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"Queen of the Mother-Tucking (Western) World": Authenticity and Nationality on *Drag Race*

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"Queen of the Mother-Tucking (Western) World": Authenticity and Nationality on *Drag Race*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Communication
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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of legislation across the United States regulating drag performances, I turn to the reality television (RTV) franchise *Drag Race* as a popular media site where queer identities are represented. More specifically, I analyze the series *RuPaul's Drag Race: UK vs The World* (*UKVTW*) which is the first series in the franchise to feature participants from different countries competing for the title "Queen of the Mother-Tucking World." Furthermore, the series suggests it represents "global" drag. Understanding that no singular RTV series can represent a singular global drag identity, I ask: how does the series represent global drag? Turning to scholarship on RTV which suggests that RTV participants who are seen as successful are often seen as authentic, I first analyze how authenticity is presented on the series. I theorize "queer authenticity" to make sense of how queer identities are presented as authentic in RTV, an idea not yet studied by critical scholars. In chapter two, I return to my first research question: how does the series represent global drag? Building on my argument in chapter one, I argue the "global" drag that *UKVTW* suggests it represents is inherently white and Western using authenticity as a tool to construct the only participants on the series from a non-Western country as "Other." Currently, there are *Drag Race* series in fifteen different countries with plans to continue expanding so being attentive to how *Drag Race* represents "global" drag provides insight into what drag identities are privileged over others.

INTRODUCTION

On March 3, 2023 Tennessee's state legislators passed a bill banning drag performances in public spaces or anywhere minors might be present. Similar legislation is appearing in fourteen other state governments across the United States. These bills broadly define a drag performer as someone dressing and acting as a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth. Some of the performances this legislation is targeting are: "Drag Queen Story Time", where drag queens read children's books at public libraries, public lip sync performances, and Pride parades (Helmore, 2023). Legislation targeting drag performers are the most recent attacks at the LGBTQIA+ community. Other recent political attacks include Florida's 2022 "Don't Say Gay" Bill, North Carolina's 2016 infamous "Bathroom Bill", the rolling back of protections for trans military people, and bills targeting gender affirming health care for transgender youth. Despite the increasingly reactionary political legislation aimed at queer people in the United States, and recently particularly at drag queens, there has been an increase in media representation of queer people in popular media (GLAAD, 2022). I orient queer as Sara Ahmed (2006) articulates, "to make things queer is to disturb the order of things" (p. 161), and David Halperin (1997), "queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (p. 62). Through these definitions I understand queer identities to be "more situated, fluid, and complicated" rather than "fixed, static, and uniform" (Berry, 2014, p. 92). This project is about how queer identities that are "fluid and complicated" are represented in popular media.

The competitive reality television series *RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR)* is one of the most popular mainstream sites for the representation of queer people and drag culture. *RPDR* is a

competition where participants are drag queens who compete in weekly episodic challenges and are eliminated each episode; the last queen standing is crowned as "America's Next Drag Superstar" and receives a cash prize which is $200,000 for the fifteenth season currently airing in 2023. *Drag Race* alumni now star in their own television series, films, and comedy specials across streaming platforms such as Netflix, Hulu, and Paramount Plus, and perform in theatrical productions on Broadway and the West End. Expanding their reach beyond entertainment, alumni of the series have taken up political and activist agendas these include: supporting gay marriage in 2014, speaking out against Donald Trump's rampant rhetoric of racism and transphobia during his election campaign and presidency, promoting the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, and, more recently, decrying the increase in gun violence in the United States. In response to the shooting at Club Q, a gay night club in Colorado Springs in November 2022 and the right-wing political discourse targeting drag queens, touring *Drag Race* alumni announced they would be increasing their security measures at their shows (Lavietes, 2022).

RuPaul in a 2016 interview claimed: "drag will never be mainstream" (Jung, 2016), and yet, one could argue, *Drag Race* has become "mainstream". *RPDR*'s success sparked the production of multiple spin-off series in the United States (e.g., *Untucked!*, *Drag U*, *All Stars*, *All Stars: Untucked!, Holislay Spectacular*, *Secret Celebrity Drag Race*, *Vegas Revue*) as well as an expansion of *Drag Race* into a global media project with franchises produced in fifteen countries as of 2023. Scholarship on *Drag Race* suggests the series represents "commercialized drag" (LeMaster & Tristano, 2021; Upadhyay, 2019), which to use Jose Esteban Munoz (1997) words is "a sanitized and desexualized queer subject for mass consumption" (p. 85). At its core, *Drag Race* is a consumer project that packages drag performance into a marketable presentation for distribution in mass media (LeMaster & Tristano, 2021; Lovelock, 2019). The consumerism and

commercializing of drag expands beyond *Drag Race* as alumni of the series produce, direct, write and star in their own scripted and reality television series, own bars and restaurants, have their own podcasts, and one *RPDR* alumni even owns a hotel. Scholarship on *Drag Race* suggests the series influences local drag cultures across the globe by promoting commercial drag as successful because it is monetized (Brahmacharimayum & King, 2022; Brennan & Gudelunas, 2022b; Matthews, 2022; Pepe, 2022; Sarfati & Santos, 2022). The expansion of *Drag Race* into global media is relatively recent with the first international franchise, *Drag Race Thailand* premiering in 2018. Since 2018, thirteen other international franchises have been released.

Given the recent global expansion of *Drag Race*, I am interested in how *Drag Race* represents itself as "global." I turn my attention to the first season (and currently the only season) of the series *RuPaul's Drag Race: UK vs The World* (*UKVTW*) consisting of six episodes which premiered in February 2022 on the BBC and was distributed internationally on *Drag Race*'s streaming platform WOW Presents Plus. The series is a competition to crown the "Queen of the Mother-Tucking World," as RuPaul says, she "wants a global superstar." I am curious about what makes a "Queen of the Mother-Tucking World" and who gets to be a global drag superstar. I turn to scholarship on reality television (RTV) which suggests that successful RTV participants are seen as authentic (Dubrofsky, 2011b). Rachel E. Dubrofsky (2022) tells us authenticity is a central part of RTV because the "participants who seem authentic are the ones we root for, presented as the most likable, the good characters, or ones we love to hate for their authentic badness" (p. 15). I expand more on the connections between RTV and authenticity shortly. Understanding *UKVTW* as a RTV series that represents queer identities (drag queens) and positions itself as representing global queer identities: I ask: How are drag queens, as queer identities, presented as authentic? How does the series represent global drag?

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Methodology

This project is about representation. I am interested in how *UKVTW* represents queer identities in a "global" context—"global" in quotations to suggest that the series can never represent anything global, but the series sees itself as doing so. Richard Dyer reminds us of the imperative to study representation in the introduction to his book *White* (1997):

> how anything is represented is the means by which we think and feel about that thing, by which we apprehend it. The study of representation is more limited than the study of reality and yet it is also the study of one of the prime means by which we have any knowledge of reality (p. xiii).

In other words, studying media representations can provide insight for how we make sense of the world around us. I use close critical textual analysis to understand how *UKVTW* represents queer identities. Textual analysis offers accessibility to the encoded ideologies of popular media texts (Baez, 2018; Turner, 2012). Rachel E. Dubrofsky (2022) tells us that textual analysis helps us "make sense of the micro to better understand the macro" (p. 8). As the representation of queer identities in popular media continues to increase, I analyze *UKVTW* as a "micro" example of queer representation.

Critical Interventions

This project builds on critical surveillance studies scholarship which suggests that RTV is a productive site of analysis for studying authenticity (Andrejevic, 2004; Dubrofsky, 2022; Enli, 2015). Critical surveillance scholars study how surveillance practices and technologies privilege some identities over others. This scholarship has given special attention to surveillance's intersections with racism (Browne, 2015; Moore, 2022; Monahan, 2022), feminism (Dubrofsky, 2011a; Dubrofsky & Magnet, 2015) Blackness (Browne, 2015; Moore, 2022), whiteness

(Dubrofsky, 2022; Hall, 2015), transnationalism (Heynen & van der Muelen, 2019), immigration (Fojas, 2021), xenophobia (Hall, 2015) and transgender identity (Beauchamp, 2019; Fischer, 2019). More specifically, this project builds on the burgeoning subfield of queer surveillance studies which seeks to make sense of "the power dynamic through which queerness is actualized as the necessary difference that adjudicates the bounds between normative and non-normative modes of embodiment, risk, and disposability" (Kafer & Grinberg, 2019). Put more simply, queer surveillance studies is interested in how queer identities exist under surveillance, resist surveillance, and how queerness is produced within a culture of surveillance. The flagship journal of surveillance studies, *Surveillance & Society* published a special issue in 2019 titled "Queer Surveillance." Editors Gary Kafer and Daniel Grinberg tie together the disparate history of queer surveillance studies across disciplines. My project builds on the new field of queer surveillance studies by examining popular culture as a site of inquiry—an area not yet studied in queer surveillance. While there has been a notable amount of scholarship about *Drag Race*, surveillance and authenticity have not been focal.

Central to RTV is the role of surveillance as it represents a culture of surveillance. David Lyon (2018) suggests that we live in a "culture of surveillance," because our everyday activities we participate in subject us to the power of surveillance. I use critical surveillance scholar Torin Monahan's (2022) definition of surveillance in the introduction to his book *Crisis Vision: Race and the Cultural Production of Surveillance*; because of his critical focus, he is worth quoting at length:

> Surveillance implies much more than just watching: it is focused observation infused with judgement and yoked to a purpose. Surveillance is a key mechanism of influencing, directing, and regulating the behaviors of individuals and groups in society. In short it is a

principle mode of governance deployed by institutions and individuals through both

technical and nontechnical means, to assert control over domains and the bodies within

them. (p. 6)

This is what RTV represents: a space where participants have their every move and sound

documented and then translated into a mediated representation through an editing process

without any agency in deciding how they are presented. My critical orientation, like Monahan's,

shifts my attention to how the surveillance culture of RTV privileges some identities over others.

Dubrofsky takes a similar critical approach to surveillance in her book *Authenticating Whiteness:*

Karens, Selfies, and Pop Stars (2022) where she argues we should see "surveillance as culture"

(p. 22). Dubrofsky suggests that analyzing "surveillance as culture" shifts the focus away from

how surveillance functions in culture to how culture is shaped by the constant presence of

surveillance. Central to both Dubrofsky (2022) and Monahan's (2022) concepts of surveillance is

how it takes up space in the everyday. This project understands RTV as part of and representing

a culture of surveillance. My focus is on how queer identities are presented as authentic in RTV,

as a media that reflects a culture of surveillance and can tell us about how we make sense of

queer authenticity.

