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ABSTRACT

The project considers the disparity between two case studies of “drag:” 1) “RuPauline drag” (*RuPaul’s Drag Race*, RuPaul, and affiliated properties), and 2) the House of LaBeija as a microcosm of ballroom drag, an international phenomenon comprised predominantly by queer and trans people of color (QTPOC) competing in self-hosted “balls.” These “cases” are assessed as *ideal texts*, that is, *ideal types* (heuristic and reductive) which are interpreted as *texts* (via hermeneutical methodology) in hopes of comparing the cases for the subjectivities they foster and the orientations they promulgate. This work begins with a comparison of the “cases” via the settings in which they occur, contrasting their relationship to and deployment of race, gender, class, and sex(uality), while the latter half examines their practices and professed values, via performance, ritual, kinship, and fantasy, for the orientations they create and sustain. Taken together, the comparison of these “cases” aims to resist the flat, cisgender-heterosexual-normative reading of “drag” as a homogenous practice and insists that the demarcation of certain subjects as “religious” further marginalizes and invalidates people and communities for whom drag holds an ultimate importance. This project concludes with a brief consideration of drag’s potential for intervention into the study of religion by way of challenging conventional binaries, interrogating the coherency of the “religious” subject, and encouraging the study of religion to think expansively about the many ways people orient themselves in the world.

CATEGORY IS: RELIGIOUS “REALNESS”
A Consideration of Disparate Subjectivity
via “RuPauline Drag” and the House of LaBeija

by

Joss Willsbrough

B.A., Lipscomb University, 2017

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Religion

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INTRODUCTION

In a 2013 interview with the Huffington Post entitled “RuPaul’s Divine Mystical Wisdom,” the international celebrity and multi-million dollar drag queen personality describes his relationship to religion and spirituality. In this interview, he refers to God, prayer, and traditionally religious figures like Jesus, Krishna, and Buddha, but his summation of spirituality comes most directly when he responds to the question of whether he sees himself as a “spiritual mentor,” one with “a God-given ability for reaching people,” and he responds:

Do I give spiritual advice? All the time. Everything I say is spiritual advice. It’s not like I’m a guru or anything, but it is the only game in town. It is the only game I can ever really have. As drag queens, we have taken the position of being... people who remind the culture to not take itself so seriously. What it says on your driver’s license isn’t really who you are - you are something much greater than that. A lot of the queens coming on the show are just beginning to realize that. They know it on an unconscious level, that they wanted to transcend the labels and boxes that society would have them be in, so they turn to drag because it’s a natural thing. It’s what we are all doing... God masquerading in drag.¹

These ideas, that we are all “God masquerading in drag,” that labels and social identity are illusory, that spirituality is “the only game in town,” suggest a worldview in which the “secular” remains imaginary, wherein the primary reaction to religiously motivated marginalization might be the cultivation of one’s own “spirituality.” Indeed, RuPaul’s comments suggest that no other option is even viable.

Such a self-identification of “spiritual not religious” is unsurprising, and is especially emphasized as a trend amongst millennials who are perceived as a threat to the future of “organized religion.”² It is this same generation who have watched and supported *RuPaul’s*

¹ Rev Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, “RuPaul’s Divine Mystical Wisdom,” *Huffington Post* (blog), January 28, 2013, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-raushenbush/ru-paul-divine-mystical-wisdom_b_2544739.html.

² Caroline Newman, “Why Millennials Are Leaving Religion But Embracing Spirituality,” *UVA Today*, December 14, 2015, <https://news.virginia.edu/content/qa-why-millennials-are-leaving-religion-embracing-spirituality>.

Drag Race, promoting it from a small reality show on the gay cable channel Logo to a mainstream cultural fixture that has burgeoned in both popular consumption and critical acclaim, anchoring spin-offs, tours, merchandise, conferences, social media celebrity, and a primetime spot on VH1.

RuPaul's Drag Race and RuPaul himself hail from the genealogy of drag competitions, which date back to prominence as early as the Harlem Renaissance and the Hamilton Lodge Ball, started in 1869 and roaring through the 1920s and 30s.³ The culture of drag throughout New York has been reconfigured many times over the course of the last century, but rose to contemporary social recognition with Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning*, which documented "drag" within ballroom culture as it came to exist amongst queer and trans Black and Latinx folk in the mid-to-late 1980s. The formation of drag "houses," as sources of both emotional and material support, began with Crystal LaBeija and continues as an international phenomenon today.

Genealogies of drag are susceptible to reductive representation within a linear narrative, arranged into a "history of American drag" with clear moments of transformation and overall progression. But linear conceptions neglect the co-constituting relationship of disparate drag communities, particularly as they have come to manifest today. While the *Paris of Burning* style ballroom drag indeed served as the foundation for *RuPaul's Drag Race* and its mainstream success, the ballroom is far from dead or dying, but rather, drag houses continue as vibrant communities of international support for queer and trans people of color. While *RuPaul's Drag Race* deploys drag as a consumerist endeavor, one that attempts to transform people's perceptions by gaining viewership and capital, drag houses of the ballroom continue

³ Oliver Stabbe, "Queens and Queers: The Rise of Drag Ball Culture in the 1920s," National Museum of American History, March 30, 2016, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/queens-and-queers-rise-drag-ball-culture-1920s>.

as primarily closed environments which sanction drag as a site of intimate community and self-becoming, often holding space for those otherwise alienated by hegemonic social life. Both communities are as alive today as ever before, and they interact with and confront one another in a myriad of ways. Yet while both undoubtedly participate in “drag,” the drag they create and value differs as a result of their disparate contexts, participants, and convictions.

Why Religion?

Admittedly, religion is not an emic description for most drag communities, especially when considered in the context of prevailing American narratives of queerness as secularism which construe religion as anti-queer and queerness as anti-religion. Melissa Wilcox characterizes this flattening as the false “conviction that religion is only, always and everywhere, the opiate of the queers.”⁴ Consequently, it would seem those who participate in drag rarely understand themselves as “religious,” or might at least think of their religious identity as distinct from their drag practices. Thus, the framing of drag as a site of religious inquiry marks an admittedly etic characterization, but this does not compromise its viability. This project neither provides nor seeks after a universal definition of religion, but instead claims a genealogy of religious studies which refutes dichotomies of “secular” and “religious” on the grounds that, as Wilcox suggests, “there was never, in fact, a ‘secular’ in the sense of ‘exterior’ to religion” and that “lack of affiliation with religion hardly equates to a strictly secular outlook.”⁵ Indeed, “secular” hardly seems an apt description for the kind of vibrancy, community, conviction, and fantasy embodied by drag. And while a great deal of scholarship concerns the *what* of drag, surprisingly little attention is paid to drag’s *why*. Why develop relationships and communities around the practice of drag? Why center drag in

⁴ Melissa M. Wilcox, *Queer Nuns: Religion, Activism, and Serious Parody*, Sexual Cultures (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 222.

⁵ Wilcox, 209.

one's life? Why sacrifice one's resources, sometimes one's physical safety, for the sake of participating in drag, for ensuring its future? And what kinds of transformations occur because of one's participation in drag?

These questions, together with the diverse answers they generate, position drag as something akin to what Charles Long defines as *religion*: “orientation in the ultimate sense,⁶ that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one's place in the world.”⁷ Participation in drag offers a site for one to discern and embody such ultimate orientation, especially in its attempt to address fundamental locative concerns regarding where one fits in the world and how one confronts, adapts to, escapes from, or otherwise deals with matrices of oppression and/or euphoria. As this project attempts to demonstrate, the “ultimate orientation” cultivated by drag is not the same for all who participate, nor does drag necessarily function as the sole site of “ultimate orientation,” nor does “drag” constitute a singular monolithic reality. Disparity in the context and centrality of drag practices affect the kinds of cosmology they sustain, which in turn, uniquely shapes their participants. Just as the substantive dimensions of drag (location, temporality, style, etc.) can be assessed for the kind of subjects they produce, so too can (and should) the ultimate orientations of drag be considered to assess the kind of religious subjectivity fostered or foreclosed by disparate practices and communities.

The conception of religion which emerges from the conjunctive work of Wilcox and Long implies that, because there is no “secular” in the sense of exteriority to religion, *everyone*

⁶ Lest the work of Paul Tillich along with its genealogical sediment imply that I here read Long's use of “ultimate” to connote any emphasis on faith or transcendence, I would like to emphasize that “ultimate” for the purposes of drag, might more appropriately be understood as referring to *importance* or *primacy*. Further, the “ultimate” concerns of drag are never detached from materiality or corporeality, and as such, may transform substantively without sacrificing **their** import. Hopefully such a conception of “ultimate” holds Protestant-hegemonic resonances at bay, but alas, it may not.

⁷ Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, 2nd edition (Aurora, Colo: The Davies Group Publishers, 1999), 7.

expresses some semblance of “ultimate orientation.” Rather than conceiving of “religion” as a word which applies only to certain subjects, it might be more expansively conceived, following the work of Kathryn Lofton, as “a word used to summarize the habits by which we demarcate ourselves as certain kinds of dreamers and makers.”⁸ Such a conception avoids the boundary defining, normative work which seeks to determine who can be seen as a properly religious subject and instead, opens the possibilities for the study of religion to consider what those “habits” are, diverse as they may be, which all people, regardless of their identification with the term “religious,” choose for themselves (or have chosen for them), to demarcate and cultivate themselves as “certain kinds of dreamers and makers.” Under this reading, drag need not defend its inclusion within the scope of religious studies; instead, the study of religion must consider why drag (and many other “ultimately orienting” practices) have heretofore remained marginalized or excluded from its scope, and must reflect upon the limitations of the discipline for as long as it continues to sustain essentialized dichotomies between “religious” and “secular” subjects. This should not prompt scholars to foist the term “religious” onto unwilling subjects, but rather, should encourage understanding that the term itself proves less important than its referent (however (un)clearly it may appear), and that even the most “secular” of subjects engage in practices which yield a certain kind of dreaming and being, a certain ultimate orientation.

In Defense of “Ideal Texts”

In an effort to demonstrate the disparity between styles of drag and the ultimate orientations they sustain, this project considers the relationship between two specific “case studies” of drag. The first is what will be termed “RuPauline drag,” which includes *RuPaul’s*

⁸ Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, Class 200: New Studies in Religion (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 3.

Drag Race, RuPaul, and all affiliated properties. The second is the legendary House of LaBeija, which functions for the purposes of this project as a microcosm of ballroom style drag, an international phenomenon comprised predominantly by queer and trans people of color who compete in self-hosted “balls.” These cases are taken up as what I am terming *ideal texts*: construed as *ideal types* but methodologically interpreted as *texts*. The “cases” are considered as *ideal types* because they are taken to be strictly heuristic, incredibly reductive, and distinctly overlapping in their instantiated realities. Assessing them as if they were coherently separate entities constitutes an act of interpretive violence, performed solely for the sake of comparison, that the disparities between them might become clearer. And the “cases” are considered *texts* because they will be read hermeneutically for the subjectivities they yield rather than the people they reflect. A future iteration of this project which involved fieldwork might prove capable of depicting the subjects for “who they are” rather than “what they produce,” but the research possible for this project forecloses any such claim.⁹ Similarly, while this project is divided into four sections of “setting” (race, gender, class, and sex(uality)) and four sections of religious “habits” (performance, ritual, kinship, and fantasy) these categories are artificially siloed, and should not be taken as materially distinct; all matters of subjectivity and practice are interpenetrating and inextricable from their context.¹⁰

⁹ The reading of these communities, especially RuPaul, as a *text* is inspired by the work of Lofton’s *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*, and her assessment of Oprah as she states “for the purposes of this work, the materiality of Oprah Winfrey – her body, her biography, and her singularity – is interesting only insofar as it documents and creates *Oprah*... a person who is also a product” (1). Subsequently, any critique of either community is not a critique on their personhood, which remain here unknowable, but addresses only what is generated by each community, the effects of reading and/or consuming them, and what is produced by either case.

Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

Consequently, these “cases” are presented primarily as fabrications. While all sources considered in this project are legitimate, the “cases” *as such* do not exist. There is no purely “RuPauline” form of drag, for this would require a stable and coherent subjectivity regarding either the image of RuPaul or the content of the RuPaul brand, and such singularities do not exist. Similarly, while the House of LaBeija is a real drag house with identifiable figures and participants, the House spans vast geographical regions, has been presided over by numerous “mothers” throughout markedly different socio-historical contexts, and regularly adds new members and incorporates new influences. Furthermore, while the House of LaBeija is accepted to be the first house of its kind, it exists in community and relationship with many members from other houses who will be similarly characterized by this project. Succinctly, while the “cases” are based upon material realities and concrete examples, for the purposes of this project, they are considered for their subjective content rather than their socio-historical realities or physical forms.

Similarly, these *ideal texts* should not be understood as some kind of “spectrum” of drag, with RuPauline drag at one end and the House of LaBeija at the other. There are countless styles of drag performed by individuals and collectives, and these two “cases” have been chosen for the prominence of the communities and the generation of textual information which enables a certain hermeneutical contrast, but many participants of drag cannot be appropriately understood if confined to the styles of drag considered here. Further, all drag is different. Like gender, wherein individuals perform and inhabit certain commonalities which make social, scientific, and analytic grouping possible, the relationship of each individual to “manness” or “womanness,” or the decision or inevitability of their failure to embody such categories, remains unique to every individual. As Butler describes it,

“[t]his being a man or woman is inherently unstable business,”¹¹ and the same might be said of one’s “drag identity.”

Thus, in the actual practices and performances of drag, there are no real barriers or clear distinctions between either of these communities, and the textual critiques which apply to either case are rarely totalizing, and can for the most part similarly be made against the other with varying degrees of successful application. A few examples should suffice. While “RuPauline drag” has come under regular fire for its “post-racial” politics (which will be considered by this project), not all participating queens personally ascribe to the same model. *Drag Race* Season 10 queen, The Vixen, loudly and explicitly critiques the show’s editing, fan base, and competition model for anti-Blackness, attempting to highlight the show’s racial failing even while she vied for the crown as a participant in the series.¹² In a contrasting manner, many of those who participate in ballroom culture, as well as members of the House of LaBeija, attend, participate, and self-promote at RuPaul’s annual DragCon, a weekend-long conference populated with merchandise, meet-and-greets, and various panels and podcasts, with tens of thousands of people in attendance, growing every year.¹³ Such examples indicate that neither RuPauline drag nor the drag of the ballroom are in particular opposition to the other, but rather, are overlapping and co-constituting, and many who participate in a certain style of drag often find themselves capable of participating in, or being in some way represented by, other drag styles.¹⁴

¹¹ Judith Butler, “Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 86.

