s financial success and barely improved their living conditions after the film aired. The fight over capital and monetary exchange has been an undercurrent behind queer representation mediated through cinema and television. Lucas Hilderbrand (2013) concludes that *Paris Is Burning* is crucial because it not only touches upon politics of representation and identities but also sketches “models of queer world-making” which offer a space of identification and the image of an alternative possibility (p. 146).

## Transgender Issues on *RuPaul's Drag Race*

While *Paris Is Burning* features several transwomen as the mothers of drag houses, chosen families and kinship between queer youths who are cast out of their biological family, RPDR holds a relatively unwelcome attitude against transgender queens. Most criticism of the politics of representation on RPDR targets how transgender folks, mostly transgender women, are presented on television. RuPaul and RPDR have been criticized for favoring male-bodied individuals over other non-normative embodiment to participate in drag. However, in this section I focus mainly on the representation of transgender women among other gender identities<sup>7</sup>, since this has been the main subject of RuPaul's policing of what physical embodiment is qualified to compete and debate over how the show perpetuates pejorative stereotypes and slang rather than the contestants' self-identification.

In *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, Susan Stryker (2017) explores the history of transgender in the English language. She notes that the meaning of the term transgender itself has undergone changes in Anglophone-West and only been a widespread term in the past few decades that can be traced to the origin in the 60s and became widely used in the 1990s (Stryker, 2017). In the 90s, transgender was used as an umbrella term in a range of identities outside of gender norms and “similar to what gender queer, gender-nonconforming, and nonbinary mean now” (Stryker, 2017, p. 37). In contemporary usage, transgender refers “only to those who identify with a binary gender other than the one they were assigned by birth” (Stryker, 2017, p. 37, emphasis in original). As Stryker (2017) notes the meaning is still undergoing change, she uses transgender “to refer to people who move away from the gender

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<sup>7</sup>This thesis is cautious of reinforcing the dichotomy of cisgender and transgender. Thus, this thesis does not label all the non-transgender contestants as cisgender as many former contestants including Jinkx Monsoon, Violet Chachki, and Shea Couleé have publicly identified themselves as non-binary and other preferred identities.

they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (*trans-*) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender” and “in its broadest possible sense” (p. 1). I here use the terms transgender and trans<sup>8</sup> following Stryker’s usage and in accordance with the queens’ self-identification and do not rely on their gender expression and presentation on the show or any form of physical embodiment and transformation of bodies such as breast implants as they pertain to transgender identity.

It is important to underscore the definition of transgender in the discussion because while Stryker attempts to be as inclusive as possible of gender-variant identities when applying trans identity, RuPaul closely follows the definition of transgender in contemporary usage and sets a rigid dichotomy of physical embodiment in her remarks and on the show’s content. Perhaps the most controversial content of the show is the (now disavowed) catchphrase, “You’ve got She-Mail!”. Used in early seasons, the catchphrase was a parodic homage to another well-known reality television competition *America’s Next Top Model* (2003-) from which RPDR borrows and appropriates many elements and puts on parodic lens. On *America’s Next Top Model*, the host Tyra Banks announces each new photoshoot theme in a video message called “Tyra Mail.” The appropriation of “She-Mail” pays homage to “Tyra Mail,” while at the same time it is a wordplay of shemale. The term shemale is considered derogatory against the transgender community for two reasons. First, it has a sexual connotation and equates transgender women to sex workers. Second, it is suspected of misgendering because it refers to their gender assigned at birth. Similarly problematic content is a mini challenge called “Female or Shemale” where contestants

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<sup>8</sup>In some discussions, scholars use trans\* with an asterisk instead of transgender to referring to “inclusive of many different experiences and identities rooted in acts of crossing” (Stryker, 2017, p. 11). The asterisk refers to words starting with the prefix trans- including transgender, transsexual, etc. However, according to Trans Student Educational Resources (“Asterisk,” n.d.), they decided to stop using the asterisk for unnecessary and often misuseage, and trans already includes all trans identities. I thereby use trans without the asterisk in the thesis and respect other authors’ usage of trans\*. See: <https://transstudent.org/issues/asterisk/>

have to guess if body parts belong to a “biological woman” or a “psychological woman” (Oleksiak, 2021). In addition to the pejorative slur, the mini challenge implies that a transwoman is not actually a woman and physical differences should be made visible for the distinction between the two. Furthermore, the women are under the gaze and their gender is perceived by externals. The show invites the perceivers, in this case the contestants and the audience, to decide what embodiment transgender women should occupy and differentiate them from true womanhood.

