HEGEMONIC “REALNESS”? AN INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF

RUPAUL’S DRAG RACE

by

Sarah Tucker Jenkins

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SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

Christine Scodari, Ph.D.
Thesis Advisor

Barclay Barrios, Ph.D.

Wairimu N. Njambi, Ph.D.

Josephine Beoku-Betts, Ph.D.
Director, Center for Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies

Heather Coltman, DMA
Interim Dean, The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters

Barry T. Rosson, Ph.D.
Dean, Graduate College

Date

April 9, 2013
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ABSTRACT

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RuPaul’s Drag Race is one of the few reality television shows focusing on QLGBT (queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) identified individuals that has made it into mainstream consciousness. RuPaul’s Drag Race debuted in 2009 and appears on the channels, Logo and VH1. This thesis analyzes the four seasons from 2009 through 2012. RuPaul’s Drag Race provides a unique perspective on the ways that gender identity, sexuality, size, class, race, and ethnicity intersect and interact in people’s lives. The television show augments many of these intersections and the challenges related to these identities while still reflecting the daily struggles that people experience. In many respects, the show works to promote messages of self-love and acceptance and makes an effort to praise each contestant. However, it also promotes many problematic and damaging stereotypes. This thesis conducts a feminist analysis in order to answer the question: How does RuPaul’s Drag Race relate to
hegemonic and oppressive stereotypes and roles associated with gender identity, sexual orientation, size, class, race and ethnicity? Does it challenge or reinforce such hegemonies? This thesis utilizes a number of secondary questions in its analysis. How does RuPaul’s Drag Race portray fat and thin contestants? How do contestants’ socioeconomic backgrounds fit into their portrayals on the show? How does RuPaul’s Drag Race portray queer cultures, and are these portrayals stereotypical? How is race represented on the show; do racial stereotypes come into play? In order to answer these questions, this thesis examines visual imagery, narrative, and dialogue in the show as well as some supporting materials. It utilizes theories from cultural studies, women’s studies, English, and communications within its analysis. This thesis concludes that although RuPaul’s Drag Race does engage in some subversive behavior, it ultimately reinforces harmful hegemonic stereotypes.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother. I couldn’t ask for a more supportive parent, thank you for always believing in me. I have loved you since the beginning of time and I will love you until the end of time. Also, to my grandma and grandpa, who live in my heart forever. They taught me what it feels like to love, and be loved, unconditionally. You gave me roots and wings, and made me who I am today. I love you both so much. And last, but not least, to my cat, Beauty, who stood (laid?) by me (literally) through the entire creation of this thesis.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background and Justification

*RuPaul’s Drag Race* (RDR) is one of the few reality television shows that focuses on queer\(^1\) individuals and has made it into mainstream consciousness. Aside from *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, other mainstream reality shows focusing on queer identities have been dating shows such as *Boy Meets Boy* and *A Shot at Love with Tila Tequila*, which focused almost exclusively on sex, seduction and manipulation (Pozner 50-51). In addition, where *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* encouraged “a highly comforting view of homosexuality as a useful accessory of postfeminist femininity” (Cohan 177), *RDR* focuses exclusively on the actions, feelings, and lives of the (assumedly all) gay men competing on the show for the title of “America’s Next Drag Superstar.” *RDR* is a new kind of queer identified television show because of its focus on the lives of the queer characters (beyond their romantic inclinations), its validation of those lives, and its mainstream appeal.\(^2\) *RuPaul’s Drag Race* also provides a unique perspective on the ways that gender identity, sexuality,

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\(^1\) I am using the term “queer” as an umbrella term to refer to the various kinds of sexual and gender identities to which a person may ascribe. I choose the term “queer” to describe *RuPaul’s Drag Race* because I am not explicitly aware of whether every contestant that has ever participated on the show has identified as “gay” and at least two of the contestants that previously appeared on the show have since come out as transgender.

\(^2\) *RuPaul’s Drag Race* was originally shown on Logo (VIACOM’s QLGBT channel), but it is also available to watch on the Logo website and airs on the mainstream cable channel VH1.
size, class, race, and ethnicity intersect and interact in people’s lives. The television show augments many of these intersections and the challenges related to these identities while still reflecting the daily struggles that people experience. Superficially, the show works to promote messages of self-love and acceptance and makes an effort to praise each contestant. However, it also promotes many problematic and damaging stereotypes. “Realness” is a phrase used on RuPaul’s Drag Race (but originally introduced to the United States in the documentary film Paris is Burning) to refer to someone who is successfully “passing” as their chosen performance object. In this case, I am using “realness” to refer to the ways RDR may or may not reinforce hegemony.

Antonio Gramsci introduced the modern concept of hegemony in the first half of the twentieth century. Although other political leaders had used the term as a synonym for “leadership,” Gramsci considered hegemony in relation to the control of ideas. Thomas R. Bates explains, “The concept of hegemony is really a very simple one. It means political leadership based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularization of the world view of the ruling class” (352). However, hegemony is not just about politics, or social classes, as theorized by Gramsci. Hegemony also applies to any other types of knowledge and can be imposed on marginalized groups. Hegemony is a culturally loaded term. What is hegemonic in one society might not be hegemonic in another. In my discussion of hegemony, I will be relying on knowledge constructed about American hegemony.
This thesis will examine whether *RDR* challenges or perpetuates systems of intersectional oppression related to gender identity, sexuality, size, class, race, and ethnicity. Intersectionality has become an important perspective in feminist media and cultural studies when considering the affects of discrimination and oppression on people’s lives (Hill Collins; Crenshaw; Grillo). Intersectionality is the belief that in order to understand persons in a particular context, we must take into account their various identities that are important to that context. Trina Grillo states that, “oppressions cannot be dismantled separately because they mutually reinforce each other” (36). A researcher will gain a more holistic understanding of one’s subjects when one employs intersectionality theory and considers what parts of a person’s identity have shaped and affected different experiences in their lives. An intersectional analysis is necessary when analyzing a show such as *RDR*, which employs a multitude of identities inscribed onto its contestants.