¹² John Paul Brammer, “How The Vixen Exposed the Racism of RuPaul’s Drag Race,” *them.*, June 22, 2018, <https://www.them.us/story/the-vixen-racism-drag-race>.

¹³ Jesse Dorris, “‘Drag Queens Ain’t Supposed to Be in Places Like This’: RuPaul’s DragCon, Bushwig, and the Old New York Drag Culture,” October 9, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/drag-queens-aint-supposed-to-be-in-places-like-this-rupauls-dragcon-bushwig-and-the-old-new-york-drag-culture>.

¹⁴ Dorris.

It is also worth noting that the drag of the House of LaBeija provided the milieu for RuPauline drag to emerge. Consequently, RuPauline drag is always citing the drag of the ballroom, and a markedly grammatical relationship exists between the two,¹⁵ which affords the genealogical occasion for their shared vocabulary (even where the same words take on different meanings) and RuPaul's pervasive references to *Paris is Burning*. RuPauline drag thus cannot, nor does it attempt to, escape its roots in ball culture, and it remains knowingly and self-referentially aware of its lineage. But similarly, the promise and potential of mainstream fame offered by RuPauline drag, and the opportunity for one to achieve culturally recognizable glamour and influence, remains alluring to many within the ballroom community. Thus, while ballroom drag predates RuPauline drag, such genealogical roots should not lead one to understand RuPauline drag as flatly derivative, and in their contemporary iterations, it proves near impossible to discern which community holds more influence over the other.

These tensions between the marginal and the mainstream are nothing new to drag. Much of the rhetoric of drag, both visual and otherwise, emphasizes grandeur, glamour, and legacy, even while its primary participants have occupied historically subaltern social positions. As Season 8 winner, Bob the Drag Queen describes DragCon, "Drag queen's ain't supposed to be in places like this... like, we should be performing in McDonald's, in Times Square,"¹⁶ and while the mainstream popularity of drag is undoubtedly at an all-time high, such mainstreaming of drag is not altogether new. As early as 1990, with the release of Madonna's *Vogue* (which was inspired by ballroom culture), Jose and Luis Xtravaganza

¹⁵ I am characterizing the relationship as one of grammar by way of Butler's "How Can I Deny that These Hands and This Body are Mine?"

Judith Butler, "How Can I Deny That These Hands and This Body Are Mine?," in *Senses of the Subject* (Fordham University, 2015), 228, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt130h9pt>.

¹⁶ Dorris, "Drag Queens Ain't Supposed to Be in Places Like This."

(members of the House of Xtravaganza) choreographed and were featured in Madonna's music video, even joining her on tour.¹⁷ Similarly, Willi Ninja, the "grandfather of vogue," forged a successful career following *Paris is Burning*, and was featured on shows like "America's Next Top Model" and "Jimmy Kimmel Live."¹⁸ Breakouts such as these are less prominent than the successes seen by contemporary queens who have found a platform in RuPauline drag, however, they trouble the narratives which suggest that drag and ballroom culture have never found mainstream success or appeal, and further demonstrate the permeability between these communities and their participants' material circumstances.

With such theoretical scaffolding in place, the former half of this project attempts to establish the differences in setting, location, and/or occasion between these two "cases," noting that while they share a great deal in common, the disparities between them are often collapsed because of uninterrogated cisgender-heterosexual normativity, which renders "drag" as nothing more than "men dressing as women." Were heteronormativity and transphobia to be displaced from social lenses, the differences of drag would likely become evident, perhaps even more so than their perceived similarities. Drag is not a singular thing; despite the shared lineage, vocabulary, and practices embodied by "drag," it might best be thought of as an umbrella term, one which contains disparate and even contrasting subjectivities. By comparing these communities via their setting (or social location/circumstance), which will here be considered with respect to race, gender, class, and sex(uality), the uniqueness between them becomes more apparent, demonstrating that styles of drag are not identical, but like most other facets of subjectivity, are perpetually contingent

¹⁷ Stephen Ursprung, "Voguing: Madonna and Cyclical Reappropriation," accessed February 27, 2019, <https://sophia.smith.edu/blog/danceglobalization/2012/05/01/voguing-madonna-and-cyclical-reappropriation/>.

¹⁸ Stephen Ursprung.

upon their idiosyncratic contexts. More succinctly, these sections attempt to demonstrate that the setting of drag affects its materiality, that context bears consequence, and that while many of the practices and technologies might appear the same, it is inaccurate, and ultimately cis-het normative to conflate them as identical.

The latter half of this project, upon proving the contextual disparity between the “cases,” turns to those “habits” which foster ultimately oriented subjectivity one might consider uniquely “religious” (as heretofore laid out) in each style of drag. This turn is not intended to suggest a directional or dialectic relationship, wherein the setting of drag necessarily affects its religious subjectivity, or vice versa. Nor does this project suggest that either ultimate orientation is “better” than the other. The goal of this project is to simply reveal that drag’s setting, together with its habits of orientation, render different styles of drag more susceptible to certain angles of criticism and social viability while deflecting or foreclosing others. In short, different kinds of drag yield different orientations where the spheres of drag’s locative and subjective dimensions prove intertwined and inextricable. They are theoretically siloed for clearer analysis in this project, but this is openly recognized as an act of essentialism and reduction, and sincere questions regarding what might happen to religious subjectivity if drag’s setting were to change (and vice versa) remain impossible questions. Succinctly, the religious orientations and locative realities of drag prove to be at least a “chicken and egg” paradox, and at most, a dynamic, co-constituting relationship where the most appropriate discourse considers consequence, not causality.

A Word About Identity Politics and Subjectivity

As much of this project concerns the relationship between social location and subjectivity, it is worth noting that identity is here taken to be neither totalizing nor irrelevant at determining one’s subjectivity. As Kai Green observes, “while race, class, gender, and

sexuality will no doubt inform the way a person walks through the world, it will not provide a predetermined outcome as much as we might like it to.”¹⁹ Certain subjective manners of knowing and being are accessible only as a result of inhabiting a certain body, a certain experience, and a certain positionality, but this should not imply that all people who are similarly categorized share a predetermined subjectivity, or will necessarily make sense of their position in the same way. There is danger both in dismissing the way positionality affects one’s subjectivity as well as in presuming that a certain positionality inherently determines a specific subjectivity. Experience and identity are vast and varied and can neither be detached from subjectivity nor collapsed under it. One’s Blackness, transness, poorness, queerness, etc. undoubtedly shapes the contours of one’s “ultimate orientation” and dictates (to a certain extent) the people with whom mutually-beneficial coalition is possible, however, they should not be understood as themselves instantiating any inherent outcome. In less words: identity functions as something of an ultimately limited but somewhat necessary factor in determining livable selfhood, possible community, and ultimate subjectivity.

With that:

COMPARISON OF RUPAULINE DRAG AND THE HOUSE OF LABEIIJA VIA SETTING

Race

In 1972, following the events depicted in Frank Simon’s documentary, *The Queen*, Crystal LaBeija co-hosted what is reported to be the first annual House of LaBeija Ball.²⁰ Crystal was one of the only queens who had won a “Queen of the Ball” title at a white-

¹⁹ K. M. Green, “‘What the Eyes Did Not Wish to Behold’: Lessons from Ann Allen Shockley’s *Say Jesus and Come to Me.*” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 2 (n.d.): 285–302.

²⁰ Tim Lawrence, “Voguing and the House Ballroom Scene of New York City 1989-92 (Soul Jazz),” tim lawrence, accessed October 14, 2018, <http://www.timlawrence.info/articles2/2013/7/2/voguing-and-the-house-ballroom-scene-of-new-york-city-1989-92-soul-jazz>.

organized ball²¹ and was known for confronting the anti-Black bias which had come to characterize New York's drag balls. Her frustration is emblemized by her presence in *The Queen* which features her infamous read of Harlow, the (white) winner of the 1967 Miss All-America Camp Beauty Contest, a ball which Crystal felt confident Harlow won solely because of racial bias, resulting in Crystal placing fourth.²² In the film, she remarks "I have a right to show my color, darling. I am beautiful and I *know* I am beautiful."²³ Crystal's frustration with the perceived privileging of white standards of beauty and femininity at the expense of competitors of color led her to partner with her friend Lottie to cofound the first "house," the House of LaBeija, a space for queer people of color to exist together and compete in balls which promoted and centered non-white expressions of drag and beauty. Crystal presided as "mother" of the House and thus, in conjunction with the House of LaBeija's consistent success and the legacy of the balls more generally, Crystal secured her place as the first legendary mother of the House of LaBeija.²⁴

Lottie and Crystal's "House of LaBeija" was followed by the creation of other houses and the proliferation of drag balls hosted by and for queer folx²⁵ of color (specifically Black and Latinx folx). These spaces constitute(d) a social sphere where folx otherwise marginalized by spaces of white queerness could provide for and support one another free from the pervasiveness of white dominance, creating their own definitions and configurations of beauty, expression, and kinship.

²¹ Tim Lawrence, "Voguing and the House Ballroom Scene of New York City 1989-92 (Soul Jazz)."

²² Frank Simon, *The Queen*, 1968, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0063477/>.

²³ Frank Simon.

²⁴ Tim Lawrence, "Voguing and the House Ballroom Scene of New York City 1989-92 (Soul Jazz)."

²⁵ This term is selected for its history of gender neutrality and gender inclusion, specifically noting that gender binaryism (and the segregation of people therein) remain an instrument of white supremacy and colonial imposition.

This is not to say that such communities remain entirely immune to the insidious hegemony of white supremacy, nor that they can successfully separate whiteness (and its implicit relation to beauty) as an ideal. As Dorian Corey notes in *Paris is Burning*, “When I grew up, you wanted to look like Marlene Dietrich, Betty Grable. Unfortunately, I didn’t know that I really wanted to look like Lena Horne. When I grew up, of course, you know... black stars were stigmatized. Nobody wanted to look like Lena Horne. Everybody wanted to look like Marilyn Monroe.”²⁶ As bell hooks describes it, Corey “makes it clear that the femininity most sought after, most adored, was that perceived to be the exclusive property of white womanhood” and that the people featured in *Paris is Burning* are not black folk “longing to impersonate or even to become like ‘real’ black women,” but rather demonstrate “an obsession with an idealized fetishized version of femininity that is white.”²⁷ One can critique ball culture, or the House of LaBeija, for falling prey to what hooks names as “a powerful colonizing whiteness that seduces us away from ourselves, that negates that there is beauty to be found in any form of blackness that is not imitation whiteness,”²⁸ but the creation of the House of LaBeija, and every other house, was predicated on an attempt to prevent such toxic whiteness from totalizing Black subjectivity as a site of value. Further, the houses create space for folx like Dorian Corey to articulate a desire to emulate Black stars like Lena Horne, even if Corey found herself a minority within her community. And one must also remember that such a privileging of white beauty is not in any way unique to queer and trans folx of color (whose performance of femininity is often subjected to greater scrutiny), but is consistent with the ongoing personal and political struggle of cisgender and

²⁶ Jennie Livingston, *Paris Is Burning*, 1990, <https://www.netflix.com/title/60036691>.

²⁷ bell hooks, “Is Paris Burning?,” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 148.

²⁸ hooks, 149.

heterosexual women of color (especially Black women) who struggle to claim and protect distinctly Black forms of beauty.

Ironically, because of the ways in which the performance of drag appears sensational to “mainstream” and non-queer gazes, much of the discourse around drag and ball culture centers around discourses of gender and/or sex. But when considering the House of LaBeija specifically, as depicted in *Paris is Burning* and as it continues today, the creation, definition, and sustenance of houses are marked just as much by race as they are by queerness. The houses remain valuable to those within them precisely because of the limited access and protection for queer people of color within the “LGBTQ+ movement,” which prioritizes questions of gender and sex above those of race: an unviable option for queer folx of color. This is not to suggest that race is more central than queerness in the House of LaBeija, but that neither identity is mutable for its participants, and thus, privileging queerness over race remains impossible in the creation of a livable life.

In contrast to the House of LaBeija (and most other houses which are comprised solely or majorly by a single race), RuPauline drag, or for current consideration, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and its spin off shows, are racially diverse, featuring queens of different races and ethnicities all vying for the same crown. Criticism of *Drag Race* for its limited awareness of racial implications remains a prolific discourse both within the academy,²⁹ and in online

²⁹ Sabrina Strings and Long T. Bui, “‘She Is Not Acting, She Is’: The Conflict between Gender and Racial Realness on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*,” *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 5 (September 3, 2014): 822–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2013.829861>; Sarah Tucker Jenkins, “Spicy. Exotic. Creature. Representations of Racial and Ethnic Minorities on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*,” in *RuPaul’s Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture: The Boundaries of Reality TV*, ed. Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas (S.I.: Springer International PU, 2018), 77–90; Alyxandra Vesey, “‘A Way to Sell Your Records’: Pop Stardom and the Politics of Drag Professionalization on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*,” *Television & New Media* 18, no. 7 (November 2017): 589–604, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476416680889>; Niall Brennan, “Contradictions Between the Subversive and the Mainstream: Drag Cultures and *RuPaul’s Drag Race*,” in *RuPaul’s Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture: The Boundaries of Reality TV*, ed. Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas (S.I.: Springer International PU, 2018), 29–43; Joanna McIntyre and Damien W. Riggs, “North American Universalism in *RuPaul’s Drag Race*: Stereotypes, Linguicism, and the Construction of ‘Puerto Rican Queens,’” in *RuPaul’s Drag Race and the Shifting*

communities of fans and contestants.³⁰ While the show prides itself on diversity, out of 14 seasons (10 of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and 4 of *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars*) 9 of the winning queens have been white. Yet most notable is the function of race on the show, wherein as Alyxandra Vesey describes, the show “struggles to articulate a radical politics of difference within queer communities because of its adherence to pop stardom as the template for drag queen’s success.”³¹ By featuring racially diverse queens as equals in competition, the show “pressures contestants of color to comply with neoliberal and post-racial discourses around personal achievement that essentialize and obscure their differences.”³² Thus, the queens with the most success, both during and after their season, are those who can shape their image to be the most marketable, which via American norms are those who are “well-connected, white, mixed-race, and light skinned cisbodied queens who abide by the regulations of feminine glamour.”³³ Similarly, over his career, RuPaul refined his image and brand into that of a light-skinned queen who sports blond wigs. This manicured “glamazon” emphasizes the expansive, performative dimensions of drag as well as the RuPauline belief that there are no limits to how one can present to the world, but it also risks the elevation of beauty standards which equate glamour with whiteness.