What blatantly exposes how RuPaul polices the boundaries of drag is her interview article in *The Guardian*. In the interview with Decca Aitkenhead (2018), RuPaul is asked about qualifications to compete on RPDR. When Aitkenhead asks if RuPaul would include a biological woman or a transgender woman who has transitioned in the drag contest, RuPaul answers “Probably not.” RuPaul further explains why by her definition, drag is only valid when it is done by men:

Drag loses its sense of danger and its sense of irony once it’s not men doing it, because at its core it’s a social statement and a big f-you to male-dominated culture. So for men to do it, it’s really punk rock, because it’s a real rejection of masculinity... Peppermint didn’t get breast implants until after she left our show; she was identifying as a woman, but she hadn’t really transitioned... You can identify as a woman and say you’re transitioning, but it changes once you start changing your body. It takes on a different thing; it changes the whole concept of what we’re doing. We’ve had some girls who’ve had some injections in the face and maybe a little bit in the butt here and there, but they haven’t transitioned. (Aitkenhead, 2018)

The interview faced trenchant criticism because of RuPaul's explicit denial of transwomen in the world of drag. She emphasized the transition process and how once the transition is done, it will inevitably undermine the radicality of drag.

The bias against female-bodied queens persists even as overtly offensive content is removed from *RuPaul's Drag Race*<sup>9</sup> and the show has welcomed Peppermint as a transwoman to compete. RuPaul's remarks expose two rationales in her drag brand. Firstly, RuPaul's brand of drag is an essentialist one-way street of male-bodied individuals performing feminine drag. The transition of the body, according to RuPaul, does not include plastic surgery but only refers to breast implants and possibly vaginoplasty. Female genitalia and secondary sex characteristics are the body transformation opposite to what RuPaul thinks of as resistance against patriarchy. It erases the contribution of those queens who participated in their pre-transition state and did not present female in the sense of embodiment. Ironically, the dismantling of patriarchal and heteronormative masculinity must be done and only valid by those who pass as male; female-bodied individuals have no part in it. Secondly, RuPaul's definition of drag performance is built on a gender binary where transgression and playing of the characteristics prescribed to the opposite gender are made visible. The dichotomy lays a necessary foundation for RuPaul's drag, a male individual moving from one extreme to the other and goes further beyond the extreme to present hyperfeminine drag. The potential danger of this definition is that while Judith Butler contends that gender is performative and that drag has the potential to subvert through parody, RuPaul reinscribes the line in gender binary and reinforces the characteristics, body images, and fashion assigned to each gender instead of exposing the performativity of gender which is

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<sup>9</sup>The catchphrase remains on *Drag Race Thailand* Season 2 as mentioned in the previous chapter.

“manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gender stylization of the body” (Butler, 2006, p. xv).

As of this writing, the 13 seasons of RPDR still feature a majority of homosexual males while transgender queens have been a solid component of drag culture as a whole. From Kylie Sonique Love (Season 2), Carmen Carrera and Stacy Layne Matthew (Season 3), Jiggly Caliente and Kenya Michaels (Season 4), Monica Beverly Hillz and Honey Mahogany (Season 5), Gia Gunn (Season 6) to Peppermint (Season 9), most *Drag Race* queens who identify as women only come out after the show. To be noted, on Season 5 (2013) Monica Beverly Hillz comes out on the main stage on the show under the pressure for holding a secret that she identifies as a transgender woman and thus thinks she does not belong to the show. Peppermint on the other hand has already come out as a transgender woman before entering the workroom on Season 9 of RPDR (2017). Peppermint marks a significant representation of the trans community, for she openly talks about her experience as a transwoman doing drag on the show, which is an issue rarely touched upon in the previous seasons.