Critical scholarship tell us that authenticity is arbitrary because we can never know if

anyone is being authentic (Andrejevic, 2004; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Dubrofsky, 2011a;

Dubrofsky, 2022; Johnson, 2003). Scholars who study authenticity analyze media to make sense

of how authenticity functions in society. Dubrofsky (2022) suggests that representations in media

are seen as authentic when "what one says and how one performs is presented as not rehearsed,

scripted, or expressive of underlying motives" (p. 5). The study of authenticity in media can tell

us about how authenticity is curated to make us believe what we are seeing is authentic.

Dubrofsky (2022) argues authenticity gains power by its taken-for-grantedness. She suggests that to understand how authenticity functions in media it "must be made strange" (p. 11) by calling attention to its mundaneness. E. Patrick Johnson (2003) suggests that if authenticity is left untouched it can privilege certain identities over others. This is an imperative that Dubrofsky takes up in *Authenticating Whiteness* (2022) as she calls attention to how authenticity is used as a strategy for whiteness to maintain its dominance. I also pick up this imperative in this project by analyzing how queer identities are presented as authentic in RTV, an idea not yet studied by critical scholars.

RTV is a useful site of analysis for scholars interested in authenticity because the surveillance of the cameras and audio equipment functions to verify RTV participants as authentic (Andrejevic, 2004; Dubrofsky, 2011a). The surveillance technologies of a RTV series (cameras, microphones) capture performances of participants which is then put through an editing and production process. Central to the production of a RTV episode is that it is edited from likely hundreds of hours of footage and audio that is boiled down to one-to-two-hour episode. As viewers we are seeing a mediated narrative not a reflection of reality, instead it is "reality-based" television. The term "reality-based" makes clear that what we see is based on disparate moments of reality that are caught on camera to produce a mediated narrative (Dubrofsky, 2006; 2011). Like authenticity I assume "reality" is contextually based and that we can never assess what "really" happened on a series, we can only analyze what is presented to us. The authenticity that is presented to us is what Gunn Enli (2015) describes as "mediated authenticity"—a curated version of what is actually recorded that is produced to appear as authentic.

Since *RPDR*'s first season aired in 2009 there has been extensive scholarship on *RPDR* (the US series) centering notions of celebrity (Andrews, 2020; Collie & Commane, 2020; O'Connell, 2020), *RPDR*'s success in social media (Brennan & Gudelunas, 2022b; Feldman & Hakim, 2020; Gudelunas, 2017; Gudelunas, 2022; Lyvie & Robinson, 2022; Mercer & Sarson, 2020), activism (Middlemost, 2019; Middlemost, 2020), political economy (Collins, 2017; Mehran, 2022; Vesey, 2017), and race and gender (Brennan, 2022; Ferreday, 2020; Goldmark, 2015; LeMaster & Tristano, 2021; McIntyre & Riggs, 2017; O'Meara, 2021; Strings & Bui, 2014; Upadhyay, 2019; Ward, 2020). While there has been scholarship on the U.S. franchise of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, there is no scholarship on the international franchises of the series since their inception in 2018. *Celebrity Studies* dedicated an entire issue (2020) to the celebrity of *RPDR*, but none of the articles looked at the international franchises. Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas have published two edited collections about *RuPaul's Drag Race* and drag cultures. The first, *RuPaul's Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture* (2017a) centers scholarship specifically analyzing *RPDR* and the second *Drag in the Global Digital Public Sphere: Queer Visibility, Online Discourse, and Political Change* (2022a) is about *Drag Race's* impacts and implications on local and global drag culture. Despite this large body of scholarship focusing on *Drag Race,* little attention has been given to how authenticity or nationality are presented on the series. In this project *RDPR* refers to the original American franchise, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, *UKVTW* refers to my site of analysis *RuPaul's Drag Race: UK vs The World*, and *Drag Race* refers to the series as a whole, that is, understanding that all the franchises are under the parent production company World of Wonder.

Building on scholarship on authenticity and surveillance, I analyze how *UKVTW* as a RTV series represents queer identities and nationality. My interests lie in how the series presents

participants as authentic and how the series presents itself as global. I extend ideas from RTV scholarship that argue participants are seen as authentic when they present a consistent self across the spaces of the RTV series suggesting that despite the surveillance of the RTV production, that this is how they behave in "real life" outside of the series (Dubrofsky, 2007; Dubrofsky, 2011a; Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014). I extend these ideas to include queer identities by asking: what if RTV participants are unable to "present a consistent unchanged self," because the premise of the series requires them to change? This is what is unique to *Drag Race*—the premise of the series relying on the participants transforming in and out of drag, not maintaining a "consistent self." I ask, who gets to be authentic on *UKVTW*? I give attention to how nationality is represented on *UKVTW* to understand which nationalities are presented as authentic and which are not and what that says about how *UKVTW* represents "global drag."

Queer Reality Television & *RuPaul's Drag Race*

GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), a non-profit organization formed in 1985, is dedicated to promoting the acceptance of the queer community. Since 2005, GLAAD has published an annual "Where We Are on TV Report" that charts the representation of queer characters across scripted broadcast television and streaming television (e.g., Netflix, Hulu, HBO Max, Disney+, Paramount Plus, Apple TV, Amazon, Peacock). In 2005 when the first report was published, less than 2% of all television characters were queer (gay, bisexual, pansexual, transgender, gender non-binary, asexual) identifying (GLAAD, 2006). During the 2021-2022 television season 11.9% of all television characters were queer identifying, a new record high (GLAAD, 2022). In addition to the increasing representation in scripted broadcast television, there has also been an increase in queer representation in reality television. However, most of these representations were and continue to be of cisgender gay men.

The first representation of a gay person in reality television was on PBS's *An American Family* (1973) which followed the Loud family and their out-gay son Lance. In 1994, during the AIDS Crisis in the United States, the third season of MTV's *The Real World* features Pedro Zamora, a gay Latino men living with AIDS. This same season of *The Real World* also had the first televised same-sex commitment ceremony between Zamora and his partner (Duke & Carter, 2013). In the early 2000's, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007) features a cast of cisgender gay men. Since the early 2000's, during the rise of reality television, series such as *American Idol*, *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, *The Amazing Race, America's Next Top Model* feature LGBTQ+ participants (Lovelock, 2019; Ogles, 2018). Today, queer reality television programs such as *We're Here*, *Queer Eye*, *Trixie Motel*, *Legendary*, and *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula* provide nuanced representations of gay, pansexual, nonbinary, and transgender people. These series feature narratives that move beyond gay and lesbian politics and encompass discussions about race, gender, age, ability, and religion. However, none of these series have gained as much critical acclaim and success as *RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR)*. The series has garnered twenty-seven Primetime Emmy Awards since 2016 among other accolades and nominations including, but not limited to, the Television Critics Choice Awards, the Hollywood Critic's Association Awards, and the MTV Movie & TV Awards.

RPDR is hosted by RuPaul Andre Charles, a black drag queen from Chicago who entered the cultural zeitgeist with his debut 1993 studio album, *Supermodel of the World*. RuPaul became the first drag queen to be part of a major cosmetics campaign; he raised money for the MAC AIDS Fund as the MAC Cosmetics spokesperson. He went on to host his own talk show from 1996 to 1998 on VH1, *The RuPaul Show,* and co-hosted a morning radio show with radio DJ and singer, Michelle Visage. However, RuPaul's eleven Primetime Emmy Awards are for his reality

television competition series, *RuPaul's Drag Race* (*RPDR*). The first season of *RPDR* aired on the LGBTQ television network Logo in 2009 and featured nine drag queen contestants competing in weekly episodic challenges where one queen is eliminated per episode. As noted earlier, the last queen standing is crowned "America's Next Drag Superstar" and receives a cash prize. To date, *RPDR* has aired fifteen seasons and produced multiple franchises, including *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars* (2012-present) where previously eliminated queens from different seasons return for a chance to win a cash prize and be inducted into the "Drag Race Hall of Fame," a title exclusive to queens who are competing for a second, third, or fourth time. Since January 2023, *RPDR* airs on the cable network MTV, after previously airing on VH-1 from 2017 to 2021, and the niche LGBTQ+ cable network, Logo from 2009 to 2016.

RuPaul's Drag Race: UK vs The World

The first season (and currently the only season) of *RuPaul's Drag Race: UK vs The World (UKVTW)* premiered in February 2022 and is the first franchise to bring "internationally acclaimed queens", as RuPaul calls them, from different international franchises to compete for the title: "Queen of the Mother-Tucking World." The series was filmed in March 2021 and the queens represent the countries where a *Drag Race* franchise had premiered at the time. *UKVTW* premiered in February 2022 on the BBC in the United Kingdom and internationally on World of Wonder's (the parent company of *Drag Race*) streaming service, WOW Presents Plus. *UKVTW* suggests it represents global drag through framing the contestants as "internationally acclaimed queens" and the winner being crowned the "Queen of the Mother-Tucking World".

Here, I briefly share details about the participants and judges. I purposefully describe their racial and national identities because in chapter two I focus my analysis on the how the participants racial and national identities are presented on the series. The cast features nine

queens who previously competed on either *RuPaul's Drag Race UK*, *Drag Race Holland*, *Drag Race Thailand*, *Canada's Drag Race*, *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars*. The nine queens on *UKVTW* represent five different nationalities (American, British, Canadian, Dutch, and Thai) and three different racialized identities (white, Black, and East Asian). The three queens from the United Kingdom—Blu Hydrangea, Baga Chipz, and Cheryl Hole—the two queens from Canada—Jimbo and Lemon—and the only queen from Holland—Janey Jacke—are white; Mo Heart from the United States is Black; Jujubee from the United States is Asian American; Pangina from Thailand is East Asian. RuPaul, Michelle Visage, and Graham Norton are the three main judges for the series. Michelle Visage is white and is a media personality from New Jersey, a former member of the girl group band "Seduction" and was RuPaul's cohost for *The RuPaul Show* (1996-1998). Graham Norton is white and is an Irish actor, author, and comedian most known for hosting his own comedic talk show on the BBC, *The Graham Norton Show* (2007-present). RuPaul and Michelle Visage are main judges for the US and UK franchises, and Graham Norton is a main judge for the regular UK franchise. Each episode of *UKVTW* features one or two celebrity guest judges from the United Kingdom.

The four social spaces of the series are the Main Stage, the Werk Room, the Confessional, and Untucked. The Main Stage is where the queens walk the catwalk for their runway presentations, receive critiques from the judges, compete in lip sync battles, and perform the challenges. The Werk Room is where the queens meet with RuPaul to learn about the challenge as well as prepare for the challenges and their runway presentations. This includes: learning lines for acting challenges, practicing choreography, sewing, writing song lyrics, and practicing their lip sync performances. The Confessional is where the queens comment in private directly to the camera providing insights about their thoughts and feelings as well as additional

commentary about what is going on at the moment. Lastly, Untucked is a segment that takes place after the judges' critiques where the contestants debrief with one another about the judges' remarks.