Visibility of Drag Culture: The Boundaries of Reality TV, ed. Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas (S.l.: Springer International PU, 2018), 61–75.

³⁰ Kat Blaque, *IS RUPAUL'S DRAG RACE RACIST?*, accessed December 9, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3dQv7WSeF1M>; Mikelle Street, “Shangela, Shea Couleé & Aja Discuss Racism in the ‘*Drag Race*’ Fandom,” *Billboard*, accessed December 9, 2018, [/articles/news/pride/8289680/shangela-shea-coulee-aja-racism-drag-race-fandom](https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/pride/8289680/shangela-shea-coulee-aja-racism-drag-race-fandom); John Paul Brammer, “*RuPaul's Drag Race* Finally Confronted the Issue of Race,” *them.*, June 22, 2018, <https://www.them.us/story/the-vixen-racism-drag-race>; Garrett Schlichte, “Does *RuPaul's Drag Race* Have a Race Problem?,” *Slate Magazine*, February 15, 2018, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2018/02/rupauls-drag-race-queens-see-racism-in-show-treatment-and-fan-love.html>.

³¹ Alyxandra Vesey, “‘A Way to Sell Your Records’: Pop Stardom and the Politics of Drag Professionalization on *RuPaul's Drag Race*,” *Television & New Media* 18, no. 7 (November 2017): 591, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476416680889>.

³² Vesey, “‘A Way to Sell Your Records,’” 591.

³³ Vesey, 600.

Because of *Drag Race*'s post-racial framing, the expectations placed on queens of color remain oscillating and inconsistent. Many queens have appropriated and/or caricatured racial stereotypes in their performances to highly varied degrees of success and scrutiny. Certain queens have feigned accents and received praise³⁴ while others (especially Puerto Rican and Latinx queens) have struggled to “overcome” their accents and thus have faced interrogation regarding their leadership abilities, professionalism, and range of performance.³⁵ Latinx queens with notable accents have often been referred to by RuPaul and the judges as “spicy” and queens of color who have embraced fictions of the “exotic” have struggled later in the season to free themselves of this label.³⁶ As Sarah Tucker Jenkins observes, these “racist images are always racist, regardless of who is portraying them. In fact, images perpetuated by members of the marginalized group may be more dangerous, because the public considers them to be more successful,”³⁷ yet often, the deployment of racial stereotypes proves successful for queens in the short term. Ultimately, *RuPaul's Drag Race* seems to mirror the racial hierarchy which exists more broadly in the American consciousness, such that performances which are seen “as part of past cultures, or as cultures sufficiently separate from [the American gaze]” escape the racial criticism which totalizes other queens.³⁸

When these two cases are considered conjunctively, one can observe the disparity between the House of LaBeija which centers race prominently, even as it negotiates with normative (read: white) beauty standards, and RuPauline drag, which opts for a post-racial

³⁴ Sarah Tucker Jenkins, “Spicy. Exotic. Creature. Representations of Racial and Ethnic Minorities on *RuPaul's Drag Race*,” in *RuPaul's Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture: The Boundaries of Reality TV*, ed. Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas (S.l.: Springer International PU, 2018), 84.

³⁵ Sarah Tucker Jenkins, 83.

³⁶ Sarah Tucker Jenkins, 82-85.

³⁷ Sarah Tucker Jenkins, 85.

³⁸ Sarah Tucker Jenkins, 86.

identity, emphasizing the malleability of expression, sometimes at the expense of queens of color who are either unwilling or unable to successfully leverage racial stereotypes, but cannot overcome the implicit whiteness of “glamour.”

Gender

Within the House of LaBeija, the constitution of gender offers fluid and flexible possibilities for its participants. Following the multitude of ethnographic work on ballroom culture and the self-articulation of ballroom identities more broadly, there are many distinct gender categories (the exact number and configuration remains contested and determined by region and time), each of which are socially rather than biologically constituted, and the adoption of an identification is seen as “malleable and mutable.”³⁹ These identities do not constitute a complete break from hegemonic gender norms, but they allow for flexibility and forms of articulation which gender binary-ism prohibits or renders impossible.⁴⁰ One’s gender within ball culture is determined by the inextricable factors of sex, gender performance, and sexuality. The non-contested categories of ballroom gender are as follows:

- 1) **butch queen**: individuals who are assigned male at birth and who are sexually attracted (though not necessarily exclusively) to men and perform their gender in any way (masculine, hyper-masculine, feminine, etc.)
- 2) **femme queen**: women who were assigned male at birth but are in various phases of “gender transition”
- 3) **butches**: individuals who were assigned female at birth but express themselves in “masculine” ways, regardless of sexual orientation and/or gender identity
- 4) **women**: who were assigned female at birth and identify as such, regardless of their sexual orientation (and in several cases, trans women who have had bottom surgery).

Other recognized but variously contested categories include: 5) **butch**

³⁹ Marlon M. Bailey, “Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture,” *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 2 (2011): 367, 369.

⁴⁰ Bailey, 369.

queen up in drag/butch queen with a twist: individuals who were assigned male at birth and remain male identified, but perform in drag only in the context of a ball and 6)

men/trade: individuals who were assigned male at birth and are straight-identified.⁴¹ The gender network offered by the ballroom scene creates a vast and variegated range of gender identification and performance. While not unlimited in its possibility, the gender categories are subject to change over time and allow for one to self-determine their role in the ballroom scene with more agency than a male/female binary traditionally allows for, and every gender category is understood to constitute its own form of performance and drag.

By contrast, RuPaul has been criticized on multiple occasions for comments which essentialize drag and gender, most specifically at the expense of transgender individuals (who have figured prominently in the creation and sustenance of ballroom culture). When asked about “drag’s relationship to the trans community,” RuPaul responded, “I think it’s a boring topic... It’s so topical, but they’re complete opposites. We mock identity. They take identity very seriously. So it’s the complete opposite ends of the scale. To a layperson, it seems very similar, but it’s really not.”⁴² These comments followed Monica Beverly Hillz’ coming out as a trans woman on the runway in Season 5⁴³ and six other queens (Kylie Sonique Love, Gia Gunn, Carmen Carrera, Stacy Layne Matthews, Kenya Michaels, and Peppermint – only one of whom is white) who have publicly come out as trans women apart from their time on *Drag Race*. When asked again more recently (in 2018) about the possibility of a bio-queen (a

⁴¹ Bailey; McCarthy Brown, “Mimesis in the Face of Fear: Femme Queens, Butch Queens, and Gender Play in the Houses of Greater Newark,” in *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion*, ed. Maria Sanchez and Linda Schlossberg (NYU Press, 2001), 208–27, <http://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/167213>; Jonathan David Jackson, “Social World of Voguing,” *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* 12, no. 2 (2002): 26–42.

⁴² E. Alex Jung, “Real Talk With RuPaul,” *Vulture*, March 23, 2016, <https://www.vulture.com/2016/03/ru-paul-drag-race-interview.html>.

⁴³ Nick Murray, “Lip Synch Extravaganza Eleganza,” *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (World of Wonder, February 4, 2013), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2481570/>.

drag queen who is assigned female at birth) competing on *Drag Race*, RuPaul responded “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.”⁴⁴ When pressed about the role of trans women in drag, he replied “Mmmm. It’s an interesting area. Peppermint [the first openly trans woman to be accepted as a contestant] 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.”⁴⁵ These comments starkly contrast the prominent role of trans women throughout ball culture, as house mothers and legendary queens. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* regularly references *Paris is Burning*, but RuPaul’s comments seem to disregard that most of the people featured in the film were female identified and undergoing “transition,” even as they remained prominently centered at the balls.

The gender essentialism that undergirds RuPaul’s comments can also be observed in *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. Even as the shows seeks to expand (or perhaps undo) the limits of expression accessible to a person of a given gender, from the tag line, “gentleman starts your engines... and may the best *woman* win” (a tagline which has remained despite the presence of trans women contestants) and the often harsh criticism of drag performances which incorporate masculine aesthetics (“read[ing] as boy,” “giving us drag king,” or “dude in a

⁴⁴ Decca Aitkenhead, “RuPaul: ‘Drag Is a Big f-You to Male-Dominated Culture,’” *The Guardian*, March 3, 2018, sec. Television & radio, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/mar/03/rupaul-drag-race-big-f-you-to-male-dominated-culture>.

⁴⁵ Aitkenhead.

dress”),⁴⁶ the show generally preserves a clear sense of gender duality. Further, the visual rhetoric of the show regularly renders the competitors as “male,” as all “talking head” interviews are filmed while contestants are out of drag, and the camera fixates on drag’s technologies (padding, makeup, tucking, etc.), thus emphasizing the subjects’ transformation within a before/after (or pre-/post-runway) binary.⁴⁷ This implicit rendering of drag queens as “men in dresses” similarly guides and affects the three-season stint spin-off show, *Drag U*, which claimed to help “biological women unleash their inner diva and let the world have it.”⁴⁸ The show features RuPaul as a male university president (who never appears in drag) presiding over drag queen professors who “teach” biological women how to better perform femininity. The show has come under fire for many of the same criticisms which haunt *Drag Race* (unhealthy body norms, “narcissism as liberation,” post-racial fantasies, neoliberalism, femininity as consumption, etc.), but perhaps the most glaring criticism has been the framing of femininity “as an overt performance.”⁴⁹ By collapsing femininity into performance, *Drag U* effectively obscures the ability for cis-male drag queens to deploy “femininity” only when advantageous or desirable, and elevates a singular, normative embodiment of femininity as more “successful” or attractive. Thus, *Drag U* encourages the contestants to “distance themselves from potential trans embodiment” by implying that they fail to meet essential

⁴⁶ Niall Brennan, “Contradictions Between the Subversive and the Mainstream: Drag Cultures and *RuPaul’s Drag Race*,” in *RuPaul’s Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture: The Boundaries of Reality TV*, ed. Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas (S.l.: Springer International PU, 2018), 36-37.

⁴⁷ Ramey Moore, “Everything Else Is Drag: Linguistic Drag and Gender Parody on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*,” *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*; *New York* 3, no. 2 (2013): 20-23.

⁴⁸ “Tomboy Meets Girl,” *RuPaul’s Drag U* (World of Wonder, July 19, 2010), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1678969/>.

⁴⁹ Benny LeMaster, “Discontents of Being and Becoming Fabulous on *RuPaul’s Drag U*: Queer Criticism in Neoliberal Times,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 38, no. 2 (April 3, 2015): 181, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2014.988776>.

definitions of womanhood,⁵⁰ rather than encouraging them to expand the category of “feminine” or challenge its coherency.

In its simplest terms, “drag” as conceived by RuPaul functions exhaustively as performance, and all facets of identity are “drag,” as evidenced by his recurring phrase “we’re all born naked and the rest is drag.” Thus, RuPaul advocates for and understands himself as embodying a social position which doesn’t “take identity very seriously.”⁵¹ When asked by Oprah, “What defines you?” RuPaul responded, “I’m everything and nothing at all. I’m black, I’m white, I’m male, female.”⁵² Contrastingly, the House of LaBeija conceives of “drag” as something both performative and inescapably material. One’s gender and drag category within the House is determined by a combination of factors, some which the individual possesses a measure of agency over (gender performance, aesthetics, sexual partners, etc.) *and* some which are immutable (race, “biological” sex, etc.). In the House of LaBeija, one’s gender both informs, and is constituted by, one’s “drag,” while in RuPauline drag, the acceptance of any identity category as “serious” results in a falsely rigid conception of self, a disregard for the malleability and fabrication of identity.

Ultimately, the relationship between gender and drag remains always contingent, or as Butler describes it,⁵³ “[a]t best, it seems, drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one

⁵⁰ LeMaster, 175.

⁵¹ Jung, “Real Talk With RuPaul.”

⁵² Oprah Winfrey, “Oprah Talks to RuPaul,” accessed October 14, 2018, <http://www.oprah.com/inspiration/oprah-talks-to-rupaul>.

⁵³ I am here considering only Butler’s account of drag from the chapter “Gender is Burning” rather than the often-cited remarks at the conclusion of *Gender Trouble* (174-180). The reason for this selection is two-fold: 1) I am primarily interested in these cases as textual bodies, and Butler’s chapter “Gender is Burning” more directly engages *Paris is Burning* as an instance of embodied drag as reflected by a single film and 2) Butler’s statements at the end of *Gender Trouble* predate those in *Bodies That Matter* and are thus accompanied by a genealogy of disparate readings, readings which I perceive Butler to be responding to throughout *Bodies That Matter*, but even more specifically in “Gender is Burning.”

is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power one opposes.”⁵⁴ In response to RuPaul’s claim that, “at its core [drag is] a social statement and a big f-you to male dominated culture,”⁵⁵ one hears Butler questioning, “whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them,”⁵⁶ especially if non-male identities are excluded and/or minimized for the sake of drag’s “sense of danger and... sense of irony.”⁵⁷ RuPaul’s comments suggest that those who claim (or are forced to claim) a material relationship with and investment in “womanhood” and “femininity,” somehow diminish the subversive potential of drag; however, as Butler continues, “identification is always an ambivalent process. Identifying with a gender under contemporary regimes of power involves identifying with a set of norms that are and are not realizable, and whose power and status prefer the identifications by which they are insistently approximated. This ‘being a man’ and ‘being a woman’ are internally unstable affairs.”⁵⁸

One can here observe the hairline disparity between drag which is motivated by a critique of identity and drag which is motivated by a critique of the system which sustains identity and inequitably privileges certain bodies and performances. Notably, as Butler suggests, all drag performances take place within the same system that perpetually reforms and defends gendered categories, and thus parody may prove insufficient at displacement. However, it seems safe to suspect that the intentions, context, and occasion of one’s drag are likely to affect its substance. RuPauline drag emphasizes the former, prioritizing a critique of identity, and has thus been criticized for what bell hooks describes (by way of Marilyn Frye)

⁵⁴ Judith Butler, “Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 85.

⁵⁵ Jung, “Real Talk With RuPaul.”

⁵⁶ Butler, “Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” 85.

⁵⁷ Jung, “Real Talk With RuPaul.”

⁵⁸ Butler, “Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” 86.

as “display[ing] no love of or identification with women or the womanly.”⁵⁹ It may seem paradoxical to critique *and* love or identify with in the same moment via the same actions, but perhaps this is the very ambivalence of drag; participating in a revered, yet exaggerated performance of a thing one wishes to undo, or at least transform. And the perceived ability for drag queens to detach from the “womanly” as a site of love, identification, or material investment seems to inform Marilyn Frye’s critique of drag as a site of appropriation of the “feminine” solely for aesthetic identification. But not all drag inhabits the same relationship to femininity.