Even as Peppermint placed the first runner-up on her season, however, RuPaul’s transphobic remarks in *The Guardian*, published the next year in 2018, provoked a backlash. Later that year, RPDR cast Season 6 alumna Gia Gunn, then a transitioned woman, to compete on *Drag Race All-Stars* Season 4 (2018), a *Drag Race* spin-off where alumni queens from previous seasons return to compete. According to Gunn on the podcast hosted by RPDR queens Willam Belli and Alaska Thunderfuck, she believed that her casting was somewhat related to the criticism of RuPaul’s remarks (Woodzick, 2021). But after Gia Gunn’s reappearance on the show, the following seasons did not cast any



transgender queens until a transgender man Gottmik who has gone through transition was cast on Season 13 (2021).

### **Thai Gender System**

Long regarded as a gay-friendly nation, Thailand draws numerous tourists from around the globe every year. Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, has long had a reputation as the “gay paradise” in the eyes of many foreign tourists (Jackson, 1999; Käng, 2011). The avid nightlife and queer culture are among the most compelling features. What differentiates Thailand from other countries is the apparently friendly and tolerant attitudes towards gender minorities and the diverse gender presentation in the daily life of Thai people.

Rosalind Morris (1994) observes that the traditional Thai three-sex system has increasingly been replaced by four sexualities in modern Western norms. Namely, the original system classifies gender into three categories, which are male, female, and *kathoey* (translated to transgender and/or transsexual especially female transgenderism in contemporary discourse), while the modern Western system follows Foucauldian sexuality, based on two sets of dichotomies: male-female and heterosexual-homosexual, hence four positions: male heterosexuality, male homosexuality, female heterosexuality, and female homosexuality.

However, Peter Jackson (2000) contends that Western sexualities could not account for the proliferating gender categories as he observes at least ten terms are used to label different gender identities in daily discourse in contemporary Thailand. The Thai term *phet* (translated to gender and/or sex) includes “eroticism” and “sexual desire” and therefore an “eroticized gender” (2000, p. 409) and “incorporates ideas of sex, gender, and sexuality” (Jackson, 2011b, p. 3). The gender identifications revolve around the gender triad of male, female, and *kathoey*. Other gender representations, sexualities, and anatomy are appended to the three main categories and

thereby multiply these terms. Neologisms in Thai reflect the continuum of both local discourse and encountering of the Western sexual culture (Jackson, 2000, 2009, 2011a). The appropriation of English terms proliferates local gender categories and presents the hybridity and the merger of two operative systems.

Dredge Byung'chu Käng (2012) observes the categories used in the daily life of Thailand are “visibly distinguishable by outward appearance” (p. 476). Käng (2012) suggests conceptualizing the Thai gender and sex system as “genderscapes,” which is based on the five key genders of *tom*<sup>10</sup> : woman : *kathoey* : *gay* : man. Thai “genderscapes” move along with five main gender clusters, and thus they are “a localized production of gender and sexual differences that negotiate the tensions between local and global gender/sexuality forms” layered with class, ethnic, regions, and morality and thus “a perspectival endeavor” (2014a, p. 427). They are categorized through repetition and daily routine although the lines between them are not fixed. He uses the plural form “genderscapes” to highlight the mobility in contemporary Thai gender and sexuality and underlines that individual agency can shift gender norms over time.