Each episode of *UKVTW* requires participants to complete a "Maxi Challenge" that test skills such as dancing, acting, singing, writing music, sewing, stand-up comedy, and celebrity impersonation. Following the Maxi Challenge in each episode there is a themed runway presentation where queens walk the runway on the Main Stage wearing outfits that reflect the theme. After the runway presentation, queens are critiqued by the judges. RuPaul decides on the top two queens of the week and the worst ones who face potential elimination, then all of the queens go to Untucked backstage. The top two queens of the week decide which of the bottom queens they want to eliminate. The queens facing elimination can meet with the top two queens individually to plead their case for why they should stay. Following Untucked the top two queens have a lip sync battle in front of the judges and other contestants where RuPaul decides which of the top two queens is the winner. The winner of the lip sync then reveals which of the queens they chose to be eliminated from the competition. Each episode a queen is eliminated, and in the final episode, the final four queens have a bracket-style lip sync battle to be crowned the winner of the series.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter One

In this chapter, I am interested in how participants are presented as authentic on *UKVTW*. I focus my analysis on the winner of *UKVTW*, Blu Hydrangea and how her authenticity and success are connected. I theorize "queer authenticity" as a means of extending the idea that to be seen as authentic in RTV participants must present a consistent self across the series. Queer

authenticity is a model for imagining how queer identities which are "more situated, fluid, and complicated than fixed, static, and uniform," (Berry, 2014, p. 92) can claim authenticity. This chapter argues that Blu Hydrangea performs a consistent queer authenticity across the series through her drag performance, sharing personal stories, and representing her country. I then argue that queens who fail to maintain queer authenticity are eliminated from the series.

Chapter Two

In this chapter, I turn my attention to how nationality is represented on *UKVTW*. I am attentive to the racial and national identities of the participants and give particular attention to Pangina the only participant from a non-Western country. I argue that *UKVTW* represents a "postracial imaginary" by turning attention away from race to nationality. I coin the term "strategic westernness" which is how Western cultural values and references maintain their dominance as normal without being called into question. Then, I argue that authenticity is a strategy of Westernness as it works to "other" Pangina from her fellow competitors because of her Thai identity and her excessively emotional exit from the series.

Chapter Three

In this chapter, I summarize the concepts and theories introduced throughout the project. I describe the future of the *Drag Race* series and how some of these ideas can be applicable to up and coming *Drag Race* media projects. I conclude by offering ideas for future scholarship.

CHAPTER ONE:

DISTURBING THE ORDER OF THINGS: QUEERING AUTHENTICITY

In this chapter I turn my attention to the notion of "authenticity" on *UKVTW*. I begin with the premise that authenticity is arbitrary and contextually situated, not essential to identity (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Enli, 2015; Johnson, 2003; Dubrofsky, 2011a; Dubrofsky, 2022; Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014). Johnson in his book, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (2003) warns of how authenticity, when left unexamined, can "foreclose possibilities" by privileging some identities over others (p. 3). I pick up on Johnson's call for us to examine authenticity and turn my attention to how queer identities are presented as authentic, an idea not yet studied by critical scholars. Scholarship on authenticity suggests that in surveillance settings, such as reality television (RTV), participants are seen as authentic when they perform a consistent self across disparate surveilled spaces (Andrejevic, 2004; Dubrofsky, 2011a). However, Berry (2014) suggests that queer identities are "more situated, fluid, and complicated" rather than "fixed, static, and uniform" (p. 92), or in this case "consistent." This chapter theorizes queer authenticity by building on Ahmed's (2006) notion of queer, where she specifies that "to make things queer is to disturb the order of things" (p. 161) and Halperin's (1997) articulation that "queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal," (p. 62) to articulate how queer identities that are fluid and complicated can be presented as authentic. To theorize queer authenticity in *UKVTW*, I ask: How are drag queens, as queer identities, presented as authentic on *UKVTW*?

Building on scholarship suggesting that authenticity is arbitrary, I turn to Enli's (2015) notion of "mediated authenticity"—that what is presented as authentic in a media product is a blend of purposefully capturing real moments on camera and curating them into a media product. What I analyze in this chapter is a mediated authenticity because we can never know if these participants are being authentic—I can only analyze how the series presents them as authentic. Dubrofsky (2022) suggests that surveillance in popular media, in this case RTV, functions to produce what Michel Foucault (1995) calls the "truth effect," that is, what the cameras capture actually happened (regardless of post-production editing) and "works in the service of giving seeming insight into the inner self—the authentic core" (Dubrofsky, 2022, p. 16).

Drag Race complicates this notion of an "authentic core" because the participants on *Drag Race* are only identified by their drag names (the names of their drag personas), not their legal names (there is one example on *UKVTW* and this will be described later). For example, on *UKVTW* one of the British participants, Cheryl Hole is only referred to on the series as Cheryl or Cheryl Hole not by her legal name Luke. This implies that the self presented on *Drag Race* is a reflection of who the drag persona is, not who they are outside of drag. I want to note that *Drag Race* participants do not have agency in what is presented on the final edited version of the series—the workers on the series, such as the editors and producers—make those decisions. Participants are aware, however, when they sign up to be on the series, that they will be expected to perform in drag and will be identified solely by their drag name.

Like other reality-based programming, *Drag Race* uses the apparatus of surveillance to verify the authenticity of participants. Dubrofsky (2011b) argues that for RTV participants to be seen as authentic they need to show "that they are authentically, on camera, the same person they are (ostensibly) in their own lives" (p. 117). In other words, to be seen as authentic RTV

participants are presented in a manner that suggests this is who they are outside of the series. Dubrofsky and Ryalls (2014) describe this performance as performing-not-performing— "appearing to behave in a manner that does not involve performing, seeming to be one's true self despite being under surveillance" (Dubrofsky, 2018, p. 167). Elsewhere, Dubrofsky (2007) theorizes the "therapeutics of the self," which she describes as "the process of affirming a consistent (unchanged) self across disparate social spaces, verified by surveillance" (p. 266). The "therapeutics of the self" extends therapeutic discourses about self-improvement, by suggesting RTV participants can have a therapeutic experience by displaying a consistent self across disparate social spaces. Displaying a consistent self in different contexts of an RTV series suggests that the self presented is the participant's "authentic" self. However, it is not enough to appear as a consistent self to verify authenticity, participants must also appear as though they are not being surveilled, that is, they also perform-not-perform to appear authentic. Central to this scholarship on authenticity is the body of participants because what is being analyzed is Enli's notion of mediated authenticity—that all there is to analyze is what is physically presented to us on the screen, in this case the bodies of participants. Dubrofsky (2011b) reminds us that authenticity in surveillance environments, like RTV, "affixes displays of authenticity to a body" (p. 117). What we see are visual representations captured by the cameras and we draw conclusions about who is appearing authentic by how RTV participants are represented. Drawing connections across scholarship on authenticity in RTV, I conclude that by pairing the "therapeutics of the self" with "performing-not-performing," current scholarship suggests an authentic self performs-not-performs a consistent physical self across the disparate spaces of RTV.

Building on this scholarship about authenticity in RTV, this chapter argues *Drag Race* presents a queer authenticity in two ways. The first queers the "therapeutics of the self" (Dubrofsky, 2007) and the notion that "authenticity is affixed to a body" (Dubrofsky, 2011b) by suggesting that *Drag Race* participants are seen as authentic if they present a consistent *sense of self* across the disparate presentations of the self while in and out of drag. This shifts authenticity away from being "affixed to a body," and suggests that RTV participants are still seen as authentic despite the inconsistent presentation of a physical self, in the case of *Drag Race*, characterized by the literal physical change of getting in and out of drag on the series. The second part of queer authenticity challenges the notion of "performing-not-performing," (Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014). While *Drag Race* participants do perform-not-perform in certain spaces on the series they also are seen intentionally performing for the camera as they participate in the challenges on the series. Participants who are seen as authentic present a consistent sense of self while both performing-not-performing and what I call performing-performing—appearing as though one is intentionally performing while under surveillance. I define queer authenticity as presenting a consistent sense of self across disparate presentations of the self while performing-not-performing and performing-performing. As I noted earlier queer identities are "more situated, fluid, and complicated," (Berry, 2014, p. 92). *Drag Race*'s representation of queer identities offers an opportunity to theorize "queer authenticity" to make sense of how queer identities are presented as authentic in surveillance settings. The ideas in this chapter can be applicable to any season of *Drag Race* because the format and premise of the series is common across the franchises. I focus my analysis on *UKVTW* because the ideas theorized here lay the foundation for chapter two which relies on the specificity of *UKVTW* as the first franchise of *Drag Race* to suggest it represents "global drag."

Queering Authenticity on the Body

On *UKVTW* it is the participants manipulation of their bodies that creates the illusion of the drag persona. The premise of the series is participants transforming into their drag persona's and participating in challenges that gauge their success in acting, dancing, singing, writing song lyrics, impersonating celebrities, doing make-up, designing, and constructing garments, walking a runway, and lip synching. While all the *UKVTW* participants have different aesthetics and styles of drag all transformations include make-up, wigs, and costumes; and most, involve prosthetic breasts, foam padding to give the illusion of larger hips, and corsets to create and hour-glass like figure. Judith Butler's (1990) writings on gender performativity and drag are useful here to make sense of how central the body is in drag performance. Taking a page from Butler about gender's performativity:

> Gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing... There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results. (p. 34)

In other words, there is no stable gender identity, but gender is constituted through its repetitive performance in the everyday. The transformation into the hyper-feminine drag persona reminds us of the performative nature of drag, that is, like gender, drag is "always a doing." Butler (1990) also writes, "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency" (p. 187). Imitation and contingency are inherent to the nature of drag because of how it is put on to the body—putting on makeup, costumes, wigs, prosthetics—as well as how drag can be taken off the body—removing the make-up, costumes, wigs. The putting

on and taking off of drag is central to the narrative of *UKVTW* and produces different physical representations of the self on the series that are all referred to by the name of the drag persona.

I categorize the presentations of the self on *UKVTW* into a few categories: the in-drag self, the out-of-drag self, and the in-between-drag self. The in-drag self is when queens are dressed in drag performing as their drag persona (as opposed to a character, described shortly), the in-drag self is present on the Main Stage, in some of the Maxi challenges, and in Untucked. The out-of-drag-self is when the queens are in their everyday clothes and are presented as who they are in their lives outside of being a drag queen. The out-of-drag self is always in the Confessional, usually in the Werk Room, and occasionally on the Main Stage during rehearsals. There are multiple spaces on the series where the lines between the in-drag-self and out-of-drag-self are blurred. I describe the self present in these instances as the "in-between-drag self"— where the queens' presentations of themselves in-drag and out-of-drag blend together. The in-between-drag self is present when the queens reference their lives outside of the series, are getting ready in the Werk Room, or when they take on a different caricature for a challenge such as impersonating a celebrity or playing a character in a scripted theater or acting challenge. These will each be used throughout this chapter to clarify how the participants are being presented.