Consider the function of “realness” in each case. The term originated within ballroom culture as a standard for judging one’s performance. Succinctly, “realness” means the ability to blend, to “pass the untrained eye, or even the trained eye, and not give away the fact that you’re gay: that’s when it’s realness.”⁶⁰ As Dorian Corey describes it,

They give the society that they live in what they want to see, and they won’t be questioned. Rather than having to go through prejudices about your lifestyle, you can walk around comfortably, blending in with everybody else. You’ve erased all the mistakes, all the flaws, all the giveaways, to make your illusion perfect... When they’re undetectable, when they can walk out of that ballroom, into the sunlight and onto the subway, and get home and still have all their clothes and no blood running off their bodies, those are the Femme Realness Queens.⁶¹

Contrastingly, “realness” is a term used in many episodes of RuPaul to describe larger than life runway categories (Spanish Telenovela Realness,⁶² Baby Drag Realness,⁶³ etc.) or by contestants to describe their own drag (Evil Henchwoman Realness,⁶⁴ Clash of the

⁵⁹ hooks, “Is Paris Burning?” 148.

⁶⁰ Jennie Livingston, *Paris Is Burning*.

⁶¹ Jennie Livingston.

⁶² Mathu Anderson, “Drama Queens,” *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (World of Wonder, April 1, 2013), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2815066/>.

⁶³ Nick Murray, “RuPaul Book Ball,” *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (World of Wonder, April 25, 2016), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5667394/>.

⁶⁴ Nick Murray, “Queens in Space,” *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (World of Wonder, January 31, 2011), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1825301/>.

Titans Set in Strip Club Realness,⁶⁵ Dorothy Dandridge Latina Glamour Realness,⁶⁶ etc.), but in no case connotes a category or style of drag which fulfills normative standards required for “passing” (that is, one cannot “pass” as “C-3PO’s Girlfriend”⁶⁷ to avoid subway violence). Within such disparity, one can again hear Butler insisting, “there is no necessary relationship between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms.”⁶⁸ “Realness” as originally conceived marks a full embodiment of “reidealization” of gender norms for the sake of safety, but contributes to their “denaturalization” by proving that individuals who are not “meant” to inhabit them can occasionally do so without notice. Contrastingly, “realness” as conceived by RuPauline drag detaches itself from any material concern of “passing,” and instead parodies the very notion that one can (or should) ever pass as anything at all; “we’re all born naked and the rest is drag.” Thus, RuPauline drag renders “serious” (read: extra-aesthetic) identification with *anything*, “womanly” or otherwise, as irrelevant and normative, and *RuPaul’s Drag Race* cares very little about the diverse gender identity of its contestants and focuses instead on the performances they produce. Contrastingly, the House of LaBeija renders identity as nonnegotiable *both* constructed and material, and thus sustains a diversity of gendered categories which remain integral to the production of disparate drag styles and reflect identity’s malleability as well as its materiality.

⁶⁵ Nick Murray, “Queens Behind Bars,” *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (World of Wonder, February 20, 2016), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2230513/>.

⁶⁶ Mathu Anderson, “Drama Queens.”

⁶⁷ Nick Murray, “Queens in Space.”

⁶⁸ Butler, “Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” 85.

Class

Both cases of drag express a desire for wealth, fame, and celebrity, or at a minimum, a desire to emulate it. The cases diverge with regards to their orientation of wealth and the extent to which such wealth proves possible.

According to Venus Xtravagnza's account in *Paris is Burning*, "Most all of the drag queens that are involved in the balls... 90 percent of them are hustlers. I guess that's how they make their money to go to the balls and get whatever they need and stuff."⁶⁹ While this statistic is both anecdotal and several decades old, sex work remains a common source of provision amongst trans womxn of color and contributes to their disproportionate murder. As Venus further theorizes in *Paris in Burning*, "sex work" or "hustling" as such is not altogether removed from white, upper-middle class femininity as she proclaims, "a woman in the suburbs, a regular woman, is married to her husband and she wants him to buy her a washer and dryer set. In order for him to buy that, I'm sure she'd have to go to bed with him anyway, to give him what he wants, for her to get what she wants. So in the long run, it all ends up the same way."⁷⁰ In these musings, she notes how in a system ruled by patriarchy, wage inequity, and the subjugation of femininity, sex becomes a form of potential capital which can be leveraged by all femme folx to various degrees of success, and it is disparity in setting (the social marginalization of transness, Blackness, HIV+ status, and other factors) which renders sex work as illegal and socially immoral for certain individuals.

These same factors of social marginalization exponentially increase the characterization of transfemininity as "deceptive," and the subsequent lack of legal and social support for Black and trans bodies, culminating in the unsolved murder of Venus

⁶⁹ Jennie Livingston, *Paris Is Burning*.

⁷⁰ Jennie Livingston.

Xtravaganza and hundreds of other Black trans womxn every year.⁷¹ Thus, for most in the ballroom scene, the desire to climb the social ladder of class proves as much a desire to simply survive as it is a desire for fantastic wealth. In the words of Pepper LaBeija, “I’d always see the way that rich people lived and I’d feel it more, you know. It would slap me in the face. I’d say ‘I have to have that.’ Because I never felt comfortable being poor. I just don’t. Or even middle-class doesn’t suit me.”⁷² But the collective orientation to money within the ballroom scene is one of both competition *and* collectivity; everyone wants to be the best, and yet, as Pepper LaBeija continues, “I wouldn’t enjoy having a whole lot of money, like being a millionaire and hoarding it, you know? I’d share it with all my loved ones, you know? I’d want them to have it too. We’d all have to go.”⁷³ In such a statement, one can hear echoes of the Combahee River Collective: “if black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression.”⁷⁴

As Octavia St. Laurent muses, “if money wasn’t so important in the world today to survive, I guess I wouldn’t want anything but what I have now. But since money does, I hope that the way I look puts money in my pocket, you know? I’m really working hard. I’m gonna work even harder.”⁷⁵ Even while balls create an opportunity for individuals to be the best, to “leave their mark,” this vying for status never exists outside of a collective, a house, a place where a group of folx left overlooked by socioeconomic access can live together, work and steal to survive, to compete, to support one another materially, financially, and

⁷¹ “TMM Update Trans Day of Remembrance 2018,” *T/T* (blog), November 12, 2018, <https://transrespect.org/en/tmm-update-trans-day-of-remembrance-2018/>.

⁷² Jennie Livingston, *Paris Is Burning*.

⁷³ Jennie Livingston.

⁷⁴ The Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 237.

⁷⁵ Jennie Livingston, *Paris Is Burning*.

emotionally.⁷⁶ Even while the houses do not always dictate a physical shared dwelling, they always indicate an intimate community, as Corey describes it, “they’re families... a gay street gang” that street-fights at a ball with voguing instead of violence.⁷⁷ Thus, while the ballroom proclaims that “everybody’s dream and ambition as a minority [is] to live and look as well as a white person is pictured in America” it also declares that for those in the ballroom circuit, “if you have captured the great white way of living, or looking, or dressing or speaking - you is a marvel.”⁷⁸ Or as Judith Butler characterizes it, “the ball itself is an occasion for the building of a set of kinship relations that manage and sustain those who belong to the houses in the face of dislocation, poverty, homelessness.”⁷⁹

In contrast, RuPauline drag markets the incentivized possibility for fantasies of wealth and fame to be materialized via consumerism. Where ballroom drag is primarily “consumed” (or spectated) by those participating in it, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and its affiliated shows are designed to be consumed by as many people as possible, most of whom have no context for drag outside of the show. While drag in general has been critiqued for its equation of “femininity” with consumption,⁸⁰ RuPaul himself demonstrates the transformation of a drag queen’s social function when they become a household name, holding four Emmys (eight for the show) and several millions of dollars.⁸¹ Notably, RuPaul is a light skinned, cisgender male, who preaches self-love and the possibility for one to become whatever they wish to be. His success is inextricably tied to his ability to market

⁷⁶ Bailey, “Gender/Racial Realness”; Jennie Livingston, *Paris Is Burning*.

⁷⁷ Jennie Livingston, *Paris Is Burning*.

⁷⁸ Jennie Livingston.

⁷⁹ Butler, “Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” 94.

⁸⁰ hooks, “Is Paris Burning?” 155; Niall Brennan, “Contradictions Between the Subversive and the Mainstream: Drag Cultures and *RuPaul’s Drag Race*,” 33.

⁸¹ Caitlyn Hitt, “RuPaul’s Net Worth Revealed After Emmys Win for *Drag Race* | Daily Mail Online,” DailyMail, September 18, 2018, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-6181323/RuPauls-net-worth-revealed-Emmys-win-Drag-Race.html>.

queerness, remaining palatable to what José Esteban Muñoz describes as “homonormative” sensibilities; that is, RuPauline drag operates as a “commercial drag,” one which results in “a sanitized and desexualized queer subject for mass consumption, representing a certain strand of integrationist liberal pluralism.”⁸² RuPaul’s success and rhetoric suggests that “subjects [are] equally capable of realizing freedom if they make effective life choices to resemble a mythical normative center.”⁸³ However, the success of RuPaul is not imitable for most queer Black folx and even those willing to market themselves to the same neoliberal capitalist market are unlikely to attain the kind of wealth or status of RuPaul.

One might protest that *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is not, as Muñoz suggests, “desexualized,” but rather, tests the boundaries of normative sensibility by creating space for queerness and gender transgression in the American consciousness. This argument is not without its merits, but it neglects to consider the stipulations placed on *Drag Race* in its attempt to get on the air. When *Drag Race* was first pitched to Logo (its original channel), it was turned down four times because, in spite of Logo’s branding as an LGBTQ+ broadcast station and a white gay man as the channel president, “channel executives ‘had not really been enthusiastic about being *that* gay,’” for fear of losing mainstream sponsorship and alienating straight audiences.⁸⁴ The show was only green-lighted after agreeing to distance itself “from drag’s role in queer nightlife” and to foreground “contestant’s professionalization in relation to RuPaul’s entrepreneurship.”⁸⁵ Ultimately, RuPaul’s connection to queer friendly corporate sponsors and concession to a more palatable, marketable image (made viable by RuPaul’s

⁸² José Esteban Muñoz, “The White to Be Angry: Vaginal Davis’s Terrorist Drag,” *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 85, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466735>.

⁸³ LeMaster, “Discontents of Being and Becoming Fabulous on *RuPaul’s Drag U*,” 169.

⁸⁴ Vesey, “A Way to Sell Your Records,” 595.

⁸⁵ Vesey, 595.

willingness to shape shift without a perceived compromise of any stable “self”) allowed for *Drag Race* to enter production.

Thus, the branding of *Drag Race* centralized RuPaul’s “legacy,” enabling and encouraging him to produce music and feature it prominently in the show. Niall Brennan notes that *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is as much about consuming the RuPaul brand as it is about enabling the queens on the show to self-promote and build a career of their own.⁸⁶ Further, RuPaul does not perform the same role as other reality TV hosts who “when present, take a back seat to the contestants and challenges,”⁸⁷ but instead, RuPaul emerges as the only constant from season to season. While *RuPaul’s Drag Race* features a panel of “judges” (and guest judges), RuPaul is the sole arbiter of who advances and who is eliminated, (which contrasts the ballroom where results are decided by a panel of judges, each ranking competitors on a scale of 1 to 10), and the reality television model which demands that all contestants compete for a single crown, a more narrow conception of “successful drag” emerges than in the ballroom (which features multiple competition categories associated with the ballroom’s gender system - butch queen realness, femme queen realness, butch queen up in drag, etc).⁸⁸ Ultimately, the financial success of queens during and after the show directly correlates to their ability to self-commodify, and thus is largely determined by the dual forces of “professionalism” and social positionality. Following Raja’s victory on Season 2, RuPaul stated, “she will sell things. That’s what we do here. We sell and endorse products.”⁸⁹ As Alysandra Vesey concludes, the union between pop music, stardom, and

⁸⁶ Niall Brennan, “Contradictions Between the Subversive and the Mainstream: Drag Cultures and *RuPaul’s Drag Race*,” 30, 39-40.

⁸⁷ Niall Brennan, 40.

⁸⁸ Niall Brennan, 42; Bailey, “Gender/Racial Realness.”

⁸⁹ Cathy Horyn, “At Lunch With RuPaul: Main Course,” *The New York Times*, August 5, 2011, sec. Fashion & Style, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/07/fashion/at-lunch-with-rupaul-main-course.html>; Vesey, “A Way to Sell Your Records,” 590.

self-commodification only further perpetuates neoliberal social disparity, such that “if *Drag Race* is meant to teach contestants how to commodify themselves, it does not uniformly value their efforts or grant them equal access to harness the means of production.”⁹⁰

The diversity and vulnerability expressed by queens on the show also remains constrained by viewer palatability and reality television’s dependence upon easily consumed narratives. One of the starkest examples is Ongina, a queen who revealed they were HIV+ on screen after winning a MAC cosmetics Viva Glam challenge promoting the line’s MAC HIV/AIDS fund in the first season. The show clearly linked Ongina’s vulnerability and success to their experience with HIV positivity, but Ongina was eliminated the following episode.⁹¹ Similarly, Monica Beverly Hillz came out as a transgender woman on the runway in Season 5, only to be sent home the following episode.⁹² She later remarked that she was grateful for the platform the show provided her (as it offered an escape from escorting as a means of survival), but that “their world was never really made for me either. Let’s be real - once I came out as trans, they milked that moment and then I didn’t stick around much longer.”⁹³ Vulnerable moments like the ones created by Ongina and Monica Beverly Hillz help boost ratings and construct narrative arcs within an otherwise competition-based show, but certain stigmas, such as transness or HIV positivity, are often totalizing to one’s identity and after they are disclosed on camera, it proves difficult for such individuals to be seen as anything else and their perceived contribution to the show diminishes.

Smaller moments of vulnerability exist for many of the queens, ones which fall into a range of more normative, and thus “universal” and “relatable” struggles. Generally, however,

⁹⁰ Vesey, “A Way to Sell Your Records,” 600.

⁹¹ Hunter Hargraves, “‘You Better Work:’ The Commodification of HIV in *RuPaul’s Drag Race*,” *The Spectator*; *Los Angeles*, Fall 2011.

⁹² Nick Murray, “Lip Synch Extravaganza Eleganza.”