Intersectionality also hinges on the understanding of identities as shifting and non-essential. Grillo defines essentialism: “An essentialist outlook assumes that the experience of being a member of the group under discussion is a stable one, one with a clear meaning, a meaning constant through time, space, and different historical, social, political, and personal contexts” (32). Essentialism does not allow the researcher the space or tools to construct a thorough analysis of context-specific identities and experiences. Intersectionality and anti-essentialism require an analysis specifically in relation to the context, in that individuals’ identities are understood as a “‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside
representation” (Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 222). Identities are constructed within certain contexts, and in relation to other identities. Although identities are often treated as stable signifiers in media, in order to analyze the given texts, one must consider identity as a product of media outlets.

Reality television shows have become an important part of our media culture within the last two decades. Because the audience is lead to believe that reality television depicts “real life” people acting in “real life” ways, the messages of these shows have the potential to be especially influential on the public’s belief systems (Cohan; Dow; Hall; Pozner; Stephens). Jennifer Pozner states that reality television:

has the power to influence our notions of normalcy versus difference, convince us that certain behaviors are ‘innate’ for different groups of people, and present culturally constructed norms of gender, race, class, and sexuality as ‘natural,’ rather than performances we’ve learned to adopt through societal education and expectation. (98)

Popular reality television often subtly (or not-so-subtly) reinforces powerful hegemonic ideals. *RDR* is a cultural artifact at the apex of many different phenomena—the politicization of queer lives, a focus on intersectionality in feminist theory, and an obsession with reality television in the United States and beyond. Thus, *RDR* provides a unique opportunity to question the ways queer television is perpetuating, or challenging, hegemony and consider how this may affect both queer and heterosexual audience members’ perceptions of hegemonic values.
Issues to Be Addressed

This thesis conducts a feminist analysis in order to answer the question: How does RuPaul’s Drag Race relate to hegemonic and oppressive stereotypes and roles associated with gender identity, sexual orientation, size, class, race and ethnicity? Does it challenge or reinforce such hegemonies? This thesis utilizes a number of secondary questions in its analysis. How does RDR portray fat and thin contestants? How do contestants’ socioeconomic backgrounds fit into their portrayals on the show? How does RDR portray queer cultures, and are these portrayals stereotypical? How is race represented on the show; do racial stereotypes come into play? In order to answer these questions, this thesis will examine visual imagery, narrative, and dialogue in the show as well as some supporting materials. This thesis will also conduct a brief audience analysis in order to examine how audience members engage with RDR. This thesis uses feminist theory and feminist media criticism, queer theory, and cultural and media studies theory and criticism in order to examine the medium of reality television, representation of identities within the media, and the effects of feminism and postfeminism on media.

Literature Review

Works from cultural studies, women’s studies, English, and communications are combined to provide backgrounds on queer theory, gender performativity, feminist theory, intersectionality, feminist media cultural studies, audience analysis theory, racial and race-intersected stereotypes, fat studies, queer and transgender individuals in the media, reality television, and drag culture and camp.
Queerness and Queer Theory

The term “queer” has a long, complicated history. Once used predominantly as a slur, it has now been reclaimed by some members of marginalized sexual and gender identities. Judith Butler explains, “As expansive as the term ‘queer’ is meant to be, it is used in ways that enforce a set of overlapping divisions” (“Critically Queer” 20). Butler’s discussion of the term reinforces the notion that “queer” means different things to different people. Some have used it as an identity that is considered more ‘radical’ than the gay and lesbian identity. However, Butler cautions people from assuming that reclaiming the word erases the long, painful history of discrimination that many people associate with “queer.” Butler explains how this history is an important part of the reasons that “queer” has been reclaimed. She states, “‘Queer’ derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult” (18). Although the term’s history gives it power, Butler insists that it cannot be completely separated from its negative associations as well. She explains that the interpellation of the term “echoes past interpellations, and binds the speakers, as if they spoke in unison across time” (18). Butler reifies the importance of identity politics, and understands the need to lay claim to the language groups use to describe themselves. However, within the ritual of naming, Butler reminds the reader that this chosen name is not reborn anew, but rather comes with its own historical “baggage.” She emphasizes, “the expectation of self-determination that self-naming arouses is paradoxically contested by the historicity of the name itself” (19). She encourages activists and academics to utilize and challenge
the term “queer,” and to acknowledge the evolution of the term (or the possible
creation of a new term) and the identities it encompasses (or fails to encompass) as we
progress (21).