The performative nature of drag requires a rethinking of authenticity that suggests it is connected to a static representation of the body. *UKVTW* presents a queer authenticity that does not inscribe authenticity on to a static presentation of the self, which to Ahmed's words (2006) "disturbs the order of things," in this case UKVTW disturbs understandings of authenticity. Queer authenticity moves beyond the notion of a "consistent physical self," and suggests that RTV participants can be presented as authentic across various presentations of the self by

presenting a consistent sense of self, in *UKVTW* this is the in-drag self, the out-of-drag self, and the in-between-drag self. The best way to illustrate how queer authenticity is present on *UKVTW* is to analyze the in-between-drag self.

The in-between-drag-self is where the queens do the most work to maintain a stable sense of identity and is where queer authenticity comes to the forefront on *UKVTW*. Across the multiple presentations of the self the queens are referred to solely by the name of their drag persona on *UKVTW*. However, as I noted earlier, there is an instance on the series where one of the queens, Jujubee, refers to her life outside of the series by using her legal name—this is that instance. In the finale episode, the last episode of the season, the remaining four queens walk the runway for the last time and line up on stage to receive their final critiques from the judges about their time on the series. After each of the judges provide their remarks to each of the queens, RuPaul asks them individually "Why do you think the world needs drag now, more than ever?" While each of the four queens reference their time on the series and their lives outside of the series, Jujubee specifically references her younger self by her legal name, Airline:

> As a queer person, as a drag queen, we have the ability because of you, Ru, to shine light into even the most darkest places, Airline, that little kid, had nobody to look up to, but when he saw you Mama, he was like, "Oh my gosh, ornamental, you know? I want to do that" and its the full circle moment, I'm here, and I think that's why the world needs drag more now because its love.

Jujubee referring to her younger self by her legal name, Airline, makes this a unique instance of the in-between-drag self because Jujubee frames Airline as a someone separate from herself. Jujubee reminds us of drag's performative nature in this instance because Jujubee, the drag persona, is someone that Airline has become.

Jujubee's unique instance on the series referring to her legal name brings to the forefront drag's performativity on the series that is implied, but rarely explicit. In Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) she quotes anthropologist Esther Newton's work on drag queens which is worth quoting here at length:

> At its most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says, "appearance is an illusion." Drag says [Newton's curious personification] "my 'outside' appearance is feminine, but my essence 'inside' [the body] is masculine." At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; "my appearance 'outside' [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence 'inside' [myself] is feminine. (Newton, 1972, p. 103 quoted in Butler, 1990, p.186).

In other words, Newton suggests that drag queens are revealing some inner "essence" when they get into drag. This essence that drag reveals is what Foucault (1995) would refer to as the soul which he claims is not an illusion, but "exists, it has a reality, it is produced permanently around, on, within, the body" (p. 29). Butler builds on Newton and Foucault's ideas and suggests that the performance of gender is producing the inner core on to the body. In the case of drag, the use of wigs, makeup, costumes, and prosthetics are used to reveal the inner essence. Jujubee mentioning her legal name on stage reminds us that Jujubee is the drag persona—something that has been put on, a performance—and separate from who she is outside of being a drag queen, Airline.

Jujubee's scene on the Main Stage in the finale illustrates how the in-between-drag self is present on *UKVTW* because Jujubee is in drag on the Main Stage while sharing a story using her legal name that reminds us that the in-drag self is a persona that is not a singular self. Queer authenticity is present in this scene because she is presented as authentic despite her disrupting

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the notion of a "consistent self," Jujubee reminds us that her identity is not static, but complicated and fluid because he is both Airline and Jujubee on the Main Stage.

Performing Queer Authenticity

In RTV being seen as authentic is usually twinned with being successful on the series (Dubrofsky, 2011b). Here, I argue that queer authenticity is present while participants are both performing-performing and performing-not-performing while under surveillance. Dubrofsky and Ryalls (2014) describe performing-not-performing as appearing to seem as though one is not performing under surveillance—suggesting that because RTV participants are aware they are being surveilled they are always performing to appear as though they are unaware they are being surveilled. I coin the term performing-performing, that is, appearing to intentionally perform under surveillance. This is a phenomenon common to several types of competitive RTV series where the premise of the series is to gauge a skill such as singing (*American Idol*, *The Voice*), dancing (*So You Think You Can Dance*), or comedy (*Last Comic Standing*), and in this case drag performance. However, performing-performing is critical for understanding authenticity on *Drag Race* because to be successful on the series participants should appear authentic while performing-performing. In this section, I analyze the winner of *UKVTW* Blu Hydrangea and argue that she is presented as authentic throughout the series while performing-performing and performing-not-performing.

There are two parts to being a successful *Drag Race* contestant on the series. The first is being a good drag queen by succeeding in the challenges which test queens' abilities to act, dance, sing, lip sync, write jokes, impersonate celebrities, do make-up, design fashion, and walk a runway, this is performing-performing. The second part of being a successful *Drag Race* contestant is being a good RTV participant by performing-not-performing to seem authentic

across the social spaces of the series through disclosing narratives of shame, trauma, self-doubt, but also self-growth and personal transformation. Sharing narratives of personal trauma and self-doubt is central to affirming contestants' authenticity on *UKVTW*, this will be outlined in more detail shortly. This is not particularly unique to *Drag Race* as other reality television shows require participants to participate in challenges while also performing to appear authentic (e.g., *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, *American Idol, So You Think You Can Dance*). However, unique to *Drag Race* is doing all of this while performing as a drag persona. Queer authenticity suggests that RTV participants are presented as authentic by presenting a consistent sense of self that is not connected to the body; because authenticity is not affixed to the body queer authenticity can be presented while both performing-performing and performing-not-performing.

Be a Good Drag Queen: Performing-Performing on UKVTW

Throughout *UKVTW* Blu Hydrangea is presented as a successful drag queen because she ranks either in the top or safe (middle of the pack—neither the best nor the worst) five out of the six episodes. Queer authenticity in the challenges is measured by the queens' ability to maintain a consistent sense of identity while performing-performing. In episode four Blu Hydrangea is one of the top two queens of the week and the main challenge is Snatch Game—a challenge featured on every season of *Drag Race* across all franchises since the second season of *RPDR* (2010). In this challenge queens impersonate a celebrity and answer questions for comedic effect in a game show-like set up reminiscent of the US game show *The Match Game* (1962-1969). In the Snatch Game, RuPaul asks special celebrity guests questions (real celebrities making a guest appearance on the series), which are typically crude, hyperbolic, and rely on sarcasm and irony. The drag queen contestants, who are impersonating other celebrities, try to guess what the actual

celebrity guests wrote down. The queens are expected to practice comedic timing, celebrity impersonation, and be able to improvise jokes and engage in humorous banter with one another and RuPaul. The accuracy of the answers to the questions RuPaul asks is irrelevant, as the gauge for success in the challenge is garnering laughs from the judges.

Snatch Game is a challenge where the in-between-drag-self is present as queens are expected to maintain some sense of their drag persona while impersonating another caricature. While only required to impersonate a single celebrity during Snatch Game, Blu Hydrangea takes on the additional challenge of performing two characters during the game: Mike Myers as Austin Powers and Dr. Evil from the *Austin Powers* film franchise. RuPaul, Michelle Visage, and special celebrity guest, British television personality Katie Price, along with the other contestants laugh at Blu's performance, showing that Blu succeeds at all the tasks: comedic timing, improvisation, and impersonation. During the critiques, the judges specifically note that Blu's Snatch Game performance was particularly impressive because of her ability to maintain her sense of self while being in-drag and playing another character. Blu's authenticity is not fixated on her presentation of Blu Hydrangea, she is still able to be seen as authentic while performing as Mike Myers. RuPaul tells Blu: "You really did make it your own, it was fun playing with you and that's really what Snatch Game is all about." Blu's success is attributed to her ability to "make it [her] own," suggesting a successful Snatch Game is when queens succeed at impersonation while maintain a sense of self. In Snatch Game, Blu's queer authenticity is presented because she maintains a sense of self while performing the in-between-drag-self while performing-performing in Snatch Game.

Be an Open Book: Performing-Not-Performing on UKVTW

The ideal *Drag Race* contestant shares stories of personal growth through disclosing moments and feelings of personal trauma, shame, and self-doubt from experiences on the series and from outside of the series. Media studies scholarship suggests the display of personal trauma is a core aspect of reality television (Biressi & Nunn, 2005; Ouellette & Hay, 2008). *Drag Race* is no exception. Debra Ferreday (2020) in her article about the "angry black woman" trope on *Drag Race* argues "[RuPaul] plays a policing role, providing closure for contestants who demonstrate the ability to appropriately perform and commodify their trauma, while expelling those who fail do so" (p. 46). Ferreday suggests the successful *Drag Race* contestant is able to have their personal shame and trauma presented on the series and will perform as having received closure because of their time on the series. These are instances where performing-not-performing occur as participants are seen seemingly choosing to disclose intimate moments from their personal lives as though they are not being watched. However, turning back to what Dubrofsky (2022) tells us about surveillance in popular media, she suggests that the role of surveillance "works in the service of giving seeming insight into the inner self—the authentic core" (p. 16). Blu Hydrangea reveals her "authentic core" while sharing a story about her life off the series this is an instance of performing-not-performing.

In episode two of *UKVTW*, Blu discloses her experience with gender dysphoria with fellow participants, Cheryl Hole and Jujubee. During this scene, the queens are out-of-drag in the Werk Room preparing for the main challenge. Blu describes how after competing on the first season of *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* she was doing so many performances in drag as Blu Hydrangea that she began to experience gender dysphoria. Blu tells Cheryl and Jujubee that becoming Blu Hydrangea was the only time she felt confident in her body. In this moment, Blu

while out-of-drag on *UKVTW* separates herself from her life off the series as she refers to Blu as someone, she "turned into." Similar to Jujubee's experience analyzed above, Blu Hydrangea presents us with an instance of queer authenticity where she performs the in-between-drag-self while referencing her life outside of the series. In this scene, the in-between-drag self is characterized by Blu drawing connections from her life outside of the series and her experiences on the series. Blu discloses this information to the camera and she is presented as authentic for doing so because she has revealed some "authentic core." Here, queer authenticity is presented a consistent identity through the in-between-drag-self connecting a participant's life off the series with their experiences on the series.