These three scholars provide different models and insights into the Thai gender system. Nonetheless, the colonial era in Southeast Asia is widely considered to have been a momentous time of shaping and reconfiguring gender discourse in Thailand. Although not directly under European rule, Thailand was characterized by its semi-colonial status (Jackson, 2010). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as part of the nation’s modernization project Thai regime used legal structures to institutes biopower, a mechanism that Foucault has argued was mediated through the law, education, and medicine to reconstruct gender and sexuality in Western Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Jackson, 2011b). During the colonial era, the state’s “autocolonial

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<sup>10</sup>According to Käng (2014a), *tom* is “a masculine woman who engages in or desires same-sex relationships with a woman” (p. 414).

governmentality” (Käng, 2014a, p. 410) attempted to demonstrate that the state was civilized (*siwilai*) by implanting gender codes recognizable to Western eyes (Jackson, 2009, 2011b). Specifically, the modernization projects worked to efface androgyny in Siamese gender, which was deemed the mark of “a ‘semi-barbarous’ lack of civilization” by European colonizers (Jackson, 2009, p. 24). Accordingly, the state sought to reformulate gender along the European model of two normative sexes (Jackson, 2009). The legislation differentiated masculine and feminine names, fashions, hairstyles, occupations, and behaviors, etc. (Jackson, 2009, 2011b; Käng, 2014a). It was through the state’s intervention and biopolitical power that Thailand avoided direct colonization under European rules like other neighboring countries in Southeast Asia (Jackson, 2009, 2011b; Käng, 2014a).

The modernization projects of the Thai state accentuated the differences between the two sexes and thus made transgressions more salient (Käng, 2014a). Jackson (2009) argues that “the predominance of gender over sexuality in modern Thai queer culture...emerged from a self-modernising regime of biopower focused intensely on the public performance of heteronormative gendering but largely overlooked private sexual practice” (p. 25). The focus on behaviors perceived in the public sphere further formed the characteristics of “the gender-inflected sexualities of Thailand” that “were produced by the very forces of autocolonial governmentality, modernization, and globalization (including the institutionalization of sexual dimorphism, restructuring of kin relations, and the construction of tradition) that tried to erase them” (Käng, 2014a, p. 426). As Jackson (2009) observes, gender presentation, facial appearance and manner are the pivotal determinants in Thai female transgenderism, yet male homosexuality shares more similarities with Western homosexual cultures that are largely based on sexual preference. Thus, male homosexuality appears modern and recognizable to the Westerners. As a

result, it is tempting to think of *gay* identity in Thailand is imported from the West and *kathoey* as the local form of male homosexuality. Indeed, Jackson (2009) suggests that many mistake *kathoey* as the precursory form and traditional archetype of *gay*. However, modern *kathoey* identity only emerged alongside the Thai state modernization program scrutinizing Siamese gender norms, while the gender category *gay* in Thailand developed contemporaneously with Western male homosexuality (Käng, 2014a). Thus, Jackson (2009) contends that *gay* identity in Thailand is not imported from the West but rather only facilitated and valorized by capitalist globalization. Namely, modern *kathoey* and *gay* identities are identities developing at a similar speed with the Western world and facilitated by Western gender norms instead of the false assumption that *kathoey* is the ancestor of homosexuality in Thailand and *gay* is the import from the West.

The high visibility of female transgenderism, namely *kathoey* culture, and other queer identities in Thailand does not only result from the refashioning of gender but also from the expansion of the sex industry in the entertainment space. Thailand as America's ally in the Vietnam war further expanded sex tourism and the government's official sanction of entertainment space in resort areas stimulated the economy of Thailand (Jeffrey, 2002; Käng, 2014a). Similarly, the promotion of an exotic and erotic "institutionalized third gender" in contemporary "ladyboy" cabarets draws tourists from around the globe to sex tourism in Thailand (Käng, 2014a, p. 424). Relations between the sex industry and visibility and proliferation of gender in Thailand have become thus reciprocal (Ocha, 2014). The monetary exchange in these tourist zones helps transgender people to afford sex reassignment surgeries and most transgender people continue to work in the tourist zones after surgeries to make a living. The reciprocal economy in the tourist scenes can further satisfy the demands for

unorthodox bodies. According to Witchayanee Ocha and Barbara Earth's fieldwork (Ocha, 2014; Ocha & Earth, 2013), not all transgender sex workers have gone through full surgical transition and some of them do not intend to complete the transition, nor do all who have transitioned identify themselves as transgender. Some have only transitioned because they see it as a plausible job option for higher earning (Ocha & Earth, 2013). Thus, the economy of the global sex industry creates and stabilizes alternative identities in contemporary Thailand and drives forward the salient points of diverse identities.