Annamarie Jagose also examines the history of “queer” and its modern day
meanings and associations. She considers the political motivation behind the use of the
term and problematizes the notion that queer can be used as an ‘umbrella’ term. She
states, “Queer marks both a continuity and a break with previous gay liberationist and
lesbian feminist models” (75). However, where Butler is concerned about the
historical baggage of “queer,” Jagose seems more interested in analyzing the adoption
of the term and its political meanings. Jagose sees the term as inherently subversive;
“By refusing to crystallise in any specific form, queer maintains a relation of
resistance to whatever constitutes the normal” (99). Yet she also understands that the
term is evolving; she affirms that, “Although there is no agreement on the exact
definition of queer, the interdependent spheres of activism and theory that constitute
its necessary context have undergone various shifts” (76). Similar to Butler’s
argument, Jagose agrees that the term has different meanings to different groups.
Where Butler expresses some concern about whether “queer” feels inclusive to non-
white individuals and groups, Jagose cites Sedgwick to explain how the term is
evolving to be more inclusive. Jagose quotes Sedgwick who states that more groups
are “using the leverage of ‘queer’ to do a new kind of justice to the fractal intricacies
of language, skin, migration, state” (Sedgwick qtd. in Jagose 99). Jagose reifies:
Although some complain that queer encodes a Eurocentric bias, which makes it insensitive to the largely identity-based politics of ethnic communities, the recent work that Sedgwick here refers to indicates that queer’s denaturalizing impulse may well find an articulation within precisely those contexts to which it has been judged indifferent. (99)

According to Jagose, the term queer is continuing to evolve and will not be reserved for white academics and activists. Jagose also considers the background of “queer” and its contribution to the term’s current development. Jagose does understand the importance of the history of the term, although she does not analyze it in the same way as Butler. Jagose states, “Indeed, as an intellectual model, queer has not been produced solely by lesbian and gay politics and theory, but rather informed by historically specific knowledges which constitute late twentieth-century western thought” (77). This statement encourages understanding of the ethnocentric meaning of the term queer. Although the term is considered an “umbrella” term by many, its meanings do not translate across languages and cultures. This thesis’ use of the term queer is with an understanding that it is a specifically Western term, one that does not easily translate to other types of knowledge. The term queer is utilized in an attempt to encompass an impossible number of identities. Identities that J. Jack Halberstam encourages us to associate with an understanding of transsexuality, as simply encompassing the various ways that we all defy our prescribed gender roles and sexual orientations. Halberstam states:
The breakdown of genders and sexualities into identities is in many ways, therefore, an endless project, and it is perhaps preferable therefore to acknowledge that gender is defined by transitivity, that sexuality manifests as multiple sexualities, and that therefore we are all transsexuals. There are no transsexuals. (“F2M” 132)

Halberstam’s understanding of sexuality and gender as transitional and fluid is what this thesis hopes to capture in the use of the imperfect word “queer.”

With an understanding that the term queer is complicated and limited, a brief discussion of the academic field of queer theory is also important. One of the authors who is most celebrated for his contributions to the “creation” of queer theory is Michel Foucault. Jagose explains Foucault’s significance:

In emphasising that sexuality is not an essentially personal attribute but an available cultural category—and that it is the effect of power rather than simply its object—Foucault’s writings have been crucially significant for the development of lesbian and gay and, subsequently, queer activism and scholarship. (79)

Just as Foucault’s purpose was to denaturalize our modern notions of sexuality, Jagose affirms that the term, “queer opts for denaturalisation as its primary strategy” (98).

Nikki Sullivan attests that “[w]hile Queer Theory may now be recognized by many as an academic discipline, it nevertheless continues to struggle against the straitjacketing effects of institutionalization, to resist closure and remain in the process of ambiguous (un)becoming” (v). Jagose has a similar position. She states, “Queer theory’s
debunking of stables sexes, genders and sexualities develops out of a specifically lesbian and gay reworking of the post-structuralist figuring of identity as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions” (3). Theorists understand queer theory as housing many different kinds of knowledge. It is a discipline that is constantly expanding and evolving. Although, it is similar to the term queer in that its knowledge is specific to certain cultures and languages, this thesis utilizes queer theory to de-center the dominant understandings of sexual orientations and gender identities as they have been categorized by hegemony within a Western context. The concept of gender as performative is an integral aspect of queer theory (and much of feminist theory).

*Gender as Performance or Performativity*

One of RuPaul’s famous quotes is, “You’re born naked and the rest is drag” *(Workin’ It!, ix)*. This quote shows an understanding of gender as a performance, a concept introduced by Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman. West and Zimmerman maintain that gender is “created through interaction and at the same time structures interaction” (131). Where Western bodies of knowledge originally considered gender an essential part of being a man or a woman, gender is now understood as a performance that we learn through social interaction and media. Judith Butler believes that gender is performative, and that each “act” of gender is one performance within that performativity. Jagose explains that Butler, “Distanc[es] herself from those who understand gender as willfully performed […]” (87). Butler wants “to discourage thinking about performativity in voluntarist or deliberate terms” (Jagose 87). Butler
states that gender, “is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms, ones which cannot be thrown off at will, but which work, animate, and constrain the gendered subject, and which are also the resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are to be forged” (“Critically Queer” 22). However, Butler does not believe that drag is inherently subversive.

A recent article by Keara Goin discussing RuPaul’s Drag Race stating, “Judith Butler’s innovative scholarship on the performative reality of gender, as exemplified through the practice of drag,” inadvertently generalizes Butler’s statements about drag. Butler addresses this confusion in “Critically Queer” stating, “I myself produced [some of this confusion] by citing drag as an example of performativity (taken then, by some, to be exemplary, that is, the example of performativity)” (21 emphases in original). Goin believes that Butler sees drag as destabilizing gender, which Butler refutes, stating:

The misapprehension about gender performativity is this: that gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is a “one” who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today. This is a voluntarist account of gender which presumes a subject, intact, prior to its gendering. The sense of gender performativity that I meant to convey is something quite different. (“Critically Queer” 21)
Butler sees drag as simply one of many performances of gender, one that is still constrained by our cultural expectations of gender. She does not believe that drag rises above the constraints of gender. Goin’s claim that RDR directly challenges hegemonic gender roles is in contrast the arguments this thesis will make. This thesis argues that RDR actually reproduces many of the same hegemonic requirements for gender, especially because of the strict rules to which contestants must adhere. The show only allows and values a certain type of drag, and contestants must be free of any “sex reassignment” surgeries to participate in the show. However, many contestants have been open about having other types of cosmetic surgeries, some of which specifically relate to emphasizing their drag persona. Where does RuPaul draw the line on surgery? This thesis uses Butler’s understanding of gender performativity to problematize how RDR’s requirements for contestants reinforce gender hegemony.