During this scene with Jujubee and Cheryl there is a crosscut confessional where Blu speaks directly to the camera saying: "I found drag, and the only thing that makes me happy is being this woman, and that then led me to being confused about my gender." During the confessional, Blu further describes that during this part of her recent past she thought she might be a transwoman and had the support from her partner in thinking about transitioning. In the confessional directly to the camera Blu shares: "No one else knows about this. I was completely keeping it secret." As Jujubee and Cheryl move in closer to Blu and hold her hand, we are invited through the camera into this intimate moment of confession from Blu. This scene is characterized as a confession in part because she is talking directly to us in the confessional, but also because she is seen as voluntarily disclosing information to Cheryl and Jujube. Foucault (1990) writes that confession requires an "other" to confess to. Dubrofsky (2007) reframes Foucault's ideas of confession to articulate how surveillance works as an apparatus to confess the self. Specifically in the context of RTV, Dubrofsky (2007) writes that "all that is surveilled by the cameras can be used to confess the self" (p. 272). While RTV participants can confess to the

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cameras, what is presented as a confessed self is determined in the editing and production process. Building on Foucault who writes that the person who confesses changes: "it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrong, liberates him, and promises him salvation" (p. 62), Dubrofsky (2007) suggests that confessing to the cameras can become a catalyst for self-growth in RTV settings. Following Blu telling us she had the support of her partner to come out as trans, we see her tell Cheryl and Jujubee that she has become more educated about gender and that she describes herself as somewhere "in-between" male and female.

Blu is presented as liberated from her secret about her gender identity after this confession because she is presented as more educated about gender and has a better sense of who she is as a person and as a drag queen. We do not know if the scene in the Werk Room or Blu's confessionals were recorded first. However, the order in which they are presented to us on screen is constructed to represent Blu as experiencing self-growth. It is through the editing and production process that we come to know Blu Hydrangea as someone who has experienced self-growth through the act of confession on the series. Turning back to Enli's (2015) notion of mediated authenticity—all that is recorded actually happened, but what is presented to us is a curated media product—we understand Blu's presentation of authenticity is a construed by the production process. Like Ferreday (2020) suggests, successful *Drag Race* participants are seen sharing a narrative of self-out or personal trauma and because of their time on the series they experience self-growth. Blu's queer authenticity is not fixed to her body in this scene, even though we only see her out-of-drag self, because she is drawing connections between her drag persona, the out-of-drag self presented on the series, and her life off the series. Here, queer authenticity is presented by Blu connecting her experience with gender dysphoria as it relates to

the multiple presentations of her self while performing-not-performing by sharing a story of personal growth.

Failing at Queer Authenticity

So far I have described how queer authenticity on *UKVTW* is presented by the participants presenting a consistent sense of self that is not attached to the body; therefore, through the lens of queer authenticity the drag queen participants are able to appear as authentic across the series whether in-drag or out-of-drag. In this last section, I describe how queens who fail to present queer authenticity on the series are seen as inauthentic and eventually eliminated. I turn my attention to Canadian drag queen, Jimbo who was one of the top ranking queens in episodes one and two. However, in episode three Jimbo fails to maintain her queer authenticity which results in her elimination at the end of the episode.

In episodes one and two of *UKVTW*, Jimbo gains success for claiming queer authenticity and maintaining it across the social spaces of *UKVTW*. During a conversation amongst the queens in the Werk Room while getting ready for the Main Challenge in episode one, Jimbo describes herself as a clown. In episode one the challenge is to present a talent show act showcasing each queen's individual talents. Jimbo performs a comedy act, she describes as clowning. Jimbo wears a head-to-toe white latex body suit with black eye and lip makeup and a protruding belly where she then "births" lunch meat and throws it on herself and at RuPaul on the judging panel. The performance is seen as a success throughout as the judges and fellow contestants initially look confused but begin to laugh throughout the performance. British drag queen and fellow contestant Cheryl Hole remarks in a crosscut confessional, "What is going on?" and Baga Chipz whispers to Cheryl from the side stage "I thought I was mad," all while laughing. The performance garners praise from the judges because of Jimbo's comedic flair and

originality. Graham Norton tells Jimbo that he enjoys her "kind of drag." Special guest judge

Melanie C. from the Spice Girls, shares her love for Jimbo's act by telling her it is

"outstandingly weird." Jimbo receives positive feedback from each of the judges and RuPaul

declares Jimo has one of the top two queens of the episode. During the Untucked, Jimbo shares

"it is my dream to clown for Ru." Here, Jimbo presents queer authenticity by describing herself

as a clown and acting as such while performing-performing on the Main Stage in-drag and

performing-not-performing in the Werk Room out-of-drag and in Untucked while in-drag.

Jimbo's consistent sense of self across the different presentations of the self in drag and out of

drag presents her as authentic.

In episode three Jimbo fails to maintain her queer authenticity through not performing a

consistent identity on *UKVTW* and is placed in the bottom and eventually eliminated at the end

of the episode. As mentioned earlier there are challenges on *UKVTW* which require the queens to

take on a caricature, like impersonating a celebrity in Snatch Game or in this case on episode

three, performing in a "Rusical" (branded spoof of a musical based on RuPaul's name). The

Rusical is a challenge where the in-between-drag-self is present because the participants must

maintain some sense of self while playing a character—like in Snatch Game described earlier.

The queens are given a parody of a classic musical theater character to perform in a scripted and

choreographed "Rusical." Jimbo is given the part of Dodo, a parody of the dog Toto from *The*

Wizard of Oz. The queens are challenged to learn choreography, a scripted lip sync, and act as a

character with props on stage. After the Rusical, the queens are critiqued by the judges and

Jimbo is placed in the bottom. Jimbo is commended by the judges for succeeding at the

choreography, but RuPaul says, "What we wanted to see was half you, half the [choreography],

that's why I say you learn it and then throw it out, that's what the challenge is about." Unlike Blu

Hydrangea who succeeded in Snatch Game because she was able to maintain a sense of self while impersonating a celebrity, Jimbo fails at the Rusical because she loses her sense of self while performing as Dodo. Here, Jimbo fails at presenting a consistent sense of self while performing-performing in the Rusical. She succeeds at performing-performing in the Rusical as RuPaul commends her on her choreography it is understood that she did the challenge well, but her inability to be Jimbo while performing as Dodo renders the performance as inauthentic. Jimbo's inauthentic performance results in Jimbo receiving negative critiques, placing in the bottom for the episode, and ultimately in her elimination. As I noted prior the successful RTV participants is one that is seen as authentic across a RTV series, despite Jimbo's success performing queer authenticity in episodes one and two, her inauthentic performance in episode three resulted in her not being the ideal *UKVTW* contestant. The purpose of outlining Jimbo's shortcomings is to articulate the fragility of queer authenticity on *UKVTW*.

"To Infinity and Beyond?": Concluding Thoughts on Queer Authenticity

The queer authenticity I theorize in this chapter provides a lens to articulate how queer bodies that are, to use Berry's (2014) words "situated, fluid, and complicated," (p. 92) can be seen as authentic in surveillance settings. I define queer authenticity as presenting a consistent sense of self across disparate presentations of the self while performing-not-performing and performing-performing. Current scholarship about performing authenticity in surveillance settings suggests there must be a consistent physical self (Dubrofsky, 2007; Dubrofsky 2011b) that appears to be performing-not-performing (Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014). This chapter extends this scholarship by theorizing queer authenticity as a lens to make sense of identities, such as drag queens who are not always represented by a consistent identity affixed to the body. However, I want to suggest that the queer authenticity I have described here is only one of many

potential queer authenticities in popular media. Butler (1993) in her article "Critically Queer" reminds us about queer's radical potential. She writes

> Queer will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes (Butler, 1993, p. 173).

In other words, queer is always evolving to be current with the political climate, it is always working against the normative. Following Butler's logic there may be infinite queer authenticities as queer is always creating, recreating, and destroying itself. Turning back to Johnson's (2003) suggestion that while authenticity is arbitrary if left unexamined it can lead to privileging some identities over others: I encourage us to always ask what is queer authenticity? What or who is working against the status quo to prove authenticity? In the next chapter, I build on these ideas by suggesting *UKVTW* uses queer authenticity as a way to privilege some drag identities over others.

CHAPTER TWO:

"ARE YOU READY FOR THAI TEA?": STRATEGIC WESTERNNESS ON *UKVTW*

In this chapter I argue the "global" drag identity that *UKVTW* suggests it represents is inherently white because it privileges Western drag performers—as I note in the Introduction, "global" is in quotations to suggest that the series can never represent anything global, but the series sees itself as doing so. In episode one, RuPaul claims *UKVTW* is the "greatest drag show on Earth" and says she is searching for a "global superstar". The winner is crowned "Queen of the Mother-Tucking World" and when a queen is eliminated RuPaul tells them they "will always be a global phenomenon." Through this phrasing RuPaul suggests that the participants' time on the series makes them representatives of global drag, implying how the series sees itself: as having a global impact and important in defining global drag. I argue the series represents what Dubrofsky and Ryalls (2014) describe as a postracial ethos, that is, how "race is configured as irrelevant, while at the same time whiteness is centered" (p. 400). Race is presented as irrelevant on the series, instead *UKVTW* centers the participants nationalities as the queens represent their home countries while competing to be RuPaul's "global superstar." RTV scholarship, to date, has yet to address how RTV series with casts of participants from multiple countries represent nationality, in part because *UKVTW* represents one of the first series to feature a cast of international participants and suggest the winner represents the world. Radhika Parameswaran's (2004) scholarship on Miss Universe pageants is worth noting because of the multiple nationalities represented in Miss Universe pageants, as well as Diana Leon-Boys' (2023) and Angharad Valdivia's (2020) scholarship about multi-national representations of Latinidad;

however, my focus is on how authenticity is used to privilege certain national identities—something that *UKVTW* as an RTV series is a productive site for analyzing. I am attentive to the national identities on *UKVTW* and ask: If *UKVTW* suggests it represents global drag, then what is *UKVTW*'s brand of global drag? Who gets to represent global drag?

Little attention has been given to how *Drag Race* has branded itself as "global" in recent years with the expansion of the series into fourteen different international franchises. The international franchises are filmed and produced in their respective countries. The international series are hosted by drag queens from their home countries, except for the two international series hosted by RuPaul (*Drag Race UK* and *Drag Race Down Under*). Central to the storyline in each season of *Drag Race* is finding the country's "Next Drag Superstar." Brennan and Gudelunas in the introduction to their edited collection, *Drag in the Global Digital Public Sphere* (2022b), suggest *Drag Race* has created a "digital global drag space", defined by *Drag Race*'s international production, distribution, and social media presence. Gudelunas (2022) suggests the global circulation of the US version of *Drag Race* prior to *Drag Race*'s international distribution demonstrated what kind of drag was worthy of being crowned a "Drag Superstar." Brennan and Gudelunas's contributors describe how local drag cultures in Namibia (Matthews, 2022), Brazil (Pepe, 2022; Sarfati & dos Santos, 2022), and India (Brahmacharimayum & King, 2022) have been influenced by *Drag Race* but also how local drag performers are resisting and subverting the "Western drag practices" of *Drag Race* (Brahmacharimayum & King, 2022, p. 235). While this scholarship has noted how *Drag Race* influences local drag cultures across the globe, *UKVTW* is a series that warrants attention because it is *Drag Race*'s first direct and explicit effort to define a global drag identity. I argue the kind of "global drag" *UKVTW* presents

privileges Western drag performers by articulating Pangina Heals, the only drag queen from a non-western country on the series, as "the Other."