⁹³ Michael Cuby, “These Trans and Cis Female Drag Queens Have Some WORDS for RuPaul,” *them.*, March 6, 2018, <https://www.them.us/story/these-queens-have-some-words-for-rupaul>.

these smaller moments of vulnerability are offered up as queens are out of drag, or as they are in the process of putting on drag, all gathered around the mirrors and talking with one another.⁹⁴ Julia Yudelman describes it such that, “as their makeup cooks, the queens’ character arcs deepen; the seams of drag are exposed,”⁹⁵ but mere seconds later, the music and runway lights pulse to RuPaul’s “Covergirl” and queens “emerge as bold visions of dragged-out glamour and charisma on the main stage, strutting confidently toward the judges.”⁹⁶ This rhetorical duality, between the intimacy of the dressing room and the bravado of the main stage, furthers the rhetorical insistence that drag is strictly performative, that the “men” out of drag constitute the “real” subjects. And yet, it is not these “real men” who are the focus of the show, but rather, the polished, glamorous drag queens. The vulnerability expressed by the contestants out of drag remains momentary, commodified for viewers’ consumption to evoke sympathy and humanity, before the “instances of pain and sadness are often, quite literally, covered up”⁹⁷ and the battle between the queens resumes its place in the foreground.

While both the House of LaBeija and RuPauline drag articulate an explicit desire for wealth and fame, RuPauline drag offers it as a material possibility for a handful of its contestants. However, because *Drag Race* remains constrained to a reality television model, one which depends upon viewership and ratings for sustenance, it can only offer success to those queens who exist within a certain normative range *and* who are willing and able to commodify themselves. Thus, the ability for one to build a lucrative career as a drag queen is an altogether new reality made possible almost exclusively because of RuPaul’s success. But

⁹⁴ Julia Yudelman, “The ‘RuPaulitics’ of Subjectification in *RuPaul’s Drag Race*,” in *RuPaul’s Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture: The Boundaries of Reality TV*, ed. Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas (S.I.: Springer International PU, 2018), 21.

⁹⁵ Julia Yudelman, 21.

⁹⁶ Julia Yudelman, 21.

⁹⁷ Julia Yudelman, 21.

mainstream success requires a negotiation with mainstream norms, and one must consider what transformations occur within drag's possibilities when queens are forced to constantly negotiate with their palatability for consumption. Contrastingly, the desire for wealth and/or fame within the ballroom exists functions largely as an unrealized hope, a collective yearning for a different social structure, one which might allow for its participants to escape murder, imprisonment, homelessness, and neglect. Even those queens on *Drag Race* whose experiences reflect similarly precarious social circumstances of those in the ballroom often find their alienation either erased or commodified by the show. Against RuPaul's search for "America's Next Drag Superstar," calls the voice of Dorian Corey saying, "I always had hopes of being a big star. But as you get older, you aim a little lower. Everybody wants to make an impression, some mark upon the world. Then you think, you've made a mark on the world if you just get through it, and a few people remember your name. Then you've left a mark."⁹⁸

Sex(uality)

The current Overall Mother of the House of LaBeija is a (presumably) cisgender, queer woman of color who was born HIV+. She is a visual artist whose work (primarily photography, film, and voguing/dance) focuses on AIDS activism and centering positive-born children and women of color, combatting the erasure and nostalgia that depicts AIDS as a foregone gay man's disease. Kia LaBeija's biological mother died when Kia was 14, and she found her way into the ballroom scene, as many ball children do, by way of her "gay mother."⁹⁹ She describes how she "began to meet many others whom acquired the virus"

⁹⁸ Jennie Livingston, *Paris Is Burning*.

⁹⁹ Hugh Ryan, "Power in the Crisis: Kia LaBeija's Radical Art as a 25 Year Old, HIV Positive Woman of Color," *Vice* (blog), June 6, 2015, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/nn9bdg/power-in-the-crisis-kia-labeija-456.

and that “it was the first time since my mother’s death of an AIDS related illness, that I felt I was not alone.”¹⁰⁰ She describes her connection to the ballroom as inextricably attached to the community it provides for marginalized people, stating, “today transgender women of color are the biggest group affected by HIV. Many of these trans women find safety in the ballroom, where they can be honored and praised, instead of beaten and bashed. You can see this in their performance.”¹⁰¹ She says “her house ‘acts like a family,’ a function they serve ‘for a lot of people.’”¹⁰²

Kia describes how she longed for such a family structure after the death of her mother, “I looked for that for a really long time... a female figure who could mentor me. Help me through difficult stuff,”¹⁰³ and she found such a mentor and community via her “gay mother,” a drag queen in the House of De La Blanca, who invited her to the ballroom scene.¹⁰⁴ A short period later, the House of De La Blanca closed and Kia followed her gay mother to the House of LaBeija.¹⁰⁵ After winning a trophy in her first major ball, she took the name “LaBeija” “in all public aspects of her life” and later became the Overall House Mother because of her continued success and her submersion into the history of her house, as she recalls, “I needed to know everything.”¹⁰⁶

Kia’s life and motherhood indicate the diversity inherent to the ballroom scene. Cis-women are generally less common than femme queens as house mothers, but they are no less integrated into the fabric of the houses. Marlon Bailey’s work demonstrates that the “conventional terms used for gender and sexual identification, such as female and male;

¹⁰⁰ BH is Voguing, “Five Questions for Kia Labeija,” February 22, 2016, <http://www.bhisvoguing.com/kia-labeija-english/>.

¹⁰¹ BH is Voguing.

¹⁰² Ryan, “Power in the Crisis.”

¹⁰³ Ryan.

¹⁰⁴ Ryan; BH is Voguing, “Five Questions for Kia Labeija.”

¹⁰⁵ BH is Voguing, “Five Questions for Kia Labeija.”

¹⁰⁶ Ryan, “Power in the Crisis.”

lesbian, gay, and straight; and transgendered... do not accurately reflect the complexities of gender and sexuality in the ballroom community.”¹⁰⁷ While there is an inescapable awareness of the impact of one’s “sex” assigned at birth and one’s sense of sexuality, “it is implicitly, if not explicitly, demarcated by the meanings that are embedded in each of the gender categories... [the ballroom system] reveals gender and sexual fluidity and the various configurations of romantic, sexual, and nonsexual affinities and interactions of the members.”¹⁰⁸ Social or familial exclusion as a result of queerness often serves as the catalyst for one’s discovery of the ballroom scene, but how one relates to or centers that queerness within the community proves remarkably flexible. For instance, “if a femme queen, as a [AMAB trans woman], dates or has sex with men, she may identify as straight. Yet, straight in this sense is queer rather than heteronormative.”¹⁰⁹ Thus, the ballroom community is comprised of people of diverse sexes expressing their sexuality in diverse ways, occasionally claiming labels such as “lesbian, gay, bisexual, straight, and queer” without their queerness being erased within the community as might be the case in broader social spheres.¹¹⁰ Kia LaBeija’s role as Mother is not informed by the fact that she would be considered a “biological woman” outside of the House, but rather, derives from her material investment in and expression of femininity and the multitudinous labor she performs to sustain her House and provide for her ballroom kin.

Following the ballroom title of “mother,” RuPaul is similarly proclaimed “Mama Ru” and incorporates the image and rhetoric of “motherhood” into his brand. Consider, for instance, his track “Call Me Mother,” a song which asserts RuPaul’s lasting success and

¹⁰⁷ Bailey, “Gender/Racial Realness,” 372.

¹⁰⁸ Bailey, 371.

¹⁰⁹ Bailey, 373.

¹¹⁰ Bailey, 367.

legacy as a respected mother of drag. The song features lyrics such as, “she’s the queen, shade machine, kiss the ring, best believe, Mother Ru” and “fishy, feminine up-and-comer, from the Clintons to the Obamas I keep it tight, now they call me Mother.”¹¹¹ References to female sex organs are prevalent across many forms of drag, as is the title of “mother,” but one can note the disparity between RuPaul’s role as “mother” primarily shaping the direction and quality of contestants’ drag via *Drag Race*, and Kia LaBeija’s “motherhood,” which similarly concerns itself with her children’s success at balls, but is also informed by the loss of her biological mother to AIDS and her material provision for the children of her House. Notably, if one ascribes to a strictly RuPauline conception of “drag,” Kia LaBeija’s contribution to the ballroom, or at least her drag, fails to be recognized as “a social statement and a big f-you to male dominated culture” simply because “it’s not men doing it.”¹¹² From a RuPauline conception, Kia’s embrace of femininity and motherhood is not seen as “queer,” but simply as a reification of sexual (biological) essentialism.

The rhetorical strategies of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* perform an analogous sexual essentialism which creates a monolithic gay, male sexuality. The show prominently features the “Pit Crew” (later renamed the “Scruff Pit Crew” to promote a m4m social app) as conventionally “masculine,” muscular, and normatively attractive (and often “well endowed”) male bodied people in underwear who exist in the periphery of the show. The Pit Crew knowingly exists as “eye candy,” (notably, for the first season, the Pit Crew was comprised solely of Black men before expanding in racial diversity through future seasons) and their “sexual appeal” remains one of the primary means for *Drag Race’s* insertion of a visual discourse of sexuality, with the rhetorical implication that all contestants are sexually

¹¹¹ RuPaul, *Call Me Mother* (RuCo, Inc., 2018).

¹¹² Aitkenhead, “RuPaul.”

attracted to them. Because (as aforementioned), the contestants are rhetorically constituted as “men,” the show becomes saturated with “gay male sexuality,” and sexual diversity amongst contestants remains largely erased or minimized. Cisgender contestants who might otherwise claim a label of bisexuality, asexuality, pansexuality, or any other label are effectively subsumed into the visual rhetoric of cis-gay. The same holds true for transgender and gender non-conforming queens, who (presuming they are strictly attracted to masculinity and/or men), might identify as straight, or androsexual, rather than as “gay,” which risks falsely reasserting their identity as “male.”

Within the inconsistencies of each case’s treatment of sex and sexuality, one can begin to discern the popular critique of “drag as misogyny.” Certain examples of misogynistic drag are obvious, as bell hooks cites Black male comedians’ (such as Flip Wilson, Redd Foxx, and Eddie Murphy) use of drag wherein the “black woman depicted was... held up as an object of ridicule, scorn, and hatred” and the “impersonations were aimed at reinforcing everyone’s power over [Black women]... they helped sustain sexism and racism.”¹¹³ hooks goes on to suggest that, “for black males to take appearing in drag seriously, be they gay or straight, is to oppose heterosexist representation of black manhood,”¹¹⁴ which would seem a significantly more fitting description of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* than that of the male comedian. However, hooks here qualifies the claim when the selected drag exalts white femininity as the ideal, which remains a widely contested assessment of *Drag Race*. In a similar manner, Butler assesses a feminist critique of drag which asserts that “drag is nothing but the displacement and appropriation of ‘women,’ and hence [is] fundamentally based in misogyny, a hatred of women.”¹¹⁵ “The problem,” Butler says, “with

¹¹³ hooks, “Is Paris Burning?” 146.

¹¹⁴ hooks, 147.

¹¹⁵ Butler, “Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” 87.

the analysis of drag as only misogyny is, of course, that it figures male-to female transsexuality, cross-dressing, and drag as male homosexual activities - which they are not always.”¹¹⁶ (Butler’s claim is here bolstered by the presence of trans and gender non-conforming drag queens on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and by folx like Kia LaBeija in the ballroom scene.) Butler continues, “in the radical feminist argument against drag, the displacement of women is figured as the aim and effect of male-to-female drag” which derives from a “logic of repudiation [that] installs heterosexual love as the origin and truth of [drag and it interprets the practice as a symptom] of thwarted love.” In other words, drag read only as misogyny assumes a male subject who fails to successfully reproduce heterosexual norms and thus picks up femininity as a performance to displace women.¹¹⁷ Strong arguments could be made against the radical feminist critique of “drag as misogyny” for both RuPauline drag and the House of LaBeija, however, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* functions as a male dominated space, one which (heretofore) explicitly excludes those who are “assigned female at birth” and minimizes the womanhood and gender non-conformance of its trans and non-binary contestants. Neither community is above criticisms of misogyny, and “assigned female at birth” folx are nearly everywhere relegated to the margins of drag; however, the dual forces of sexual essentialism (both biological sex and sexuality) in RuPauline drag inevitably leave certain forms of misogyny intact which are more directly subverted by the ballroom as a space which allows both cis and trans womxn to connect with and boldly claim their femininity without the interrogation and/or erasure of their queerness. Succinctly, many queens (especially those of color) who participate in RuPauline drag can find a welcome space in ballroom communities, but the inverse does not hold true. There are many

¹¹⁶ Butler, 86.

¹¹⁷ Butler, 87.

members of the ballroom community whose sex and/or sexuality would remain either explicitly excluded from or implicitly minimized by a RuPauline conception of drag as it currently stands.

COMPARISON OF RUPAULINE DRAG AND THE HOUSE OF LABELLE VIA ULTIMATE ORIENTATION

Performance

All forms of drag remain consciously dependent upon performance; a crude definition of “drag” might read: “an intentionally exaggerated performance of identity.” The separations between those performances which constitute “drag” and the “mundane” performances of everyday life are simply a matter of degree, but it is precisely this heightened degree of intentionality and knowingness which enables the religious spark of drag to come into hazy focus. Succinctly, when exaggerating one’s performative conception of identity, one cannot help but betray their convictions regarding social organization, the materiality of identity, the division between the fantastical and the “mundane,” and their perspective of what the world is in relation to what the world could be; we might appropriately term such an orientation “religious.” This is not to suggest that all forms of drag are “religious,” but that because one cannot “do drag” accidentally, the decision to engage in drag, and the subsequent performance one produces, cannot be detached from one’s worldview, from one’s cosmology, from one’s ultimate orientation. Following the characterization of Kathryn Lofton, “drag,” like “religion,” “is a word to intensify what we do when we name authority, practice interactions, and interpret life itself,”¹¹⁸ or at the very

¹¹⁸ Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, Class 200: New Studies in Religion (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 13.

least, drag cannot exist apart from such naming, practice, and interpretation. Thus, initial analysis of the religious subjectivities produced by the cases of RuPauline drag and the House of LaBeija begins with consideration of their respective performances.¹¹⁹

In considering the performances of the House of LaBeija, José Muñoz' conception of "disidentification" proves remarkably apt. Muñoz' theory of disidentification was crafted by directly observing the performances of queer individuals of color and intentionally centers the "worldmaking power of disidentificatory practices."¹²⁰ At its core, disidentification is a practice wherein subjects remain entirely grounded in and conscious of the materiality of normative, hegemonic identity markers which have been assigned to them, but rather than conceding to such identification as totalizing, performers instead "disidentify with that world and perform a new one."¹²¹ This new performance "changes one's perception of the world,"¹²² and rather than simply attempting to refute normative identity claims, disidentification "is about transformation, about the powerful and charged transformations of the world, about the world that is born through performance."¹²³

In the case of the ballroom scene, such disidentificatory practices are created and sustained by every ball, which is "predicated upon [the] ability to disidentify with the mass public and instead... contribute to the function of a counterpublic space."¹²⁴ This counterpublic space is not capable of altogether refuting white standards of glamour,

¹¹⁹ I will here consider performance in relation to a handful of strains of performance theory (namely Muñoz and Pellegrini) which primarily concern the *intention* of performance, which I understand as closely reflective of one's ultimate orientation. I select this method for the sake of brevity, consolidation, and my admitted lack of familiarity with the breadth of performance studies – a discipline which spans a more immense realm than I feel capable of confidently engaging here.