Feminist Theory

There are myriad types of feminist theory that vary depending on location and individuals utilizing the theory. “Feminism” is a term that has different meanings for people depending on their backgrounds, identities, and experiences. Because RDR is filmed the United States, I will focus on feminism within the United States. Within the United States, three waves of feminism are generally discussed. The first wave took place in the late 19th century and early 20th century and focused on women gaining the right to vote, and other personhood rights such as owning property. The second wave began around the 1960s and focused on women gaining control of their bodies, reproductive rights, equality in the workplace, and equality in the home. While white
women generally defined and controlled first and second wave feminism, third wave feminism has made an effort to be more inclusive. Third wave feminism, which was first recognized and theorized by scholars in the 1990s, is “built on multiracial/multiethnic feminism, standpoint feminism, and postmodern feminism” (Lorber 305). Third wave feminism does not hinge on the belief that women share common experiences simply because of their identity as women. To expand upon this belief, no identity of people can be viewed as interchangeable individuals. Using the theory of intersectionality, this thesis will explore the ways that individual lives and experiences differ even within certain groups. Although the basic premise of feminism began with the belief that women deserve equal treatment with men, feminism has been expanded to focus on gender inequality in relation to other types of oppression and ways to fight various oppressions simultaneously.

Judith Lorber organizes different theories of feminism based on “their theory or theories of gender inequality” (9). Applying Lorber’s categories, this thesis utilizes “gender rebellion feminisms” which include “social construction, multiracial/multiethnic, feminist studies of men, postmodern, and third wave” feminisms (12). According to Lorber, “[t]hese feminisms continue to focus on multiple sources of inequality—racial, ethnic, and social class in particular—that are also reproduced through individual actions and social interactions, but the main target is the binary gendered social order” (12). My analyses will employ social construction feminism, multiracial/multiethnic feminism, and postmodern feminism. These feminist theories reject the notion of dualistic thinking that permeates Western
thought, and questions what society considers to be common sense, while working to bring value to knowledge developed among marginalized groups. Patricia Hill Collins’ definitions of intersectionality, the matrix of domination, and domains of power will be an essential part of the applied feminist theory this thesis utilizes.

Intersectionality, the Matrix of Domination and Domains of Power

This thesis utilizes Hill Collins’ definitions of intersectionality, the matrix of domination, and domains of power in order to analyze RuPaul’s Drag Race contributions to, or breaks from, hegemony. Hill Collins describes intersectionality as “particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice” (21). While intersectionality refers to the types of oppressions a person faces, the matrix of domination refers to “how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized” (21). Within a patriarchal society, domination uses differences that are ascribed social meaning to reinforce the power structure of one group over another. Hill Collins explains that “viewing domination itself as encompassing intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation points to the significance of these oppressions in shaping the overall organization of a particular matrix of domination” (293). A matrix of domination will include various forms of oppression for people but always contain four “interrelated domains of power, namely, the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains” (294). These domains of power interlock and make hegemonic values feel “natural.” Resistance,
while always possible, can sometimes be difficult; in some cases it may even be hard
to think of ways to resist beliefs we consider to be “default.”

This thesis focuses largely on the hegemonic domain of power to explain the
ways that RDR may reinforce oppressive stereotypes and beliefs. Hill Collins explains
this domain, “By manipulating ideology and culture, the hegemonic domain acts as a
link between social institutions (structural domain), their organizational practices
(disciplinary domain), and the level of everyday social interaction (interpersonal
domain)” (302). The hegemonic domain of power enforces “commonsense” beliefs
“so pervasive that it is difficult to conceptualize alternatives to them, let alone ways of
resisting the social practices that they justify” (303). In this way, oppressed groups
also reinforce the hegemonic domain of power by acting on and believing in these
“commonsense” stereotypes. I will use Hill Collins’ understanding of this domain of
power to analyze whether RDR reinforces hegemonic beliefs and to explain why such
reinforcement could be so damaging.

Feminist Cultural Studies

Because this thesis is an analysis of media texts, it will also employ feminist
cultural studies theory. Toby Miller provides a definition of cultural studies:

In place of focusing on canonical works of art, governmental leadership, or
quantitative social data, cultural studies devotes time to subcultures, popular
media, music, clothing, and sport. By looking at how culture is used and
transformed by ‘ordinary’ and ‘marginal’ social groups, cultural studies sees
people not simply as consumers, but as potential producers of new social
values and cultural languages. (1)

Suzanna Danuta Walters explores the meanings of feminist cultures studies. She
begins by emphasizing the growth of media, explaining “One could argue […] that
they [media] have come to construct our sense of what it means to live in the (post)-
modern world” (22). Walters then explains feminist critics’ engagement with the ways
media represent women and other marginalized groups. She maintains, “It is no
accident that the feminist project has been deeply concerned from its inception with
‘the cultural’” (23), and explains that feminist critique of cultural images has been a
part of feminist theory and activism for many decades. Furthermore, feminist cultural
studies both critiques, “existing (patriarchal) representations” while also constructing
“alternative or oppositional cultural image and practices” (24). Although feminist
cultural studies theory is highly complex and multi-faceted, this thesis will use said
theory to enhance the feminist theories that the analysis engages.