Drawing on postcolonial scholarship, I understand "the Other" as an ideological construct, that frames the "East/South/colonized" as inferior to the dominant "West/North/colonized" (Alahmed, 2020, p. 408). I use Eiki Furumizo's (2005) articulation of "the Other" which suggests "the Other" is formed in opposition to how the dominant view themselves as superior and is influenced by history, culture, and ideology. Furthermore, Furumizo suggest that this conception of "the Other" is a relational construct situated in relation to the Self. The Other is always seen as subordinate to the Self because we will naturally view ourselves as superior. In the case of *UKVTW*, the Western countries (United States, Canada, The Netherlands, United Kingdom) are presented as the normative and the only non-Western country (Thailand) is the "Other." I opt to use the term non-Western in lieu of other popular terms such as the Global South, the East, or Asian because each of these terms have their own histories that are not applicable in terms of discussing how Pangina is represented on *UKVTW*. My argument in this chapter is about how she is "othered" in relation to the West, not how she represents, or if she even represents Asia, the East, or the Global South.

This chapter argues that *UKVTW* represents a postracial imaginary—a fantasized space that suggests race is a historical issue and insignificant to a contemporary reality that centers whiteness. Under the guise of postracism, *UKVTW* becomes symptomatic of what I call "strategic westernness"—how Western cultural norms maintain their dominance as the normative—which I argue is a strategy of whiteness. I then suggest that *UKVTW* uses authenticity as a strategy of Westernness to mark Pangina as "the Other" by devaluing her authenticity because of her emotionally excessive exit during her elimination in episode four. As

I theorized in chapter one, the authenticity present on *UKVTW* is a queer authenticity—when a participant shows a consistent identity across the multiple social spaces of the series that is not connected to a static representation of the body. I analyze how Pangina's authenticity is presented on the series from when she is introduced in episode one to her elimination episode four.

UKVTW's Postracial Imaginary

Postracism is an ideology that, as Ralina Joseph (2009) suggests, "assumes the civil right movement effectively eradicated racism to the extent that not only does racism no longer exist, but race itself no longer matters" (p. 239). Brennan and Gudelunas (2022b) describe *Drag Race* as having an "LGBTQ-egalitarian ethos" that can be seen by the fact that eight of the fourteen winners of *RPDR* (US series) are queens of color. Most seasons, if not all, feature narratives about how participants of color overcome racism prior to being on the series. Kent Ono (2013) suggests that "narrative representations of race indirectly (and perhaps inadvertently) juxtapose a mature and modern postracial present against the no longer relevant—and backward and archaic—racial past" (p. 301). Similarly, Jonathan Rossing (2012) describes postracism as "a belief that positions race as an irrelevant relic of the past with no viable place in contemporary thought" (p. 45). In her article about the stereotype of the angry Black woman on *Drag Race*, Ferreday (2020) argues *Drag Race* frames narratives of racism on the series as something from the past and suggests *Drag Race* "gestures to a postracial future" (p. 471). Building on this scholarship, I argue *UKVTW* represents a postracial imaginary—a fantasized space that suggests race is a historical issue and insignificant to a contemporary reality that centers whiteness. I intentionally use "fantasized" to reinforce Ono's (2010) claim that postracism is a "fantasy that racism no longer exists" (p. 227) and that it is simply that—a fantasy.

The goal of *UKVTW* is for RuPaul to "crown a global superstar" as the participants

represent their home countries on the series. The participants on *UKVTW* represent five different

nationalities and three different racial identities. The two queens representing the United States

are Mo Heart and Jujubee. Mo Heart is Black and Jujubee is East Asian American (Laotian

specifically). The only queen representing *Drag Race Thailand* is Pangina Heals, who is East

Asian (Thai). The six remaining queens are from the United Kingdom, Canada, and The

Netherlands and are all white. The judges and participants do not discuss race, but they do

discuss national identities. This is particularly evident in how the series presents Mo Heart and

Jujubee as queens of color from the United States. Jujubee's racialization as an Asian American

is not referenced or spoken about during the entirety of the series. However, Mo Heart's

Blackness is brought up in a few disparate moments throughout the series. Given the series focus

on national identity, I extend Ferreday's (2020) claim that *Drag Race* "gestures to a postracial

future" (p. 471) and I argue *UKVTW* represents a postracial future, or as I have described prior, a

postracial imaginary—a fantasized space that suggests race is a historical issue and insignificant

to a contemporary reality that centers whiteness.

I analyze two moments where Mo Heart brings up her Blackness, both of which are in

episode five, to articulate how *UKVTW* represents a postracial imaginary. In episode five the

remaining five queens, from the United States, the United Kingdom, and The Netherlands, are

tasked with writing lyrics for a verse on RuPaul's song, "Living My Life in London" as part of

their challenge for the episode. RuPaul tells them the song lyrics need to be about their

relationship to their hometown. The first of the moments is while the queens are in the

WerkRoom writing their lyrics and sharing ideas with one another. Mo describes that she feels

like a "nomad" because she's travelled so much in recent years since she first appeared on the

tenth season of *RPDR* in 2018. After listing some international cities she visited she says "as a little broke Black boy, you never thought, you know, outside of mission trips for church, thank you drag." Without explicitly saying it, Mo is suggesting that "a little broke Black boy" would never have had the opportunity to travel the world if it was not for drag. She attributes "drag," as the reason for her class mobility. Given the fame and notoriety that the queens receive after being on the show, Mo is implying that it is the fact she was on *Drag Race* that has provided her the economic means to travel internationally in recent years. In this instance, beyond "gesturing toward a postracial future" (Ferreday, 2020, p. 471) *UKVTW* represents a space where Mo has overcome her past characterized by her race because of her time on *Drag Race* and is now a "global phenomenon" on *UKVTW*.

The second of these moments where Mo brings up her Blackness is later in episode five while the queens are getting ready in the WerkRoom and are discussing their childhoods in their hometowns. This segment is a space where we see the queens getting into drag and sharing stories about their lives off the series. White contestants Janey Jacke from The Netherlands and Blu Hydrangea from Northern Ireland talk about how they grew up in rural areas where there were religious tensions about being gay. They both share how moving to a larger city when they were older provided them the space to be themselves and Janey talks about how her parents were very supportive of her being gay. Mo Heart is putting on her make up while sitting next to Blu and Janey during this conversation. Janey turns and asks Mo about her relationship with religion. Mo details how she grew up an only child to a mother who is a fourth-generation Christian minister, and Mo shares that before she came out as gay she was a full-time Christian minister. She describes her childhood as lonely because so much of her time had to be spent in church. Mo refers to the church she was a part of as the "Black church" and tells us about her experience

with conversion therapy (a pseudoscience therapeutic tactic to convert people from being gay to straight). At the end of her story, Mo in a confessional tells us directly to the camera:

> For anyone out there who thinks they need to go to conversion therapy, No you don't. Don't waste your time or your money. You are enough. There is not one part of you that is broken.

Conversion therapy is something anyone might experience, not just those raised in Black churches. However, Mo's discussion about her experience growing up is presented as more intense than Blu's and Janey's because it is a longer sequence and is inner cut with confessional scenes where she provides additional details and comments beyond what is said in the Werk Room.

Mo's story suggests she has been transformed because of her past with the Black church and by going through conversion therapy. The use of the confessional is key to what makes Mo's narrative about overcoming this traumatic experience as transformative. Like I noted prior, the confessionals are where the participants are seen talking directly to the camera in a separate space and they typically are inner cut throughout an episode to provide additional details or insights about the main action occurring on the series. This type of scene, which is often featured as a short monologue of participants speaking to the camera, is not unique to *Drag Race* and is seen across the RTV genre (Grobe, 2017). The term "confessional" implies that these scenes are where the participants are confessing something to the viewer; however, Dubrofsky (2007) suggests that in RTV "all that is surveilled by the cameras can be used to confess the self" (p. 272), this includes all the footage captured by the camera, not just what is portrayed as a "confessional." Building on Foucault's (1990) ideas about confession which suggest the act of confession always requires another presence—someone to confess to in order to verify that

confession occurred—Dubrofsky (2007) describes surveillance as a "technology of confession" (p. 272), that is, surveillance functions as a virtual presence for individuals can confess. Foucault (1990) writes that the act of confession changes the person confessing: "It exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation" (p. 62). Furthermore, Dubrofsky (2007) suggests that when RTV participants confess to the camera this can be used by the editing and production process to represent "a confessed self" and present the RTV participant as having been changed because of their confession. Between what Mo shares with Blu and Janey in the Werk Room and what Mo shares in the confessional, her "confessed self" is presented as being "liberated" from her past because she is now denouncing conversion therapy.

During this scene, Mo's "confessed self" becomes an example of how *UKVTW* represents a postracial imaginary. At the end of this conversation between Blu, Janey, and Mo the queens acknowledge how it's interesting they have similar experiences even though they are from different parts of the world. In the Werk Room, Blu, who is sitting between Janey and Mo, says "It's so weird how the three of us are from completely different places but have faced similar hardships." Janey and Mo nod their heads in agreement as they continue getting ready. This is an example of how the series represents a postracial imaginary. Mo's story about religion and conversion therapy is presented as a more intense experience than the brief stories Blu and Janey share. Despite Mo connecting her experiences with conversion therapy and religion to her Blackness, Blu suggests that their experiences are similar because they grew up gay in rural areas across the globe. The scene then cuts to a confessional where Mo says,

I'm not surprised at all that we have similar stories, weaved and threaded very differently

because we are in different parts of the world, because if you just let people be them, they

will love honor and respect you.

Mo is suggesting that they all have similar narratives that are different because of where they live

in the world not because of their race. However, the narrative that was presented to us before

Mo's confessional suggests that Mo's experience with religion and conversion therapy is more

intense than Blu's and Janey's because of her Blackness. This scene in *UKVTW* does what Ono

(2013) says narrative representations of postracism do— "juxtapose a mature and modern

postracial present against the no longer relevant—and backward and archaic—racial past" (p.

301). Mo's experience from her past is characterized by her Blackness, but now, on *UKVTW* it is

her nationality that distinguishes her as different from her white European competitors. Mo's

"confessed self" is not only "liberated" from her past but liberated from how her Blackness

influences her past.

UKVTW* represents a postracial imaginary because race is something of the past on the

series, it is not significant to how the queens are presented as seeing themselves. The series

presents the queens as seeing themselves as representatives of their countries competing for the

title of "Queen of the Mother-Tucking World." On *UKVTW*, nationality obfuscates race. Here, I

have argued how *UKVTW* represents a postracial imaginary as a fantasized space suggesting race

is an issue of the past and not relevant to the present by centering differences in nationality. In

the following section, I argue how *UKVTW* as a postracial imaginary centers whiteness while

focusing on the queens' nationality not their race.