¹²⁰ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas, v. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), ix.

¹²¹ Muñoz, xi.

¹²² Muñoz, xii.

¹²³ Muñoz, xiv.

¹²⁴ Muñoz, 7.

misogynistic implications of performed femininity, or the signifier of wealth as a mark of self-worth. However, complete refutation is not the goal of disidentification. As Muñoz describes it, “disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification... is a strategy that tries to transform cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.”¹²⁵ The performances of the ballroom demonstrate a collective dream for an alternative world, one which does not (and indeed cannot) ignore the harsh realities of life for queer and trans people of color, but also recognizes, demonstrates, and critiques the absurdity of dominant ideology and the social restrictions which accompany marginalized identities. As Dorian Corey describes it, “the fact that you’re not an executive is merely because of the social standing of life, [but] in a ballroom, you can be anything you want. You’re not really an executive, but you’re looking like an executive, and therefore, you’re showing the straight world that ‘I can be an executive.’”¹²⁶

Elements of disidentification can similarly be observed in RuPauline drag, and as emphasized earlier in this project, these “cases” heavily overlap and interpenetrate. One of Muñoz’ primary subjects in *Disidentifications* is Vaginal Creme Davis, who participated in a performance circuit shared by RuPaul prior to RuPaul’s mainstream success, and the two even performed together as backup singers for Glen Meadmore.¹²⁷ In fact, there are certain manners in which RuPauline drag could more aptly be characterized by disidentification,

¹²⁵ Muñoz, 11.

¹²⁶ Jennie Livingston, *Paris Is Burning*.

¹²⁷ 5ninthavenueproject, *Glen Meadmore, RuPaul, Fertile Latoya Jackson*, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4DJ8QkGjYs>.

namely in its relationship to “passing.” As Muñoz notes, “in traditional male-to-female drag, ‘woman’ is performed, but one would have to be naive and deeply ensconced in heteronormative culture to consider such a performance, no matter how ‘real,’ as an actual performance of ‘woman.’”¹²⁸ Muñoz continues by saying, “the ‘woman’ produced in drag is not a woman, but instead a public disidentification with woman,” which bears much similarity to RuPaul’s claim in *Guru*, “My drag is less about looking like a woman and more about saying F. U. to the cult of a systematic masculinity.”¹²⁹ Many participants of ballroom style drag, especially trans and gender non-conforming folx, cannot make the same claim, at least not to the same degree, because of material concerns of safety and passing. While looks turned by non-cis queens in the ballroom are often notably more dramatic than those worn in everyday life, both maintain a dependence on emulating a “real” (at least by dominant ideological perception) femininity. And while non-cis ballroom participants may have a similar desire to see the category of “woman” destabilized altogether, such a desire is never detached from recognizing such gender obliteration as “fantasy.” Thus, daily performances must emulate “real” womanhood or risk violence, while drag performances, no matter how grandiose, are in fact productions which expand the category of “real woman” rather than attempts to obliterate it. Yet, as Muñoz concludes, “both modalities of performing the self, disidentification and passing, are often strategies of survival,”¹³⁰ neither of which is totalizing, but which are each contingent upon disparate access and material privilege available to different drag subjects.

Nevertheless, there remains a key divergence between RuPauline drag and Muñoz’ concept of disidentification: RuPauline drag has little concern for world making and remains

¹²⁸ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 108.

¹²⁹ RuPaul, *Guru* (Dey Street Books, 2018), 102.

¹³⁰ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 108.

more preoccupied with deconstruction, perceiving identity as always strictly inhibiting and delusive. In RuPaul's words, "Drag reminds us that the divisions we create to make sense of what is real and not real are all but our own little superficial illusions."¹³¹ The transphobic, and other seemingly exclusionary remarks, made by RuPaul stem from a much larger worldview that perceives all self-identity as reductive and limiting. In an interview with the *New York Times*, he describes the role of identity as "always a social statement," one which is subverted by drag. "It's all nudge, nudge, wink, wink. We never believe this is who we are. That is why drag is a revolution, because we're mocking identity. We're mocking everyone."¹³² Thus, as RuPaul perceives it, criticizing identity is an act of grace and liberation, intended for edification, not harm. Since making such transphobic remarks, RuPaul tweeted "Each morning I pray to set aside everything I THINK I know, so I may have an open mind and a new experience. I understand and regret the hurt I have caused. The trans community are heroes of our shared LGBTQ movement. You are my teachers."¹³³ And in Season 4 of *RuPaul's Drag Race All-Stars*, Gia Gunn arrived in the workroom as the first participant to have undergone "medical transition." There remains profound skepticism regarding the substance, posturing, and motivation of such "transformations," especially when considered against RuPaul's lasting conviction that "Ego loves identity. Drag mocks identity. Ego hates drag."¹³⁴ But despite RuPaul's failure to recognize that muting one's identity is made materially possible only by structures of privilege, he remains emphatic and consistent (and

¹³¹ RuPaul, *GRu*, 26.

¹³² Jenna Wortham, "Is 'RuPaul's Drag Race' the Most Radical Show on TV?," *The New York Times*, January 24, 2018, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/24/magazine/is-rupauls-drag-race-the-most-radical-show-on-tv.html>.

¹³³ Charles, RuPaul (@RuPaul), Each morning I pray to set aside everything I THINK I know, so I may have an open mind and a new experience. I understand and regret the hurt I have caused. The trans community are heroes of our shared LGBTQ movement. You are my teachers." March 5, 2018, 3:57 PM. Tweet.

¹³⁴ RuPaul, *GRu*, 170.

correct) regarding the harm caused by identity politics. Further, it is important to note that RuPaul's disdain for identity politics arises from a life somewhat afflicted by similar matrices of oppression which characterize those in the ballroom (racism, heteronormative, femmephobia), and the conception of drag that he preaches professes an avenue for transcending identity labels, which he perceives as the source of such harm.

Thus, RuPauline drag participates in a drag more closely aligned with performance as described by Ann Pellegrini's *Performance Anxieties*. Pellegrini's claim that, "everything is performance, and everyone, at once performer and performed"¹³⁵ aligns closely with the RuPauline refrain "you're born naked and the rest is drag" or more explicitly, "whatever you proclaim as your identity here in the material realm is... drag."¹³⁶ These convictions affirm Pellegrini's desire to demonstrate "the hopelessness of trying to demarcate where performance ends and any 'real' begins."¹³⁷ Unlike RuPaul, Pellegrini retains significant regard for matters of identity, defining the term as "what it means to take up a particular time and place"¹³⁸ and noting that "subject-formation occurs in history, where social and cultural conditions do matter."¹³⁹ Yet the very aim of RuPauline drag is to perform one's way out of subject formation. "You are not your religion. You are not your skin color. You are not your gender, your politics, your career, or your marital status. You are none of the superficial things that this world deems important. The real you is the energy force that created the entire universe!"¹⁴⁰ Thus, while RuPauline drag contributes to what Pellegrini describes as the blurring, if not erasing of "the line between 'fact' and 'fiction,'" and

¹³⁵ Ann Pellegrini, *Performance Anxieties: Staging Psychoanalysis, Staging Race* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 9.

¹³⁶ RuPaul, *Workin' It! RuPaul's Guide to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Style*, 1st ed (New York, NY: It Books, 2010), Location 47. Kindle.

¹³⁷ Pellegrini, *Performance Anxieties*, 8.

¹³⁸ Pellegrini, 11.

¹³⁹ Pellegrini, 91.

¹⁴⁰ RuPaul, *Workin' It! RuPaul's Guide to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Style*, Location 48. Kindle.

emphasizes that “attempts to reclaim identity... may participate in the very structures they seek to undermine,”¹⁴¹ rather than analyzing the relationship between identity and performance, RuPauline drag vows instead “to always live outside the Matrix.”¹⁴²

In an attempt to compare these two “cases” more explicitly, a modified version of Melissa Wilcox’s conception of *serious parody* as developed in *Queer Nuns* seems to provide something of a common denominator. Wilcox notes the derivative relationship of *serious parody* from Muñoz’ *disidentification*, but describes “serious parody,” as “a form of cultural protest in which a disempowered group parodies an oppressive cultural institution while simultaneously claiming for itself what it believes to be an equally good or superior enactment of one or more culturally respected aspects of the same institution.”¹⁴³ While Wilcox’s work reads “institution” quite literally via the Catholic church, if institution is taken more broadly to include “informal” social institutions such as gender, race, etc.¹⁴⁴ then both RuPauline drag and the House of LaBeija could appropriately be characterized by *serious parody*. The central question of such an analysis considers: what do each of these drag performances parody as a means of engaging seriously? For the House of LaBeija, the institutions protested would include biological essentialism, racism, wealth disparity, and the like, all of which are parodied, reproduced with transformation, and emulated in ballroom drag, while the community takes seriously the possibility of creating a new world, however microcosmic, that makes possible alternative ways of life, identity formation, and relationship while recognizing the necessity of confronting material inequity. For RuPauline

¹⁴¹ Pellegrini, *Performance Anxieties*, 99.

¹⁴² RuPaul, *GiRu*, 103.

¹⁴³ Melissa M. Wilcox, *Queer Nuns: Religion, Activism, and Serious Parody*, Sexual Cultures (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 70.

¹⁴⁴ It is somewhat unclear whether Wilcox would approve of such a broadening move; however, they do call for the advancement of “serious parody” into new directions of queer studies and religious studies. And whether Wilcox would consider “gender” or “race” an institution formal enough to be engaged via “serious parody,” the value of their method for deconstructing subjective paradox seems to hold here.

drag, the institution being parodied is identity itself, even as RuPaul relies on the coherence and deployment of certain images and identities, and while at first glance it may appear that nothing is taken “seriously,” despite RuPaul’s deepest protests, the conviction that identity is useless constitutes an identity of its own. As Eve Sedgwick reminds us, identification is never a simple project, but rather, identification “with” always implies an identification “against.”¹⁴⁵ RuPauline drag’s identifications *against* may remain more sensational, but it is never without its sympathies. One cannot mock everything, and RuPaul himself states “doing drag... actually reveals who you are.”¹⁴⁶

Ritual

If drag’s conscious and exaggerated performance makes legible the stylistic orientations of each “case,” the ritualization of drag further articulates each community’s shared values and ideological commitments. As drag moves from individual performances to collective spaces of ritual, the subsequent economies of drag begin to reveal a cosmogony that transcends (without rendering irrelevant) personal convictions. Through the disparate rituals of drag, one can consider religion, as Lofton describes it, as a word which frames “How is activity organized? What makes something people decide to do, to like, or to watch? Why do we commit to organizing socially in one way rather than another?”¹⁴⁷ While both RuPauline drag and the House of LaBeija participate in drag’s ritualization, the rituals themselves are not configured in the same way, and their respective forms reflect the distinctions between the ultimate orientations they perceive and cultivate. As Lofton continues,

¹⁴⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick* (University of California Press, 1990, 61); Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 8.

¹⁴⁶ RuPaul, *GuRu*, 14.

¹⁴⁷ Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, 2.

Whenever we see dreams of and for the world articulated, whenever we see those dreams organized into legible rituals, schematics, and habits, we glimpse the domain that the word *religion* contributes to describe. Whenever we see the real ways we organize ourselves to survive our impossible distance from those dreams, we grasp why religion exists. Not because religion is that dreaming or those realities. Because religion has been a word used to summarize the habits by which we demarcate ourselves as certain kinds of dreamers and makers.¹⁴⁸

Thus, it is in shared ritual that one begins to see the unique religious subjectivities which are formed as a result of participation in either of these two “cases.” RuPauline drag identifies the “dream” as that of a complete lack of inhibition caused by identity, and the “impossible distance” is negotiated by mocking identity, by prompting others to do the same, and by using drag to peel back the curtain of ego. Alternately, the House of LaBeija identifies the “dream” as a world where different experiences of materiality do not inequitably prohibit certain bodies, where one can be a legend even while being Black and queer, and the “impossible distance” is negotiated by cultivating a space where snatching trophies depends on one’s ability to embody the dream while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of categories, to blend in with what society deems as successful while standing out as exceptional.

Consider the collective ritual of the ballroom when read via Roy Rappaport’s conception of “ritual” in *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*.¹⁴⁹ Rappaport defines ritual as “the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers,” as contrasted by other social events such as theatrical performances or athletic events, which create a distinction between the

¹⁴⁸ Lofton, 3.

¹⁴⁹ I arrive at my understanding of ritual also by way of Catherine Bell’s *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, especially for her intricate union of ritual and belief, or ritual as something which “will act out, express, or perform... conceptual orientations” (19). However, for the sake of clarity, I choose to follow the distinctions between rituals laid out by Rappaport precisely for their artificially siloed distinctions, which share methodological ground with my use of *ideal texts*, as opposed to Bell’s work which proves more entangled and somewhat less collapsible.

Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 1 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

“performers” and the “audience” or “spectators.”¹⁵⁰ Ritual, Rappaport asserts, “is ‘in earnest,’ that is, it is understood by performers to be taking place in the world, even when it is playful, entertaining, ludicrous, obscene or blasphemous, or even when, perhaps especially when, its actions are highly stylized.”¹⁵¹ The balls undoubtedly meet such criteria as there is no divide between those “performing” and those “participating;” unlike *Drag Race*, balls are not orchestrated on behalf of consumers or spectators, except by those physically present, almost all of whom will themselves “walk” in a category at that same event. Further, the balls are in every sense performed “in earnest,” as in fact, many of the ballroom participants’ lives are centered around the balls, financially, familiarly, and otherwise. The balls offer the primary sense of structure for the world of ballroom culture and are defined both in contrast and in response to the larger material world.

Rappaport’s other criteria for “ritual” are similarly met by ballroom events. The performances are “not entirely encoded by performers,” as the categories for competition are consistent from ball to ball, dictated by a set of communal standards which one is introduced to via participation in a house. These standards are maintained and presided over by the panel of judges, emcee, and the collective response of those present at a ball and if a performer strays too far from the implicit strictures, they are met with unquestionably negative feedback. Such structure informs the ballroom’s ritual function as “more or less invariant,” but “the details... are [n]ever specified to such a degree that there is no room for some logically necessary or deliberate variation.”¹⁵² The categories change over time to include new trends in performance, femininity, fashion, etc. and those who walk in

¹⁵⁰ Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, Repr., 10th printing, Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology 110 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 41-43.