**Audience Analysis Theory**

My brief audience analysis will be a sampling of videos from YouTube and
message board posts on the website Television Without Pity. This audience analysis
must be understood in the context of convergence culture. Henry Jenkins describes
convergence culture as the space “where old and new media collide, where grassroots
and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producers and the power
of the media consumer intersect in unpredictable ways” (*Convergence Culture* 2).
Jenkins believes that our media is traveling in new and unique ways that have not been
documented in years past. The new ways that media is circulating “depends heavily on consumers’ active participation” (3). This active participation refers to a participatory culture that Jenkins believes has become an integral part of our media experiences. According to Jenkins et. al:

A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created). *(Confronting the Challenges 3)*

Participatory culture is the site of the audience discussions taking place on YouTube and Television Without Pity which are analyzed in this thesis. These audience members feel that voicing their opinions on *RDR* and discussing these opinions with other viewers is an important part of their media experience. Fans engagement with media also involves a process called textual poaching. Jenkins explains that in textual poaching, “one text shatters and becomes many texts as it is fit into the lives of the people who use it, each in her or his own way, each of her or his own purposes” (“Star Trek Rerun” 490). Textual poaching allows fans and audience members to take a text and rewrite and/or reimagine it in any way they please. The main types of textual poaching that are discussed below involve fans who create
idealized images of their favorite RDR characters, which may or may not actually be related to their real personalities.

This thesis utilizes Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model in order to categorize the responses of the audience members. Jacqueline Bobo explains that the encoding/decoding model “analyses ideological and cultural power and the way in which meaning is produced in that context” (280). This model was drawn from a “theory that delineates three potential responses to a media message: dominant, negotiated, or oppositional” (281). The dominant, or preferred, reading of a text is when the viewer accepts the dominant ideology it puts forth. A negotiated reading takes place when the viewer questions some parts of the text, but not the overall ideology on which the text is based. An oppositional reading occurs when “the recipient of the text understands that the system that produced the text is one with which she/he is fundamentally at odds” (281). These labels will be used to analyze the responses to RDR in videos on YouTube and message boards on Television Without Pity.

Overt and Inferential Racism

In order to analyze the racial aspects of the show, this thesis uses Stuart Hall’s concepts of overt and inferential racism. Hall’s concepts of overt and inferential racism are recognized as both cultural studies theory and critical race theory. Within the media, overt racism refers to, “open and favorable coverage […] given to arguments, positions and spokespersons who are in the business of elaborating an openly racist argument or advancing a racist policy or view…” (“The Whites of Their
Eyes” 91). Inferential racism refers to “those apparently naturalized representations of events and situations relating to race, whether ‘factual’ or ‘fictional,’ which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as *unquestioned assumptions*” (91, emphasis in original). Hall’s understanding of “overt” and “inferential” oppression applies to various identities, and will be used to analyze the treatment of contestants as they navigate their identities on the show.

**Racial and Race-Intersected Stereotypes**

This thesis examines whether or not *RDR* propagates or questions various racial stereotypes. Hill Collins states, “Intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality could not continue without powerful ideological justifications for their existence” (76). Willard F. Enteman explains, “The very nature of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination is that they convert real persons into artificial persons and, as a consequence, treat human beings as objects” (18). Hill Collins problematizes “controlling images” of black women as part of these “ideological justifications” that I will utilize in my analysis. Some of the controlling images I will analyze include the “mammy” (Hill Collins; Yarbrough & Bennett), and the “angry black woman” or “Sapphire” (Pozner; Yarbrough & Bennett). Not all of the stereotypes in my analysis will be gender specific; many of the stereotypes of African and Puerto Rican individuals apply to all genders. I will analyze the stereotype of the monolithic, “exotic” African imposed on BeBe Zahara Benet and the representations of the Puerto Rican contestants and the ways that they must navigate being both a part of, and
Stereotypes of Size and the Treatment of Fat Individuals

This thesis utilizes theory from the field of fat studies to analyze the ways that the fat contestants on *RDR* are treated and portrayed. I use the term fat as reclamation of a word that has been used to discriminate against and humiliate people. Although *RDR* promotes self-love on a superficial level, nearly all of the fat queens that have been on the show have appeared to be “deficient” in some way. Fat competitors often appear emotionally unstable, unprepared for competitions, and the least liked by the other contestants, even after they have proved their talent. Along with this, the top three contestants in each season appear in one of RuPaul’s music videos, and none of them have been fat.

Discrimination against people we consider fat is rampant in our culture. Historically, within the United States and Europe, fat was a sign of prosperity; it was something that was highly desired. It was only at the end of the 19th century, when it became easier to get enough to eat in the United States that fatness began to lose its popularity (Fraser). Presently, fat people are often stereotyped as “lazy, stupid, and worthless” (Wann 454). These stereotypes are especially attributed to women, who are held to a higher standard of beauty and control. Where fat men on television are seen engaging in romantic relationships (*The Drew Carey Show, King of Queens*) fat women are often portrayed as desperate and/or sexless (*Big Sexy*). Dina Giovanelli and Stephen Ostertag state that “fat female television characters are both numerically
annihilated […] and qualitatively annihilated” (296), meaning that there are very few fat women characters, and those that exist are often one-dimensional or portrayed as pathetic. I will be using research done on the body pressure that women experience to analyze RDR because the contestants deal with many of the same stigmas as women due to their performances of emphasized femininity. Jerry Mosher states, “women’s fat is measured against a hegemonic ideal of beauty so powerful that any variation from it is considered a personal deficiency or aggressive act,” (167) and this philosophy is also imposed on RDR contestants.