### **On West-to-East Diffusion Model**

Scholarly work on the history of the gender system from the Kingdom of Siam in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century to post-war era Thailand offer different perspectives on contemporary Thai gender discourse. Many of them document and analyze the reformulation of the Thai gender system from perspectives and methodologies drawn from gay and lesbian studies and early queer studies. Rosalind Morris (1994) lays the foundation of Western gender norms in Foucauldian sexuality and argues that the four-sexuality system has increasingly supplanted the three-sex system hence the two sets of contrast of modernity versus tradition and West versus Thainess. Dennis Altman (2001) contends that "globalisation has helped create an international gay/lesbian identity" (p. 83). The Stonewall riot as a widespread American symbol of gay liberation is the main model to be inspired, adopted, and assimilated by LGBT movements on an international scale, which has also been valorized by the AIDS/HIV epidemic. The post-Stonewall era global gay homogeneity has been shaped around the American model alongside economic and cultural superpower. America as the center exporting cultures of sex and gender based on the Anglo-American model all thanks to the convergence of economic and cultural globalization was marked by the ubiquitous transnational capitalism at the end of the twentieth

century. However, this kind of reading overly underscores the West as the centrifugal mediation of transnational cultural exchange and fails to see queer cultures and their autonomy beyond the West. It also implies the inevitable prevalence of more dominant Western culture with the contrast of tradition versus modernity and locality versus globality.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, studies of the Thai gender system have departed from the main discourses in the 90s and begun to reflect on the West-to-East diffusion model. These new approaches emphasize the autonomy and resilience of non-heteronormative identities beyond the West. Peter Jackson (2011) maintains that cultures of gender and sexuality, as well as queer subjectivities in Asia, have taken on processes of indigenization and localization different from those one would expect if western models were the dominant influence alongside modern transnational capitalism. Dredge Byung' chu Käng (2012, 2014a) proposes a model of “genderscapes” that move along five main gender clusters in Thailand. “Genderscapes” negotiate the tension between different models and are therefore “hybrid and globalized” (Käng, 2014a, p. 427). At the same time, these scholars do not seek to deny the influence of Western gender norms on local gender systems, for it is implausible to stop cultural exchange from shaping identity politics. They stress the continuum of local discourse in encountering Western sexual culture and the ability to absorb new categorization into an existing system instead of being completely replaced by the dominant culture. This stress on flexibility underlines how the contemporary discourse of gender in Thailand is hybrid as the “genderscapes” model Käng (2012, 2014a) proposes. Käng intends to destabilize “universal notions of sexual dimorphism and heterosexual compulsion through cross-cultural comparison” (2014a, p. 410). Their studies offer explanations that reject the one-way narrative that queer culture and identities diffuse from the

West, instead illuminating the autonomy and complexity of the Thai gender system which escapes the Western gaze.

Linguistic use of gender terms is often seen as evidence of global gay identity diffused from Western gender identities. For instance, “gay” is a common label of male homosexuality around the world, and it has been transliterated in Thai “*gay*.” “*Gay*” first appeared in the Thai language in the 1960s involving a murder of an American journalist and thus connoted cross-culture homosexual relationship especially with white men at the time (Jackson, 2009; Lin, 2019). However, Jackson (2009) argues that the terminology should not be understood as an American export, for “adaptation of the term ‘gay’ beyond the West often marks the emergence of distinctive new local worlds of homosexual meaning” (p. 18). In contrast to regarding Thai gender as a byproduct of culture exchange, Jackson (2011) emphasizes how Western models were borrowed, appropriated, and indigenized. There is little evidence that Thai culture was inevitably usurped in the collision with more hegemonic Western culture. Jackson (2009) concludes that the English term in the Thai lexicon reflects “linguistic innovations and local autonomy as much as foreign borrowing” (p. 19). We should thus treat the Thai term “*gay*” as hybridized.