Strategic Westernness

Scholarship about postracism in media argues that postracism operates as a strategy of whiteness, that is, whiteness maintains its dominance by depicting narratives that make racism palatable for white audiences (Cramer, 2016; Cramer, 2020; Cranmer & Harris, 2015; Dubrofsky, 2022; Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014; Griffin, 2015; Johnson, 2017; Oh, 2020). Analyzing representation in postracial contexts is complex because as Ono (2013) describes "postracial representation grows out of a putatively race-neutral standpoint, in an attempt to avoid negative forms of racial presentation" (p. 304). The complexity of analyzing race in a postracial media text is true of *UKVTW*, because as I argue in the previous section, nationality obfuscates race on *UKVTW*. In this section, I analyze how nationality is presented on *UKVTW* to make sense of how *UKVTW* as a postracial imaginary centers whiteness.

Building on "strategic whiteness" which suggests that whiteness maintains its superiority because of whiteness's ability to maintain dominance and normativity without calling attention to itself (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Projansky & Ono, 1999), I coin the term "strategic westernness," that is, how Western cultural references are the unquestionable normative assumption. I suggest that Westernness functions as a strategy of whiteness to maintain *UKVTW* as a postracial imaginary. The West can never escape whiteness because it is everything as Dyer (1988) tells us, "white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularizing quality, because it is everything—white is no colour because it is all colours" (p. 45). In a postracial media text that centers nationality and obfuscates race whiteness still maintains its dominance. Westernness becomes a strategy for maintaining a postracial imaginary and for "Othering" Pangina as the only participant from a non-Western country.

Westernness is inherent to the series through the production and casting choices. *UKVTW* is produced in the United Kingdom, airs on the BBC, and is distributed internationally on WOW Presents Plus (*Drag Race*'s Los Angeles Based Streaming Service). Eight of the nine competing participants are from North America (Canada and the United States) and Western Europe (the United Kingdom and The Netherlands). Two of the three main judges, RuPaul and Michelle Visage are from the United States. The third main judge, Graham Norton is from Ireland and the weekly guest judges (one or two per episode) are all from the United Kingdom. The series is also titled "*RuPaul's Drag Race: UK vs The World*" which suggests that the United Kingdom is competing against "the world." This overwhelmingly Western cast, judging panel, and production implies the series privileges Western identities in its production. While the intricacies of the production of *UKVTW* are outside the scope of this project the national identity of the cast and judges and the national rhetoric of the series' title imply that the series centers the West as the majority, juxtaposed against Pangina Heals the only participant representing a non-Western country as the minority.

Westernness is inscribed into the challenges on the series because to succeed the participants need competency in US and British cultural references. This is most prominent in episode two, three and four. In episode two the challenge is the "RuPaul Ball" where queens present three different outfits on the Main Stage inspired by RuPaul, one of which they must design and construct during the episode. This challenge suggests that the ideal *UKVTW* contestant will be familiar with RuPaul's stylistic choices and aesthetic; implying that RuPaul is inherent to the global drag identity promoted on *UKVTW*. In episode three, the Rusical, described in chapter one, queens perform as different parodies of classic musical theater characters from productions such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Mamma Mia*, *The Sound of Music*, and

Hairspray—all of which are productions based in the United States or United Kingdom. Episode four is Snatch Game where queens impersonate a celebrity or other famous caricature. While the queens have the liberty to choose who they want to perform on *UKVTW* the six remaining queens each chose American references including musical artists Cher and Mariah Carey, actor Billy Porter, YouTube personality James Charles, Kathy Bates, and Michael Myers. Since the gauge of success on Snatch Game is to make the judges' laugh through impersonating the celebrity characters, choosing a character that the judges are most likely familiar with is often helpful. While it is not technically required to be educated and competent in these Western cultural references such as RuPaul's fashion interests, musical theater, and American celebrities, the participants must know some of these references to succeed in the challenges. To be successful on *UKVTW* requires participants to be fluent in Western popular culture.

Westernness is not just embedded into the architecture of the series through casting and production, it is used to mark Pangina Heals as a cultural "Other" through mundane comments from the judges. For instance, common across all the episodes of *UKVTW* is that the judges make seemingly lighthearted and often humorous commentary about the queens' runway presentations as the queens walk off stage. For the runway presentation in episode one, Pangina wears what she describes as "Thai-inspired couture": a floor-length silver gown, a tall silver headdress, and a blonde wig. During a voiceover while walking down the runway, she tells us the headdress is inspired by a Thai goddess and that the Thai alphabet is handstitched on to the dress. As Pangina is walking off the stage Michelle Visage is the first to comment: "Suddenly my telly's got channels it didn't have before." Her comment references the tall, pointed structure of Pangina's headdress by comparing it to a television antenna. Graham Norton follows up with, "She's giving me an eye-full." I presume this to be, although never stated, a reference to the Eiffel

Tower because of the similar shape. This is an instance of strategic westernness because of how Michelle and Graham's comments juxtaposed against Pangina's description disregard her Thai references. Framing Pangina's cultural references as obsolete for the sake of a comedic bit between the judges.

Comparatively, participants from Western countries wear outfits that are inspired by their nationality, but are not compared to irrelevant cultural references for the sake of a comedic bit. In episode four, the runway category is, "Luck Be a Lady." Blu Hydrangea and Baga Chipz from the United Kingdom both wear leprechaun-inspired runway outfits and they each talk about how they are Irish during the voiceover while they walk down the runway. The judges make a few light hearted remarks poking fun at the Irish and leprechaun references. When Baga Chipz walks out RuPaul says in a fake Irish accent "I think she's going to steal me lucky charms," and when Blu Hydrangea is walking down the runway Michelle Visage says "They all want a crack at that pot of gold." These comments reinstate the Westernness of *UKVTW* because they are Western cultural references that are about an outfit that is also a Western cultural reference. However, unlike Pangina, Blu and Baga are not "Othered" because their choices of what to wear on the runway fit within the Western standards of *UKVTW*. In the next section I describe how Westernness is used throughout the series to mark Pangina as "Other."

Authenticating Westernness

In this section, I argue that authenticity functions as a strategy of Westernness. Continuing to build on scholarship about whiteness, I use Dubrofsky's (2022) argument detailing how authenticity functions as a strategy of whiteness: "Whiteness and authenticity . . . function in a similar fashion: like whiteness, authenticity gains salience and power by being unspoken, seemingly natural, and appearing to require no effort" (p. 6). Following this logic, I put this in

the context of *UKVTW* which centers national identities and suggest that Westernness also functions in this manner by "being unspoken, seemingly natural, and appearing to require no effort." As I argued earlier, Westernness is built into the architecture of the series through its production and the use of cultural references that success on the series relies on. Building on scholarship about authentic displays of emotion in RTV (Dubrofsky, 2009) I suggest that Pangina Heals' emotional exit is a "money shot" that is used to "other" her from the other Western participants. The money shot is a metaphor for a climax presented on the screen. This climax has been characterized in a variety of ways in scholarship. In the case of film pornography the ejaculating penis (McClintock, 1993; Williams, 1993), in daytime television when guests emotionally reveal secrets (Grindstaff, 2002), and in romance-based RTV when women's emotions are displayed excessively for narrative effect (Dubrofsky, 2009).

I use Dubrofsky's (2009) articulation of the "money shot" in RTV—a camera shot that captures RTV participants who are seen as so emotional they lost physical control. Dubrofsky analyzes how women on romance-based RTV series perform the "money shot" and she argues that shortly after a woman gives the "money shot" she is seen as unfit for love and is eliminated. More specifically, Dubrofsky argues that showing emotion is not bad, but when performed so excessively it disrupts the women's representation of themselves on the series and becomes an issue. Central to the money shot in RTV is the role of the surveillance of the cameras used to capture the moment which verifies its authenticity. Turning back to chapter one, I suggest that what we see on RTV is what Enli (2015) calls mediated authenticity, that is, a produced media product made from real footage caught on camera curated to be presented as authentic. The money shot is a part of the mediated authenticity in RTV because it is authentic in that it occurred and was captured on camera; however, it is used in the production of the RTV series to

frame a RTV participant as emotionally excessive. The money shot does not verify the authenticity of the participant, in fact it devalues the authenticity of the participant by suggesting that the consistent self they have been presenting on the series leading up to the money shot may not be their authentic self. I argue authenticity is a strategy of creating "the Other" as Pangina performs a "money shot" during her elimination which marks her as "Other" and devalues her authenticity on the series. Theorized in chapter one, the authenticity present on *UKVTW* is a queer authenticity—a participant's authenticity is verified by them showing a consistent sense of self across the disparate spaces of the series that is not connected to a static representation of the body.

Central to capturing the money shot is the buildup of action leading to the climactic moment when the participant loses bodily control due to emotions overtaking the body. For Pangina this buildup happens across the series in episodes one, two, and three because she has two challenge wins and was seen as the front runner of the competition. It is because Pangina is presented as the "one to beat" on the series that when she is eliminated in episode four after failing at Snatch Game she provides the "money shot". Described in chapter one, Snatch Game is a challenge where contestants impersonate a celebrity and success is gauged by their ability to practice comedic timing, impersonate a celebrity, and improvise jokes and engage in humorous conversation with each other and RuPaul. As described earlier, Snatch Game is a component of the series structure that reflects the Westernness of the series because participants are inclined to choose US or British celebrities that the judges are familiar with. Pangina impersonates US singer Mariah Carey. During Snatch Game, RuPaul and the other contestants do not laugh at Pangina's jokes or engage with her banter. She is presented as failing at Snatch Game. During the judges' critiques Pangina is complimented for the accuracy of her impersonation of Mariah

Carey. However, she is critiqued for her inability to make her funny. Ultimately, Pangina is one of the lowest performing queens in the episode because she was not funny in the Snatch Game and can potentially be eliminated. After the judges' critiques the queens go backstage to Untucked where the queens that are facing elimination meet with the top two ranking queens of the week to plead their case for why they should stay. In this episode the top two queens are Baga Chipz and Blu Hydrangea, both from *Drag Race UK* season one. Pangina meets with each of them individually to plead her case to stay in the competition. During Pangina and Blu's conversation, Blu tells Pangina she is her biggest competition because she has won two of the four challenges so far. Blu tells Pangina that she is tempted to eliminate her because she is the strongest competitor. Blu concludes her conversation with Pangina by expressing her love and respect for her and saying she does not believe she will have the heart to eliminate Pangina. Following their conversation, Pangina tells us in a confessional she does not think Blu will choose her to go home and that she hopes Blu wins the "Lip Sync for the World". Up to this point Pangina is presented as thinking she is going to be safe. Blu Hydrangea is presented as very inconspicuous about who she thinks she will eliminate because she reminds us there are other queens who are up for elimination such as Jujubee and Janey Jacke that have been in the bottom in multiple episodes and appear as more "justifiable" choices. All this action from the beginning of episode one up until this moment in Untucked in episode four create the spectacle of the "money shot." After Blu Hydrangea wins the "Lip Sync for the World" RuPaul asks Blu, "Which queen have you chosen to get the chop?" Blu begins justifying her choice before revealing she chose Pangina and says "at this point in the competition even just one misstep can send you home". Then, it is revealed that Blu chose to eliminate Pangina.