Gay men, regardless of race or class background, also experience a similar fat-phobia. Nathaniel Pyle and Michael Loewy state, “the pressure to be thin/muscular, young, and attractive by traditional standards is at least as strong among gay men as it is among heterosexual women” (145). Michael Moon and Even Kosofsky Sedgwick analyze the experiences of fat bodies coupled with an understanding of those bodies as “feminine” while discussing the famous drag queen Divine. Moon states, “Divine seems to offer a powerful condensation of some emotional and identity linkages—historically dense ones—between fat women and gay men” (218). Moon and Sedgwick go on to establish the, “interlocking histories of stigma, self-constitution, and epistemological complication proper to fat women and gay men in this century” (218). Indeed, there are links between the fatphobia that men who have sex with men and women who have sex with men experience. However, Bear S. Bergman describes how the public polices women’s bodies in a way that men, gay or straight, generally avoid. Bergman, who identifies as transgender, describes receiving different treatment
when people read him as a woman instead of a man. Bergman explains, “As a woman, I am revolting. […] No matter how clearly I order a Coke in a restaurant I *must* be on a diet, and so I get a Diet Coke. […] Wait staff develop selective amnesia about my side of fries or my request for butter” (141 emphasis in original). However, the pressure to appear attractive to men generally places more body pressure on homosexual men versus heterosexual men. Cecilia Hartley points out, “Recent research has shown that internalized fat-oppressive attitudes are more often present in persons of *either sex* who want to be found attractive by men and that they are less common in persons of either sex who wish to be found attractive by women” (67 emphasis in original). Hartley’s statement points to the connections between patriarchy and the policing of the body. Hegemony reinforces men’s expectations about their partners’ physiques more often, regardless of their partner’s gender identity.

**Stereotypes of Queer and Transgender Individuals**

Historically, within mainstream Hollywood, queer individuals on film and television have been symbolically annihilated, demonized, or used as a warning against homosexuality. Vito Russo states, “When the fact of our existence became unavoidable, we were reflected, onscreen and off, as dirty secrets” (xii). Films that showed queer and transgender individuals (such as *Dog Day Afternoon*) are described by Russo as “the ultimate freak show […] which] used the sensational side of a true story to titillate a square audience” (178-179). Queer individuals, especially the “feminized” man, have continued to be associated with evil in contemporary films
(such as *300*, *Gladiator*, or *Silence of the Lambs*) or simply made into a mockery (such as *Jack and Jill*, *White Chicks*, or *Mrs. Doubtfire*). Joshua Gamson discusses the ways that talk shows have developed problematic relationships with queer and transgender individuals. Gamson states:

> For people whose life experience is so heavily tilted toward invisibility, whose nonconformity, even when it looks very much like conformity, discredits them and disenfranchises them, daytime TV talk shows are a big shot at visibility and media accreditation […] Exploiting the need for visibility and voice, talk shows provide them, in distorted but real, hollow but gratifying, ways. (5)

However, some talk shows provide holistic, sympathetic, and non-exploitative representations of QLGBT (queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) folks in both the hosts and the guests that appear on the shows. The talk shows hosted by Ellen DeGeneres and Anderson Cooper both achieve this; but they are outnumbered by shows that profit on exploitative and problematic images of the queer community. Representations of queer and transgender individuals on television continue to be predominantly white, however. Allan Bérubé examines the public “whitening” of the gay community that has taken place. He states:

> To gain recognition and credibility, some gay organizations and media began to aggressively promote the so-called positive image of a generic gay community that is an upscale, mostly male, and mostly white consumer market with mainstream, even traditional, values. (235)

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These images symbolically annihilate queer individuals from various racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and political backgrounds that make up diverse queer communities. 

*RDR* is unique in that it does promote racial and ethnic diversity. *RDR* provides a different venue for QLGBT individuals to express themselves. However, it also makes assumptions about individual’s identities, and polices those identities in problematic ways. This thesis analyzes the ways *RDR* characterizes contestants in relation to their gender and sexual identities.

**Reality Television**

Although other scholars have done critiques of reality television in terms of individual identities such as race, class, gender and/or sexuality (Cohan; LeBesco; Maher; Pullen; Stephens; Roberts), Pozner provides a holistic intersectional analysis of reality television. Pozner analyzes gender, sexuality, race and class in hundreds of hours of reality television. Pozner states that, “In today’s society, mass media is our prime purveyor of that cultural hegemony—by which I mean that media is largely responsible for how we know what we know” (97 emphasis in original). She focuses on reality television shows available on the major networks and only mentions *RuPaul’s Drag Race* in passing, usually to praise it for providing a better portrayal than the shows she is analyzing. Pozner states that all reality television is: intentionality cast, edited, and framed to amplify regressive values around gender, race, and class, underscore advertisers’ desire to get us to *think less* and *buy more*, and create a version of ‘reality’ that erases any trace of the
advances made during the women’s rights, civil rights, and gay rights movements. (18)

Pozner describes the tactics that reality television producers will use to create friction between cast members. She cites a *New York Times* article by Edward Wyatt in which he states that reality television “programs routinely use isolation, sleeplessness and alcohol to encourage wild behavior” (N.p.). Although these reports are not from contestants on *RDR*, the contestants do bemoan not being allowed to communicate with friends and family during the show (phone calls home are used as prizes), and the show is sponsored by Absolut Vodka (the queens are always given cocktails after each runway challenge). The spinoff show, *RuPaul’s Drag Race: Untucked!*, focuses exclusively on the arguments between the contestants, where it becomes very clear that contestants are encouraged (possibly even manipulated) to fight with each other. Furthermore, editing is used to “play up regional and ethnic stereotypes” (Pozner 102) on reality shows, a technique I will investigate on *RDR*.