In conclusion, I would argue that the studies conducted in the 90s looked for, employing Homi Bhabha’s words, “colonial mimicry...the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, 1984, p. 126). The studies in the 1990s that saw Thai gender culture as nearly same “but not white” (Bhabha, 1984, p. 130) centered dominant post-Stonewall symbols and a West-to-East diffusion model. Evidence was drawn from not only economic and cultural globalization but also the AIDS/HIV epidemic in which LGBT organizations in the non-Western world utilized Western literatures in sex

education, eventually creating “a newly universal sense of homosexuality as the basis for identity and lifestyle” (Altman, 1996). Attempts to pinpoint the commonality in local discourses reflected a desire to see a “slippage” between American queer culture and Americanized queer cultures (Bhabha, 1984). These Eurocentric views predisposed scholars to see similarity instead of difference under globalization, and they bolstered these views by stressing the assimilation and homogeneity of non-heteronormative identities.

According to Jackson (2009), European colonization actually delayed homosexual liberation and queer development in Asian countries. The countries that had circumvented direct European rule, such as Japan and Thailand, have well-developed, vibrant queer identities in their capitals Tokyo and Bangkok respectively and have become centers of queer culture in Asia. The semi-colonial past in Thailand’s history along with other political, historical, and technological elements cooperate in shaping the gender and sexuality system, including the modernization of the state, the AIDS/HIV epidemic as well as inter-Asian immigration and diverse ethnic groups within Thailand national borders. Namely, intra-Asian culture flows influence the contemporary gender system in Thailand as much as Western gender norms do.



## Conclusion

*RuPaul's Drag Race* (RPDR) has become a cultural phenomenon and drawn a wide audience in and outside American to consume the show which features drag and queer culture that were once only enjoyed by marginalized groups. RPDR's success sweeps across the world and propels the localized production of the reality competition in many countries. As the *Drag Race* franchise grows, drag and queer culture around the world have taken on an apparently homogenous façade, especially as most versions are produced in and modeled around the Anglophone West. *Drag Race Thailand* (DRT) is one of few the exceptions produced outside of Anglophone West and is the only Asian platform as of this writing. Thus, the international spin-offs as a funnel to market RuPaul's brand of drag bring the cross-cultural exchange of queer cultures and identities between the West and the non-West to attention. Moreover, the expansion in Asia under cultural globalization further raises tensions between queer studies and gay and lesbian studies as well as the shift of foci in the intersectionality of Asian queer studies in Western academia. To examine this global phenomenon, I have utilized texts from the *Drag Race* series in Thailand and America as examples.

The high visibility of alternative identities resulted from the “commodification of transgendered bodies” (Tan, 2014) and the “hybridized and globalized” (Käng, 2014a) characteristics of Thailand's gender system could be easily recognized to Western eyes and thus labeled as “gay paradise” (Jackson, 1999; Käng, 2011). Along with the stereotyping of Thailand, the multivocality and hybridity of gender identities set the foundation and could be the reason why Thailand became the first destination for the *Drag Race* expansion on the Asian continent and the only Asian platform of the *Drag Race* franchise as of this writing. Moreover, while the Thai gender system presents itself as Western-inflected, it also delivers a local subtext that

female transgenderism has reciprocal relations with entertainment spaces including cabaret theaters and drag at local bars and clubs. Working in these entertainment spaces supports the expense of surgical transition and allows queer autonomy (Jackson, 2011a). The entanglement therefore naturalizes transwomen doing drag at the drag scenes in Thailand which shows on DRT. Transwomen participants on DRT are not marked out for any marginal status within the larger drag community.

DRT presents a relationship of drag and transgenderism that is very different from RPDR, which has been accused of gatekeeping transgender queens. In the 13 seasons of RPDR, its attitude towards transgender queens has been changing. RuPaul and the television networks have taken measures following various backlashes, including removing offensive content and catchphrases, issuing public apologies, and recasting former transgender alumnae on the spin-off *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars*. These measures could be understood as ways to salvage the show's reputation or be understood more positively as RuPaul realizing her mistakes and trying to make amends (Oleksiak, 2021). As K. Woodzick (2021) argues, “[e]ven if gatekeepers against transgender and non-binary drag performers continue to exist, the drag community has shown itself to be elastic enough in its inclusivity to continue to expand” (p. 78). The two critics both have a positive attitude towards the change and growth of RuPaul and RPDR and have confidence in the resilience of non-normative and queer performers.