¹⁵¹ Rappaport, 43.

¹⁵² Rappaport, 36.

categories must adapt their performances to reflect changes in gender norms and aesthetic vogues, balancing the demands of standing out from their competitors without taking too much expressive liberty so as to transgress the category in which they are competing. Rappaport names such a tension between the personal and the collective as the “self-referential and canonical messages” of ritual, both of which are “interwoven” throughout the same liturgical order.¹⁵³ “The canonical stream is carried by the invariant aspects or components of these orders,” while “self-referential information is conveyed by whatever variation the liturgical order allows or demands,”¹⁵⁴ but, as Rappaport ultimately concludes, “*in all religious rituals, there is transmitted an indexical message that cannot be transmitted in any other way and, far from being trivial, it is one without which canonical messages are without force, or may even seem nonsensical.*”¹⁵⁵ Such a conception of ritual, when applied to the House of LaBeija and ballroom drag, demonstrates the profundity and centrality of the balls: without the balls, the collective canonical messages would be rendered incoherent. The balls sustain the convictions and strength of the community, while holding space for individuals’ self-expression and affirmation within the range of demarcated space. Ultimately, when considering the balls via Rappaport’s ritual theory, one can appreciate the gravity of the ball as a ritual form, as “a special medium peculiarly, perhaps even uniquely, suited to the transmission of certain messages and certain sorts of information.”¹⁵⁶

Contrastingly, most forms of RuPauline drag (most notably *Drag Race*) would struggle to be read so particularly as a site of collective ritual; not because such ritual form does not exist, but because the canonical messages are designed for, and contingent upon,

¹⁵³ Rappaport, 53.

¹⁵⁴ Rappaport, 54.

¹⁵⁵ Rappaport, 58.

¹⁵⁶ Rappaport, 52.

consumption. Thus, RuPauline drag more heavily relies on a dichotomy between “performer” and “spectator,” divided by television screens and subject to the force of popular culture, “a terrain where individuals come together to participate in, support, or criticize an object, principle, or subject.”¹⁵⁷ Thus, RuPauline drag remains more intentionally engaged with rituals concerning the technologies of drag, which hold the effacing of identity as their central canonical message. As the RuPaul refrain goes: “we’re all born naked and the rest is drag.” Consider the art of donning drag: a spark of inspiration yields the crafting of a look. The look must match the occasion or category, the look must be executed: either made or stolen or purchased or borrowed or otherwise procured, styling of hair and makeup and padding and accessories must be selected to complement the overall vision, and technologies of drag such as tucking, packing, shaving, gluing one’s eyebrows, applying false lashes, pasting on sideburns, binding, stuffing, etc. must be strategically applied (expertly, poorly, or anything beyond, each contributing to a different end), before the look is put together and “turned” for whatever venue, audience, or lack thereof one might choose (or be chosen for).

Many of these decisions are simply exaggerated versions of daily tasks, which prompts RuPaul to remind us that all of life is drag: choosing an outfit and style which yields a strictly aesthetic end. These decisions are themselves part of a larger network of consumerism, what one wears, what one buys, and why one selects a certain thing and not an alternative; as Lofton characterizes,

these discernments may be rendered as minor matters in the given traversal of daily life, yet represent our decisions to connect with (or not) circulating objects. These small decisions are where we organize ourselves, consciously or unconsciously, as political and economic actors, in alignment with certain demographics and social wholes and implicitly or explicitly in dissent from others. This is how we draw the lines of what a family should be and how a woman can appear; this is how we know

¹⁵⁷ Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, 4.

what a working day ought to include and what racial and gendered freedoms are possible.¹⁵⁸

Performances of drag are concerned with and participate in precisely the same economy of consumerism as “mundane” consumer life, and thus also share in its subsequent religious implications, yet they do so intentionally (one cannot accidentally “do drag”). This confrontation of social norms, and the negotiation between upholding or challenging them accordingly, constitutes one of the primary sites of RuPauline drag as ritual. As RuPaul describes, “When I get all dolled up to film *Drag Race*, I’ll take six hours. I could do it in two hours, but it’s important for me to make it a deliberately sacred, drawn-out ritual.”¹⁵⁹ Such technologies of drag, and RuPaul’s intentional focus upon them, both in the filming of *Drag Race* and in everyday life, emphasize a visual rhetoric of transformation, one that undermines the validity of identity and further mocks social categorization. One is everything and nothing, and whatever one wants to be, because neither life nor identity are to be taken seriously - the core canonical message of RuPauline drag.

Ultimately, elements of each form of ritual can be observed in both “cases,” as well as elements of performance and collective behavior which are not explored here (i.e. voguing, lip-syncing, night club performances, etc.) and through this interpenetration of ritual, one begins to see that the ultimate orientation of one style of drag is not altogether absent from the “other,” but rather, each “case” merely emphasizes certain canonical messages which yield rituals that accentuate and transmit such messages accordingly. As J. Z. Smith succinctly notes, “Ritual is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention”¹⁶⁰ and the disparity between these “cases” relationship to ritual primarily falls to a difference in

¹⁵⁸ Lofton, 4.

¹⁵⁹ RuPaul, *GiRL*, 2.

¹⁶⁰ Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism (Chicago, Ill.: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992), 10.

emphasis; they are paying attention to different facets of a similar practice. And by considering the differences in their rituals, one can more clearly perceive the differences in their attentions.

Kinship

If, as Rappaport suggests, that the participants of a ritual constitute a “congregation,” then drag, at least in the communities considered here, brings with it a genealogy of familial dispossession and newfound queer relationships which transform “congregational” relationships into those of “kin.” The meaning of this kinship, and how it appears, differs in each “case,” however both communities use rhetoric of family and kinship to describe the relationships cultivated by drag’s centrality in one’s life, affirming Kathryn Lofton’s assertion that “however much the family might be reorganized or queered, it endures as the story within every story.”¹⁶¹ While these queer familial strategies were assessed earlier in relationship to “motherhood” and materiality, when considered in light of the convictions associated with each form of drag and the canonical messages emphasized by their rituals, such kinship structures take on a more en fleshed texture. Further, following Lofton who posits, “[w]hatever else religion might be, it is a way of describing structures by which we are bound or connected to one another,”¹⁶² one can characterize the creation and sustenance of binding structures as distinctly and explicitly religious for their participation in and reflection of each community’s ultimate orientation.

The House of LaBeija embodies many of the characteristics of “kinship” as described by Elizabeth Freeman in “Queer Belongings,” as she describes, “if kinship is anything at all... it marks a terrain... that lies in its status as a set of representational and

¹⁶¹ Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, 284.

¹⁶² Lofton, 4.

practical strategies for accommodating all the possible ways one human being's body can be vulnerable and hence dependent upon that of another, and for mobilizing all the possible resources one body has for taking care of another," or more succinctly, kinship can "be viewed as the process by which bodies and the potential for physical and emotional attachment are created, transformed, and sustained over time."¹⁶³ Such physical and emotional attachment are everywhere in the organization and genealogy of ballroom culture; from confronting the social alienation and deep loss of AIDS, to serving as surrogate family structures in reaction to disownment and disenfranchisement, to collective economic strategies which combat poverty and homelessness. As Freeman carefully notes, such kinship structures are necessitated by histories of racism which have demanded that Black people creatively construct relationship configurations as "the racial caste system itself was coextensive with the denial of kinship rights and recognitions to African Americans under slavery"¹⁶⁴ and lingers in a racial caste system that "makes people look like they were born with inferior or superior bodies that predict social and economic limitations and privileges."¹⁶⁵

Consequently, the kinship cultivated by ballroom culture expresses tension with the label of "chosen family," which "presumes a range of economic, racial, gender, and national privileges" which are not in fact available to many members of the ballroom.¹⁶⁶ This is not to suggest that ballroom participants have no agency over their participation and the relationships that they form, but that kinship is necessitated for survival, both material and otherwise, at least as much as it is sought out. Freeman describes these extra-material desires

¹⁶³ Elizabeth Freeman, "Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory," in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry, 1 edition (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 298.

¹⁶⁴ Elizabeth Freeman, 303.

¹⁶⁵ Elizabeth Freeman, 303.

¹⁶⁶ Elizabeth Freeman, 304.

as the desire to belong, to “be long,” that is, “to impossibly extend our individual existence to present relationships that will invariably end, but also to have something queer exceed its own time, even to imagine that excess *as* queer.”¹⁶⁷ In the case of the House of LaBeija, participation in the House allows one the possibility to become legendary, to be remembered beyond one’s material life, to “be long,” and to effectively produce a queer excess which would remain otherwise impossible for Black and Brown queer folx attempting to leave their mark on a society and world which is constructed against their success.

In RuPauline drag, one observes a similar queer desire to “be long,” along with similar structures of queer kinship which help queens become initiated to the technologies of drag and remain resilient in the face of social marginalization and femme-phobia. Upwards of ten queens from *Drag Race* identify (or are identified) as the “drag mother” of later contestants, resulting in “sister” or “sibling” relationships between many of the queens, and the formation of several “houses,” such as the House of Edwards and the House of the Drag Queen. Relationships featured on the show, those cultivated both within house/family structures and via time spent together filming, touring, promoting, etc. are noted as one of the more moving elements of RuPauline drag. In a *New York Times* interview, Jenna Wortham recalls RuPaul affirming,

“There is a sisterhood here,” he told me. “It has to do with the shared experience of being outsiders and making a path for ourselves.” The camaraderie Charles describes is evident: Even after their season ends, *Drag Race* contestants work together, live together, travel together. Their Instagrams are full of photos of one another. The kinship feels real, and it’s what initially caught my attention and endeared me to the show.¹⁶⁸

Interestingly, RuPaul’s naming of queen’s “shared experience as outsiders” emphasizes Lofton’s assessment of “family [as] a claim of differentiating dependency; this *us*

¹⁶⁷ Elizabeth Freeman, 299.

¹⁶⁸ Wortham, “Is ‘RuPaul’s Drag Race’ the Most Radical Show on TV?”

exists in part by how it distinguishes itself from all the other *they*.¹⁶⁹ RuPaul remains conscious of such delineations, recalling, “I’ve been shunned by whites for being black, by blacks for being gay, by gays for being fem,”¹⁷⁰ but rather than viewing such discrimination in light of systems of oppression, RuPaul contextualizes it within interpersonal ego conflict. “The real tee? The ego needs to feel superior over others... know that the hurtful things people say have everything to do with them and not you. It is simply an outward projection of their own self-loathing. Bless them.”¹⁷¹ Within statements such as these RuPaul makes explicit the ways in which his own conception of drag allows him to cope with the forces of racism and cis-het normativity, and more clearly emphasize the shared socially marginalizing forces of the ballroom and RuPauline drag. Interestingly, both “cases” embody an ambivalent relationship between self-interest and collective good as they grapple between being the best and being a family. Houses compete, viciously at times, in pursuit of their house’s success, even while they retain a sincere regard for their competitors. And while *RuPaul’s Drag Race* pits queens against each other in a competition (or, in the words of Lashawn Beyond’s iconic read, “this is not RuPaul’s Best Friend Race”¹⁷²), it similarly fosters relationships between people who share in social ostracism and the life challenges which accompany being a drag queen. Both communities contend with the boundaries of family and rivalry, and both, at times, trouble distinctions between “us” and “them.” Ultimately, the kinship that forms in both communities results from a synthesis of necessity, circumstance, shared experience, and common alienation; where they differ regards the degree of commonality, marginalization, and necessity.

¹⁶⁹ Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, 285.

¹⁷⁰ RuPaul, *GnRu*, 25.

¹⁷¹ RuPaul, 25.

¹⁷² “RuPocalypse Now!,” *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (World of Wonder, January 30, 2012), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2191323/>.

However, unique to RuPauline drag is *Drag Race's* capacity to foster secondary spaces of kinship which are detached from and otherwise independent of the show. While ballroom culture spawns multiple generations of kinship by welcoming new members, opening houses in new cities, and passing down legacies and traditions, each community remains more or less geographically confined, directly affiliated via participation in balls, and sustained by material interaction with fellow house members. Contrastingly, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is designed to be consumed and interacted with by communities of people who have not met, and may never meet, its participants. As Aaron Edwards describes it, “to truly understand the impact of the reality competition... you need to be around it’s intended jury. This is no new fact: for years, LGBTQ people have huddled in bars, living rooms, and other communal spaces to participate in a show that has become ubiquitous to mainstream queer culture.”¹⁷³ The circumstance and regularity of the show present an opportunity for otherwise alienated queer folx to come together and interact with one another amidst a culture of increasing isolation, individuality, and “mainstreamed queerness,” while gay bars are declining, *RuPaul's Drag Race* offers an alternative opportunity for queer convening.¹⁷⁴ Edwards compares “the feeling of watching *RuPaul's Drag Race* to attending church services as a child,” noting the similarities of “pageantry and circumstance” and the ability for “both institutions... to draw masses to their respective altars.”¹⁷⁵ Such gatherings remain critical of the show and its shifting tone, as Edwards muses on the questionable racial dynamics and commodification of mental health, but concedes that in spite of the show’s critical failings, “sometimes all I can do is return to the root of the experience - standing around with a lot of queer people,

¹⁷³ Aaron Edwards, “The Religious Experience of Watching ‘RuPaul’s Drag Race,’” *The Outline*, accessed October 14, 2018, <https://theoutline.com/post/3803/rupauls-drag-race-church-photo-essay>.

¹⁷⁴ Eric Sasson, “Gentrification May Be Killing The Gay Bar. But The Way The LGBTQ Community Communes Today Is Changing.,” *GOOD*, April 16, 2018, <https://www.good.is/features/disappearing-gay-bars>.