The treatment of QLGBT individuals on reality television has been problematic at best. Kathleen LeBesco explains that because reality television is believed to portray “real” people, QLGBT “representation and reception carry significant weight in terms of reaffirming or altering ideas about sexual difference” (“Got to Be Real” 271). Gay characters in popular reality television shows such as *Survivor, The Real World, and Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* have been analyzed for their representations of gay lives (Cohan; Heller; LeBesco; Morrish & O’Mara; Pullen; Ramsey & Santiago). Many more gay male characters (especially white gay
male characters) have been visible on reality television than lesbian characters, a representation that is problematic on its own. Of these gay male characters, scholars have noticed that they are often desexualized (Ramsey & Santiago), or their sexualization is mocked (Pullen), and they are consistently associated with the feminine (Cohan; Heller; LeBesco; Morrish & O’Mara; Ramsey & Santiago), or the evil (LeBesco). Almost all of the representations of queer characters in reality television, “[endorse] the liberal view that homosexuality is an essential part of self identity” (Kachgal 363), a concept problematized by Michel Foucault. Foucault examines the ways that sexuality has been historically constructed and ultimately labeled as a crucial and innate part of identity. Although sexual orientation does not need to be the focus of a character’s life (and is less so the focus when discussing heterosexual characters), that is the general belief endorsed by television shows. RuPaul’s Drag Race strongly promotes this view by eliciting and highlighting various confessions and discussions about gay identity and experiences between the cast members. Where many representations of queer identity in reality television have been white, RDR provides a much more racially diverse cast, although not without promoting various problematic ethnic stereotypes that this thesis explores in detail.

Drag Culture and Camp

Esther Newton’s ethnography on drag queens entitled, Mother Camp provides a useful basis for understanding drag culture and the experiences of queens living within that culture. Newton affirms that “The effect of the drag system is to wrench the sex roles loose from that which supposedly determines them, that is, genital sex”
(103). Because her ethnography was written in the 1960s, it also provides a model for comparison with the queens on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* to see how experiences have (or have not) changed for gay men and drag queens in the past 50 years. In some ways, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is a natural continuum of Newton’s ethnography. Newton states, “Drag queens symbolize homosexuality” (3); however, she also maintains, “to perform *professionally* (publicly) in women’s clothing stigmatizes impersonators within the gay world” (7). Contestants on RDR still seem to experience this stigma to some degree. Newton also discusses the relationship between drag and camp, stating they, “are the most represented and widely use symbols of homosexuality in the English speaking world” (100). She also states, “camp is a ‘strategy for a situation’ […] camp ideology ministers to the needs for dealing with an identity that is well defined but loaded with contempt” (105). However, Newton is also guilty of severe generalizations with such statements as, “‘camp taste’ […] is synonymous with homosexual taste” (105). This type of essentialist thinking needs to be investigated in the beliefs and actions of the contestants and judges on *RDR* as well. Although her concept of camp essentializes QLGBT individuals, it is useful in analyzing the function of camp on *RDR*.

Susan Sontag also provides a more essentialist view of camp; she begins by describing the concept of “taste” as something that is innate within people (276). As Andrew Britton states, Sontag “associates ‘taste’ with an ethereal individuality which transcends social ‘programming’” (139). Sontag’s argument ignores the ways such a concept would change across cultures, socio-economic classes, and historical periods.
Sontag’s description of camp is somewhat stagnant; it does not take into account the evolution of culture that can lead to something being defined as camp, or being removed from the definition of camp. Newton admits that “camp is in the eye of the beholder” (105) and Britton goes further to explain that “Camp behavior is only recognizable as a deviation from the implied norm, and without that norm it would cease to exist, it would lack definition” (138). Steven Cohan, like Sontag, provides a more stable view of camp. He states, “Camp can be defined as the ensemble of strategies used to enact a queer recognition of the incongruities arising from the cultural regulation of gender and sexuality” (184). However, Cohan’s definition of camp is more open ended because he relies on the reader’s understanding of “regulations of gender and sexuality” to decide what one defines as camp.

Contrary to Newton, Sontag, and Cohan, Britton believes camp to be potentially harmful to the homosexual community. He states that “gay camp seems little more than a kind of anaesthetic, allowing one to remain inside oppressive relations while enjoying the illusory confidence that one is flouting them” (138). Britton goes on to critique the idea of “gay sensibility exists” by citing the importance of intersectionality. He explains that “The ideological place of any individual at any given time is the site of intersection of any number of determining forces, and one’s sense of oneself as ‘gay’ is a determinate product of that intersection—not a determinant of it” (139). Britton’s critiques of the essential homosexual identity are recognizable in the ways RDR portrays homosexuality. RDR’s
portrayals of homosexuality are potentially harmful if the audience believes them to be accurate and honest examples of gay life, something I will explore more in depth.

As seen in the various opinions above, the concept of camp is up for interpretation. The definition of camp can vary and will, arguably, be defined by the individual. This thesis puts these various authors in conversation with each other in order to analyze the ways contestants on *RDR* portray and understand camp, and to examine ways audience members may interpret these performances.

**Research Procedures and Methodology: Theoretical Framework**

I have chosen to perform a textual analysis and a brief audience analysis of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* because of its unique subject matter compared to other shows on television. It is the only show on television that regularly discusses drag culture, and queer culture, and its fan base goes beyond queer identified individuals. For these reasons, it would be easy for audience members to assume that the show is providing a general truth about drag culture, or queer culture, instead of viewing it as a subset of a larger group of individuals. This is especially true for audience members who do not have other experience with queer culture; these individuals could easily assume that *RDR* is providing them with some sort of general “handbook” for navigating queerness. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is more than a funny show about drag queens; its light attitude might actually help mask some of its more problematic elements.