Here, the money shot commences but everyone on screen plays a role in establishing the money shot by distinguishing this elimination as different than the previous ones. After Blu reveals she chose Pangina we see a sequence of shocked reactions: RuPaul gasps, Pangina puts her face in her hands, Michelle Visage looks down and shakes her head, and the other three queens who were facing elimination grasp one another in shock. The queens reach out to comfort Pangina and RuPaul lets out a soft and audible "Wow". In the three previous episodes after the name of the queen who will be eliminated is revealed, RuPaul says "As it is written, so it shall be done" and tells the eliminated queen "You are and will always be a global phenomenon." However, this time the focus is on Pangina's face in her hands, showing her visibly upset, RuPaul is seen using a different tone and phrase, acknowledging how shocking this moment is compared to other eliminations. RuPaul pauses between "as it written," and "so it shall be done", and for a moment we are left wondering if she is going to make a special exception for Pangina. Afterward, RuPaul says "Pangina Heals. Listen to me. You are and will always be a global phenomenon." The additional "listen to me" marks this elimination as different.

Next, Pangina loses control of her body and is presented as succumbing to her emotions—this is the crux of the "money shot." When a queen is eliminated RuPaul tells them to "Sashay Away" (*Drag Race* vernacular for being eliminated from the competition). The eliminated queen typically wipes away tears, expresses thanks, and exits the stage with a comedic tagline. This is common across all seasons of *Drag Race*. The first three queens eliminated from *UKVTW* perform their elimination according to these conventions. However, when RuPaul tells Pangina to "Sashay Away," Pangina is overtaken with emotion and does not follow the conventions of being eliminated. Pangina cries on the Main Stage and says, "I want to say sorry to all the Thai people that I did not go all the way." Pangina sobs as she walks up the

runway to exit off stage. Instead of a comedic departing line, Pangina says in Thai while crying, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, thank you" (translated from Thai to English with subtitles on the screen). Key to the money shot is losing bodily control while under surveillance (Dubrofsky, 2009), in Pangina's case this is characterized by her sobbing on screen. Pangina's emotions prevent her from following the conventions of how to be properly eliminated on *UKVTW*. After Pangina exits the stage, there are a few moments when the camera cuts between Blu Hydrangea, the judges, and other contestants while the sound of Pangina sobbing continues in the background.

Pangina's "money shot" relies on her success in the first three episodes and her confidence in Untucked that Blu will not eliminate her. If Pangina had been doing poorly in the competition or told us she anticipates she will be eliminated she most likely would not have displayed such excessive emotions, and if she had it would not have been presented in a way that suggested the viewer should sympathize with her. Dubrofsky (2009) suggests that in romantic RTV series the money shot puts women at risk, that the money shot signifies "a transgression of the participant's initial image and of how she wants to present herself. The transgression violates a woman's intended (as the series constructs it) presentation of the self." (p. 357). For Pangina, she violates how she is constructed as a good *UKVTW* contestant by losing bodily control. While Dubrofsky argues that in romance RTV series women who exhibit the money shot are shortly eliminated, Pangina has already been eliminated. However, the consequences for Pangina is her authenticity on the series is devalued because of her loss of bodily and emotional control. In this instance, Pangina is so overtaken with emotion she does not perform to the conventions of being eliminated by crying the whole way off the stage and then not saying a witty exit line. In *UKVTW* the "money shot" is a mechanism for "Othering" Pangina because she is the only participant who does not follow the conventions of being eliminated "properly." This is not

simply happenstance. As I noted prior, Pangina is subjected to strategic westernness throughout her time on the series and the "money shot" during her elimination is the penultimate representation of her as being "othered" as the only non-Western participant.

"Looks White To Me!": Concluding Thoughts on Westernness

This chapter suggests that *UKVTW*'s idea of a "global" drag identity is inherently white characterized by the series postracial ethos and "othering" its only non-Western participant. Building on scholarship about postracism and whiteness in popular media, I coin the term strategic westernness to articulate how a postracial media site such as *UKVTW* that centers nationality and obfuscates race still privileges some identities over others, in this case Western ones over non-Western ones. I suggest Westernness functions as a strategy of whiteness by allowing whiteness to maintain its dominance under the guise of Westernness. To assume that Westernness is separate from whiteness would only reinstate the values of postracism, that race is an issue of the past. Here, I have argued Westernness is strategic on *UKVTW* because it is inherent to the architecture of the series through its casting and production. Westernness on the series is reenforced and made evident through the judges comments and how Pangina is presented as "the Other" on the series by devaluing her authenticity. As media becomes more global and postracism continues to permeate the media landscape, whiteness will continue to maintain its dominance. This chapter suggests that calling attention to Westernness is a method for continuing to interrogate how whiteness maintains its dominance.

CHAPTER THREE:

SASHAYING INTO THE FUTURE OF QUEER AUTHENTICITY

Drag Race's global expansion will not be slowing down anytime soon. As of February 2023, *Drag Race*'s international reach includes *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* (2019-present), *RuPaul's Drag Race Down Under* (2021-present), *RuPaul's Drag Race UK vs The World* (2022), *Canada's Drag Race* (2020-present), *Canada's Drag Race: Canada vs The World* (2022), *Drag Race Thailand* (2018-present), *Drag Race Holland* (2020-2021), *Drag Race Espana* (2021-present), *Drag Race Italia* (2021-present), *Drag Race France* (2022-present), *Drag Race Philippines* (2022-present), *Drag Race Beligique* (2023-present). *Drag Race Sverige* (Sweden) is scheduled to premiere in the summer of 2023 and casting calls were announced in October 2022 for franchises of *Drag Race* in Mexico, Brazil, and Germany. In November 2022, the Hong Kong based media group, O4 Media, announced they will represent *Drag Race* across Asia with plans to produce franchises in India, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea, as well as take over the production of *Drag Race Thailand*. As *Drag Race* remains the most popular representation of queer people in popular media its global expansion deserves our critical attention. Reality television series that feature largely, if not all, queer cast members include *We're Here* (2020-present), *Legendary* (2020-2022), *The Boulet Brother's Dragula* (2016-present), *Call Me Mother* (2021-present), and *Trixie Motel* (2022). While *Drag Race* is the most popular and successful due to its fifteen-year tenure, international distribution, and critical acclaim, I encourage us as scholars to expand our focus to the new and ever-increasing representations of queer representation in RTV.

The foundation of this project is to make sense of how queer identities are seen as authentic in RTV. This project builds on foundational scholarship about authenticity in RTV which suggests that authentic RTV participants present a consistent self that appears as though it is unaware of the role of surveillance of RTV (Andrejevic, 2004; Dubrofsky, 2007; Dubrofsky, 2011a; Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014)). I extend this work by suggesting that queer identities, such as drag queens, that do not always present a consistent sense of self are still seen as authentic in RTV. The queer authenticity I theorize here suggests that authenticity is not affixed to a consistent representation of the body. Queer authenticity is present on RTV when participants are seen as a consistent self across the different presentations of the physical self, in the case of *UKVTW* this is while in and out of drag on the series. In chapter one, I argue the winner of *UKVTW*, Blu Hydrangea, is presented as authentic because she is presented as maintaining a consistent sense of self while participating in the challenges, sharing stories of self-transformation, and representing her country.

As I noted in chapter one, the queer authenticity I describe here is only one of many possible queer authenticities in popular media. Turning back to Butler's (1993) writings on queer where she suggests that queer should always be challenging itself by responding to the current popular and political discourse, I imagine queer authenticity will continue to change and evolve. Looking towards the younger generation of participants on *Drag Race* is one way queer authenticity may change as a new generation of drag performers are represented on the series. Gen Z, those born between 1997 and 2012, claim to be the "queerest generation ever" (Lang, 2021) and the increasingly regressive legislation targeting queer identities continues to permeate political discourse, I imagine queer authenticity will continue to evolve and change. In recent seasons across *Drag Race* the conversation of age and experience have arose as Gen Z queens

gain their fame from performing on social media sites as opposed to older queens who began performing in gay night clubs and at Pride parades. As queer is always responding to the present moment, I imagine there will be new ways of making sense of how younger generations of queer identities present authenticity.

The second part of this project brings attention to the racial and national dynamics informing how authenticity is presented on *UKVTW*. I argue *UKVTW* represents a postracial imaginary by suggesting racism is not a current issue and instead the series focuses on the nationality of the queens as it frames itself as global. Building on strategic whiteness—how whiteness maintains its dominance by its mundane nature in the everyday (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Projansky & Ono, 1999)—I theorize "strategic westernness" to articulate how *UKVTW* centers western cultural references as the norm by "Othering" the only contestant from a non-Western country, Pangina Heals. However, strategic westernness is not distinct from strategic whiteness. Strategic westernness is a strategy of whiteness. *UKVTW*'s attention to nationality and its post-racial ethos, obfuscates race on the series. Strategic westernness provides a framework for how whiteness permeates media texts that represent post-racial imaginaries through drawing attention to how Western cultural norms maintain their dominance. *Drag Race*'s global expansion and *UKVTW* featuring an international cast of queens makes it an interesting case study to theorize strategic westernness.

Drag Race is continuing to expand internationally and is producing new series seeking to represent "global drag." In November 2022 the first season of *Canada's Drag Race: Canada vs The World* premiered on the Canadian cable network Crave and was distributed internationally on WOW Presents Plus. The series is hosted by Canadian drag queen and season eleven *RPDR* alumni, Brooke Lynn Hytes who hosts the other seasons of *Canada's Drag Race*. This series

does not represent any of the *Drag Race* franchises in non-Western countries, however the series featured a very racially diverse cast featuring six queens of color and three white queens, one who is the only cisgender woman drag queen in the franchise. As of February 2023, an unnamed "Global All Stars" version of the series featuring an international cast of queens is beginning production, as well as the second season of *UKVTW*. This project is the first within the burgeoning subfield of queer surveillance studies to use a popular media text as a site of analysis. As Dyer (1997) tells us, "how anything is represented is the means by which we think and feel about the thing" (p. xiii). Popular media texts are sites of analysis that queer surveillance studies would benefit from examining because they offer a way to make sense of queer identities in popular discourse. This project studies *UKVTW*, a RTV series, as a media text that represents a culture of surveillance which can offer insight into how queer identities are seen as authentic in surveillance settings.

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