¹⁷⁵ Edwards, “The Religious Experience of Watching ‘RuPaul’s Drag Race.’”

eyes glued to a show that is oftentimes out of our control, yet wields so much power over us.”¹⁷⁶ Communities like the one Edwards participates in and describes have contributed to the show’s continued success and themselves offer sites of queer friendship and kinship that, while facilitated by the practice of drag, do not remain confined or materially attached to it. The “spectators” become participants in their own regard, and the simple act of viewing *RuPaul’s Drag Race* becomes a site of ritual, one which creates and sustains its own congregations, or as Edwards concludes, “the experience is as shared as it is personal... a show that deals largely with illusions has mastered the art of invoking reality.”¹⁷⁷

While kinship appears similarly in these two cases, tending toward similar ends, facilitated by necessity and marginalization, seeking ways to “be long,” each case diverges with regards to the kinds of kinship they seek to cultivate and the respective demands placed on their kinship structures. Both negotiate boundaries of familiarity, however, the ballroom structure sustains a more materially necessitated configuration of kinship while RuPauline drag aims to make cultivated queer relationships more visible, more consumable, and effectively creates sites of kinship beyond its participants. Akin to performance and ritual, the models of kinship which are prioritized signify their respective conceptions of reality, and their distinctions between the fantastical and the mundane, or put differently, their collective orientations in the ultimate sense, and the subsequently religious subjectivities they cultivate.

Fantasy

Common to both “cases” is the idea of, “feeling one’s fantasy.” This phrase describes when one’s participation in drag (momentarily) subsumes other personal indicators

¹⁷⁶ Edwards.

¹⁷⁷ Edwards.

of identity, which are otherwise accepted as reality; one no longer perceives themselves as consciously “performing” in a certain way, but transcends such self-consciousness and “feels the fantasy.” Feeling one’s fantasy shares much in common with the idea of “realness,” and similarly to “realness,” “fantasy” can be used mockingly, sincerely, ironically, passionately, or otherwise, depending on the drag performance selected and the subject who is performing. Thus, the “fantasies” which are “felt” appear different in the cases of RuPauline drag and the House of LaBeija, as well as for each person participating in their respective style of drag. Further, what one perceives as “fantasy” remains contingent upon what one perceives as “fantastical” (or one might say “sacred”), something which contrasts the “real” (or one might say “mundane”). The fantasies offered by drag enable its performers to create and participate in a world which reflects their perceptions of self more than socially constructed markers of identity, to exist in a world where they are marveled, celebrated, and loved, rather than marginalized, misunderstood, and confined. Ultimately, to “feel the fantasy” of one’s drag is to participate and embody one’s ultimate orientation, to insist on a world order which runs contrary to that of normative, hegemonic anti-queerness, anti-Blackness, cis-sexism (and all other oppressive forces) which antagonize those bodies who perform drag.

For the House of LaBeija, such “fantasy” is central to the appeal of the ball, as well as its sustaining force. As Pepper LaBeija describes it, “a lot of those kids that are in the balls, they don’t have two of nothing. Some of them don’t even eat. They come to balls starving... They don’t have a home to go to, but they’ll... go out, they’ll steal something, get dressed up and come to a ball for that one night and live the fantasy. A ball is the very word.”¹⁷⁸ Notably, the balls are not exclusively escapism; that is, they are not, as Marx might suggest an “opium” which keeps their participants subdued and complacent within an

¹⁷⁸ Jennie Livingston, *Paris Is Burning*.

exploitative class structure. As the former half of this project demonstrates, the balls are grounded in an undoubtedly material awareness and critique of inequity and injustice, however, they create an opportunity for material community which affirms those left unprovided for by the bourgeoisie. The religion practiced in the ballroom does not sustain the status quo without qualification, does not yield an “inverted world consciousness,”¹⁷⁹ but rather, functions more closely aligned with religion as conceived by Antonio Gramsci, who repudiates the conception of religion as exclusively superstructural and instead suggests that religion is “a mediating variable in social conflicts, it has both a degree of autonomy and material impact.”¹⁸⁰ Gramsci holds out the possibility for religion to function as a vehicle for counter-hegemonic resistance as “every relationship of ‘hegemony’ is necessarily an educational relationship. To succeed in revolutionary struggles, subaltern classes must generate... new forms of hegemony by shattering the universalistic claims of older worldviews.”¹⁸¹ The ballroom offers precisely such a space for the creation of new hegemony, inviting similarly disenfranchised individuals to a community of re-education and participation in “rituals that reiterate beliefs,” beliefs which challenge and critique bourgeoisie norms of race, gender, class, and sex. The “fantasy” of the ballroom is a culmination, extension, and reification of the ideals expressed in its performances, rituals, and kinship structures, all of which provide a reality which “demarcate[s]... certain kinds of dreamers and makers,” and cultivates a unique subjectivity, one which should appropriately be understood and described as “religious.”¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd Revised & enlarged edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 53-54.

¹⁸⁰ Dwight B. Billings, “Religion as Opposition: A Gramscian Analysis,” *American Journal of Sociology* 96, no. 1 (1990): 27.

¹⁸¹ Billings, 7.

¹⁸² Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, 3.

Lest such a description appear too idyllic, the subaltern resistance offered by the ballroom is not singularly counter-normative. Religion, as with drag, often demands intelligibility within normative structures for one's messages to be rendered coherent, and by performing within such constraints, of femininity or fantasy, norms are re-inscribed at the same moment they are resisted or transformed. As Lofton notes, "Religion has been complicit in producing the status quo. It has also provided a critique of the status quo,"¹⁸³ and ballroom drag demonstrates that such a dialectal relationship is not constrained to distinct moments or communities, where one action is normative and the other counter-hegemonic, or one religious community is complicit while another is revolutionary. Rather, the religion expressed by drag (and likely religion elsewhere) remains intertwined with and inseparable from the social setting in which it is located. And thus, even while the fantasy of the House of LaBeija challenges conceptions of race, gender, class, sex(uality), and identity, it inevitably contributes (more or less) to their coherence and gravity.

The "fantasy" of RuPauline drag functions in much the same way; while attempting to mock and destabilize identity, it inevitably reinforces the material consequence of categorical identities, encouraging individuals to escape the illusion rather than attempting to destabilize material inequity. But the "fantasy" itself proves no less material or significant. As Season 6 contestant Laganja Estranga recalls, "My mom told me that this isn't the future she sees for me and that she saw a lot more for me and that she thinks of drag as less. And I hope to show her through the show that drag is not only more, it's everything."¹⁸⁴ And as Valentina describes her participation in *All Stars* Season 4, "When I feel a fantasy, it is my

¹⁸³ Lofton, 12.

¹⁸⁴ "Season Six," *RuPaul's Drag Race*, 2014, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1353056/episodes?season=4>.

*reality.*¹⁸⁵ Similar sentiments are expressed by queens, both on the show and in subsequent interviews, each expressing the centrality of drag in their life as something more than a career or an art form, as a “fantasy” which is truly “felt,” and affects one’s orientation to the world.

Yet because RuPauline drag is often constituted by people less marginalized by race, gender, class, and sex(uality) than those in the ballroom, and because RuPauline drag actively markets itself as a commodity within a capitalist structure, RuPauline drag proves less successful at fending off Marx’s critique of religion as an “inverted world consciousness.”¹⁸⁶ The “fantasy” of RuPauline suggests that the primary source of unhappiness is “tak[ing] life too seriously”¹⁸⁷ and contentment is but a matter of perspective. As RuPaul posits, “Is the glass half full or half empty? Both choices are correct, but one choice will bring you joy, and the other will bring your pain. Yep, I choose joy.”¹⁸⁸ Further, RuPaul delegitimizes material critique, admonishing his audience: “instead of constantly point out what’s missing, celebrate what is.”¹⁸⁹ Such statements are not intended to diminish the validity of one’s suffering, nor to deny the reality of injustice, but to suggest that adjusting one’s expectations and perspective to match reality are more viable than bending reality to meet one’s expectations. To a certain extent, a similar belief is expressed in the balls; rather than rearranging the whole world to secure one’s place, one can settle for a more localized adjustment and rearrange a school gymnasium and find their place in a house. However, ballroom drag concerns itself very little with the palatability of its “fantasy,” while RuPauline drag must gain viewers, sell records, host conferences, book tours, market books, and produce podcasts and

¹⁸⁵ Yohana Desta, “RuPaul’s Drag Race’s Valentina: ‘I Really Do Live an Authentically Extra Fantasy Life,’” HWD, accessed February 27, 2019, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/01/rupauls-drag-race-all-stars-valentina-interview>.

¹⁸⁶ Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 53.

¹⁸⁷ RuPaul, *Workin’ It! RuPaul’s Guide to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Style*, Location 24. Kindle

¹⁸⁸ RuPaul, Location 30.

¹⁸⁹ RuPaul, *GRU*, 58.

spin-offs to survive. And in the world of RuPauline drag, religion is not exempt from repackaging for consumption. As Drew Konow observes of *Drag Race*, all disclosures of religious injuries are reframed “within some greater purpose... The show is not interested in calling out the system that caused religious harm but in marketing the story of triumph it made possible.”¹⁹⁰ These stories of triumph are what RuPaul refers to as “the ministry of drag” which he claims is “so powerful. We can speak from so much pain and so much heartache and so much still frustration, but we can walk that walk.”¹⁹¹ Because there is little critique of systemic injustice, these narratives of personal growth remain firmly situated in individualism and as Odessa Cheeke concludes, “If there is a religious theme to the show, it is that the coexistence of queer culture and religion manifests itself as a personal interpretation of the idea of faith unique to each individual.”¹⁹²

BY WAY OF “CONCLUSION”

Because RuPauline drag must, by nature of its form, appeal to more mainstream sensibilities and the consumer market, its social impact remains undoubtedly larger in scale than that of the House of LaBeija. And with the show’s continued growth, one might note the increase of professed ideological support of LGBTQ+ folx among millennials. As the show continues in its commercial success, it gains a more authoritative social voice, contributing to the phenomenon Gramsci describes wherein, “Even when people cannot repeat all the intellectual justifications that they have heard given for new conceptions, they remain convinced that such reasons exist and that ‘so many like-thinking people can’t be

¹⁹⁰ Drew Konow, “RuPaul’s Drag Race Wants to Reconcile Queerness and Religion. And It Wants Queer People to Do All the Work.” *Slate Magazine*, December 18, 2018, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2018/12/rupaul-drag-race-religion-queerness.html>.

¹⁹¹ Konow.

¹⁹² Odessa Cheeke, “The Ministry of Drag- Unpacking the Coexistence of Religion and Queer Theory in Drag Culture,” *Religion in Society*, December 21, 2018, <https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/sociologyofreligion/tag/rupauls-drag-race/>.

wrong.”¹⁹³ Admittedly, the success of *Drag Race* does not exist in a vacuum and it is impossible to discern the exact relationship between the mainstreaming of “gay rights” and the success of RuPaul, but it is clear that both are products of and forces within the same cultural milieu. And when measuring social change using traditional neoliberal conceptions of inclusion and altered social consciousness, the orientation of RuPauline drag seems to be undoubtedly more pervasive than the orientation of the ballroom.

And yet, when one hears RuPaul’s benediction, “If you can’t love yourself, how in the hell are you gonna love somebody else. Can I get an amen up in here?” and millions utter, from bars and living rooms, “Amen,” one should remember that “self-love” remains more plausibly attainable for certain bodies and identities than others, both within the insular world of RuPaul and globally. And despite RuPaul’s continual admonishment that, “we’re all born naked and the rest is drag,” the voices of those in the ballroom protest that we are not all “born naked,” but rather that all are born into a system which predetermines certain identity markers and the consequences of those differences. Even as so many aspects of identity are socially constructed, and as RuPaul might add, illusory, they remain some of the most material signifiers or access, safety, reputability, “beauty,” trustworthiness, desirability, worth, and inclusion. RuPaul’s emphasis on identity solely as something to be mocked neglects to consider such often inescapable disparities and inequities, suggesting that 1) abstinence from identification possibly exists and 2) simply by abstaining from identification, one can remain unphased and uninhibited by its weight, or at least feel unburdened by its presence. The RuPauline belief that identification can be mutable is made possible only by certain privileges and success within neoliberal capitalism, which allow for a conception of identity as “fantasy,” one which regards identification as unserious.

¹⁹³ Billings, “Religion as Opposition,” 10.

Even while these “cases” are reduced to their most idealized, most reductive conceptions, the “fantasies” which they participate in remain complex and multifaceted. Demonstrating such complexity via heuristic and reductive *ideal texts* should encourage one to appreciate the exponential degrees of complexity which occur as subjects blend styles of drag and as these “cases” are considered with more texture and reality. Thus, the primary intention of the analytic work performed here is to demonstrate that while “drag” may appear homogenized and irreligious via a heteronormative, strictly materialist gaze, when considered from the emic perspective of participants and counter-hegemonic lenses, drag proves much more disparate and complex than generally conceived. Examining the complexity of drag provides an opportunity for the study of religion to consider the unique, multifaceted ways in which people often accepted as a unified “collective” might in fact be engaging and creating new communities, practices, and habits which allow them to respond to the matrices of categorical distinction (and general “otherness”) which mark their life, and to claim for themselves their own orientations, their own fantasies, which resist (and perhaps subvert) the totalizing narratives and social locations to which they might otherwise remain constrained. Thus, the orientations of drag help demonstrate the impetus for the academic study of religion to spend more time considering those who embody “religion” in forms which are often minimized and marginalized by normative conceptions of the discipline, for doing so not only provides a more equitable (and perhaps ethical) approach to scholarship, but enriches the theoretical and methodological lenses of the field in return. Hopefully, this project has demonstrated that drag proves no less a site where “religion” can be observed than any other community taken up by religious scholarship.

Further, the religion embodied by drag offers a crucial intervention regarding the boundaries of traditional, binary conceptions of the fantastical and the mundane, the radical

and the realistic. Drag exaggerates the condition of most human behavior, walking the line between the self-referential and the canonical, the individual and the collective, upholding social categories enough to remain intelligible while testing their malleability. These are not separate actions; rather practices of drag are simultaneously expansive and transformative *as well as* inevitably constrained and norm re-inscribing. Consequently, the study of drag as a site of religion urges us to consider the nuanced materiality of disparate subjects, noting that religion can be “resistant” without being intentionally “radical,” or complicit in the preservation of hegemony without losing its capacity for social transfiguration. Such normative ambivalence is not necessarily the outlier in understanding subjectivity, but may in fact be a norm itself.

Within the “cases” considered here, the “fantasy” produced by one is nowhere mutually exclusive to the other, but rather, elements and characteristics of each religion, each orientation, each “fantasy,” are included in and dependent upon the other. Both RuPauline drag and the House of LaBeija yearn for a different world order, both understand identity as limited, malleable, and constructed, both seek to critique the rigidity and absurdity of hegemony via exaggerated performance, both explicitly desire to become legendary, to be remembered, to “be long.” Where these communities differ, in every case, is often a matter of degree and emphasis, but as demonstrated by this project, these degrees of separation and context are irrefutably consequential, resulting not only in new forms of drag, but in new ultimate orientations, distinct kinds of dreamers and makers, and unique attempts to survive the impossible distance between ourselves and our dreams.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁴ Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, 3.

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