The progress indeed appears to be happening as in 2021, Season 13 of RPDR cast a transgender man to compete. However, casting a transman as a token of transgender representation shrewdly circumvents the issue in which female-bodied individuals are left out from the show featuring drag culture in which transgender women have always been a huge pillar. Thus, I would argue that even though RuPaul and RPDR have changed and evolved

through the course of the show, the problem of excluding trans women remains and more radical action is needed.

I propose that the issue of favoring non-trans queens to participate on the platform featuring drag and queer culture can be reflected from international spin-offs in the *Drag Race* franchise. Many argue that RuPaul's drag brand produces an easily consumed drag for a mainstream audience and runs the risk of scrutinizing the radical aesthetics of drag as well as perpetuating heteronormative discourses (Balzer, 2005; Kohlsdorf, 2014). To put it succinctly, RuPaul's brand of drag has taken the edges off and is not queer enough. However, it is the "de-queer drag" that can be easily framed around the genre of reality television to market and export in a compact *Drag Race* template. The television expansion of *Drag Race* with the strong force of dominant American culture exports and presents drag culture in a seemingly unified form, which also centers around Anglophone-America as the centrifugal mediation for global queer culture.

While it is tempting to see the American drag brand as the funnel for exporting and globalizing a Western-based gender formation around drag through *Drag Race* global franchising, it would be imprecise to describe the *Drag Race* phenomenon as sheer Westernizing homogenization. As the franchise grows, RuPaul's drag brand with *Drag Race* template will inevitably intermix with drag situated differently in performance genealogy outside of Anglophone-West contexts. The localized process to unpack the *Drag Race* template into the locally produced versions draws from different performance genealogies and gender epistemologies. The RuPaul aesthetic of drag would not apply to every drag scene in every country. On closer look, the US version and Thai version present distinct attitudes when it comes to non-normative identity, female embodiment, and queer culture.

Depending on contexts, the porous nature of drag entails different meanings and connotations. The franchise can be studied to reveal at least two different historical gender formations around drag. First, drag on DRT draws to the proximity and coexistence of Thai gender identities which often conflates with female transgenderism as a result of highly commercialized queer culture. Second, drag on RPDR relies heavily on biological determinism which reinforces gender binary to accentuate the parody performance and transgression. Their different relations to gender formations exemplify the way that drag embodies multiple interleaved meanings that fluctuate according to contexts. Drag plays certain elements, for instance, imitation of gender expression, appropriation of gender clothing, and most importantly parody of naturalized gender identity and desire. Drag contests, transgresses, and blurs multiple boundaries between the public and the private, empowerment and disenfranchisement, and visibility and invisibility. Drag re-inscribes identities and re-imagines the unnamed: Drag is for the survival of peripheral subjects. Therefore, drag takes shape in distinct aesthetics and configurations and seldom has an aligned, monolithic formation. The presumed identical drag is a false assumption misled by the *Drag Race* trademark and English terminology.

Additionally, the paradigm of aesthetics of RuPaul's drag brand itself has constantly been contested by the queens on and after the show. The show itself has found its way to deviate from RuPaul's disapproval of transwomen's appearance on the show, as Peppermint and many other trans predecessors are able to tell their stories and make an impact on the show's reception of transgender queens. RuPaul herself cannot take complete control and gatekeep the absolute narrative in drag. Drag culture is constantly written and rewritten by a community of contributors across time and gender. There have been queens of different embodiment and identities in different international spin-offs in the *Drag Race* franchise such as DRT.

RuPaul thinks of herself and is often reckoned as the matriarch of drag, yet she cannot be the singular mother of drag despite her fame and success. Moreover, RuPaul's drag has also been in constant change from her androgynous genderfuck drag in her early career to her feminine glamorous drag looks on RPDR. The change of her drag perfectly exemplifies the fluidity of drag. The dialectical and fluid nature of drag enables drag to preserve itself, resist, and challenge different forms of normativity. In 2016, another drag contest *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula* (Noyes & Varrati, 2016), a dark and grotesque drag contest which parodies RPDR, began streaming on YouTube. *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula* imitates and adapts RPDR's mantra of searching for "America's Next Drag Superstar," claiming to search for "The World's Next Drag Supermonster." The aesthetics and practice of drag thus involve monstrous elements on *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula* and shift from transgressing gender binary to questioning human beings as a concept. The morphing face of drag resembles the postmodernist parody that renders everything copies of copies and drag as an idea is in constant escape, mutation, and reconfiguration. No one can be the ultimate author of drag narrative, even for a matriarchal figure like RuPaul who always says that every queen in the franchise will always belong to her drag royalty. In the end, ironically, it is RuPaul's own lyrics in "Born Naked" that best describe the playfulness, fluidity, and performativity in the core of drag— "We're all born naked, and the rest is drag" (2014).

In conclusion, I would argue that the inclusion of transgender competitors could indicate that Thai drag often comprises transgenderism as the result of the historical transformation of gender in Thailand while drag presented on the US version is often decoupled from transgender women. Thus, drag on DRT is not aligned with RPDR. With the franchise's international expansion, it only reveals the distinctive cores of gender performance and identities. The

international expansion of the *Drag Race* franchise highlights how American queer culture interacts with Thai queer cultures rather than imposing a post-Stonewall homogeneity of queer culture diffusing from America. Under the name of drag, it represents unique features stemmed from divergent origins. Claims of a uniform and homogenous queer culture around the world ignore cultural differences and connotations unrecognizable to Western eyes.

This thesis also wants to join the conversations on the tension between homosexual-dominant sexual politics and queer studies as well as the shift of focus in queer theory interconnection with regional studies. One of the most common approaches in gay and lesbian studies lies in the movement-based liberation and movements which preempt the politics of identity around the globe, and they are further conditioned by material reality in different regions. Queer theory attempts to escape and break the limitations of identity politics and theorization in queer studies often involve post-modernist questioning of stabilization of normative identification. In short, the gay identity as a product of modernism and Fordism strengthens the identity as a fixed point while postmodernist queer theory interrogates the identity as the central reference.

This conceptual shift in the discourse of identity is both illustrated and advanced by approaching the *Drag Race* phenomenon through the interdisciplinary matrix of Asian queer studies. On the one hand, materiality, which queer theory is frequently criticized for omitting, exemplifies in the economic and cultural power that successfully exports and markets the television programming and marketing RuPaul's brand of drag with English as the lingua franca. The promotion of sex tourism renders the high visibility of transgenderism and stereotypes of Thailand as "gay paradise" and I argue they are the possible reasons Thailand was the first platform in Asia of the *Drag Race* franchise. On the other hand, queer theory tries to make room

for individuals who do not fit the dominant gender binary epistemology. A distrust of the authorship of the drag brand of RuPaul, who sees herself as the matriarch of her drag empire, is shown by many contestants on RPDR and other parody drag contests that try to subvert RuPaul's policing on drag. The economy of the global sex industry in Thailand also provides new discourse on proliferating alternative identities which overflows dichotomy epistemology. In a nutshell, the diversity on the drag scene on DRT provides discourses and possible solutions to the exclusion of trans queens on RPDR. Asian queer studies can also address the problem of Eurocentrism in queer theory and the possible danger of a regime of homonormativity in gay and lesbian studies.

I hope this thesis helps to caution against overgeneralization when applying Anglo-American norms and Western theoretical concepts to the non-West. The critical reading of Asian drag and Asian queer culture requires further studies and assessment apart from America-based theorization. By comparing DRT and RPDR, hopefully I have provided one avenue to resist a univocal approach to drag inscribed in the Anglo-West norms. It is my hope this comparative study of the two versions of *Drag Race* contributes to the further exploration of comparative queer and gender studies as well as *Drag Race* studies.

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