The primary texts this thesis examines are seasons one through four of *RDR*, as well as the spinoff show *RuPaul’s Drag Race: Untucked!*, which focuses on the conflicts between the contestants. I will also analyze the bonus features that are
included in the season DVDs. I viewed season one on Amazon Prime video, I viewed seasons two and three and their bonus features on DVD and season four on Logo’s website. I watched each episode twice, taking detailed notes on my computer during the second viewing. I will be looking at the show’s use of language, the challenges given to the contestants, and the judges’ feedback and fellow contestants’ responses to each other. I will discuss how the show may normalize derogatory and discriminatory language and how this can affect the ways the audience views such language. This thesis also utilizes a number of secondary texts and metatexts. Because the show mentions and alludes to the documentary *Paris is Burning*, I will also briefly analyze that film and its critiques (Butler, “Gender is Burning”; hooks). RuPaul Charles also uses *RDR* as a platform to promote his music and his books. I will analyze RuPaul’s songs that are used in the show as well as his two books, *Lettin It All Hang Out: An Autobiography* and *Workin’ It!: RuPaul's Guide to Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Style*. In addition, I will be citing an interview I conducted with Latrice Royale, one of the contestants on *RDR*. I conducted the interview on the phone while audio recording it onto my computer, and then transcribed the interview. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed this interview and protocol, and deemed that it was not part of generalizable research in this thesis, and so did not fit the category of human subject research. Because this interview is only with one contestant, I will simply be using it as an enhancement to my analysis, it will not be used to generalize any beliefs held by other contestants on *RDR*. 
My sample audience analysis will include YouTube videos and message board posts on the website Television Without Pity. YouTube videos were found by searching for key words “RuPaul’s Drag Race,” and “racism.” I attempted to search for videos using other key words such as “sexism,” “transphobia,” and “fatphobia,” but was unable to locate any useful videos. My message board sampling was taken by browsing the message board posts on the RuPaul’s Drag Race board of Television Without Pity related to seasons one through four. My audience analysis will draw on Jenkins’ theories of convergence culture, participatory audiences, and textual poaching, as discussed above. Hall’s encoding/decoding model will be utilized to examine the audience responses.

My textual analysis will draw on the feminist media and cultural studies theories that I have outlined above (Butler; Cohan; Crenshaw; Hall; and Hill Collins). This thesis will utilize queer theory and feminist theory throughout the textual analysis. Bonnie J. Dow analyzes the strengths and weaknesses that scholars attribute to both textual and audience analyses. She encourages scholars to view their criticism as, “an argumentative activity in which the goal is to persuade the audience that their knowledge of a text will be enriched if they choose to see a text as the critic does, while never assuming that that particular ‘way of seeing’ is the only or best way to see that text” (4). Furthermore, Dow maintains that all criticism is socially constructed, and that critics must acknowledge their social situations, because no knowledge is created inside a vacuum. Criticism, “is always the product of socially situated persons who make arguments that are enabled but also limited by their experiences and
perspectives” (3). Dow understands textual analysis (and any other analysis) as one of many forms of knowledge, that must be recognized as culturally constructed and non-objective.

In analyzing *RDR*, I also want to acknowledge how much I enjoy the show. My situated knowledge of the show comes from my position as a white, queer, cis-gendered woman, and as a fan, feminist, scholar, and critic. Dow encourages analysis of one’s personal interests, stating, “We should look askance at anyone who purports to understand and to evaluate a text that s/he claims not to appreciate on its own terms” (xiii). Dow also explains the importance of television within our culture. She sees “the role of television programming as public discourse that carries important meanings for its viewers, meanings that cannot be separated from their links to the larger context in which television is created and received” (xiii-xiv). This thesis’ feminist textual analysis will focus on my interpretations of messages that are propagated on *RDR*. This thesis will utilize Hill Collins’ domains of power in the analysis of these messages. I analyze the possible influence these messages may have on audience members. This analysis of *RDR* strives to “engage our thinking about the political implications of discursive practice” (Dow 5). I view textual analysis as an opportunity to explore the political implications of popular culture.

**Chapter Layout**

The analysis provided in chapter two will begin with a brief overview of *Paris is Burning* and its scholarly critiques then a discussion of drag and queer cultures on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. I will then discuss the treatment of the feminine and women on
the show. Next, I will discuss individuals and representations of groups of individuals on the show in general chronological order. Next, I will provide a short audience analysis. Lastly, I will discuss some related materials that did not appear on the show. When necessary, I will use secondary texts to augment my analysis. Chapter three will conclude whether or not *RDR* propagates or challenges hegemony, and how audience members may read these messages. I will also recommend future research on the topic.
CHAPTER TWO: TEXTUAL AND AUDIENCE ANALYSIS

Chapter one introduced the television show *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and briefly discussed the importance of the show, including the fact that it is one of the only shows on television that openly discusses gay lives and drag culture. The literature review that followed was a brief overview of the theories and bodies of knowledge used to complete this thesis. Chapter two will provide a discussion of the ways in which *RDR* relates to hegemonic and oppressive stereotypes and roles.

Because RuPaul and contestants often cite *Paris is Burning* as their predecessor, this chapter will begin with a short analysis of *Paris is Burning*. A discussion of drag and gay culture will follow and then move into a discussion of the representations of the feminine and femininity on the show. This discussion will address the secondary question which asks how *RDR* represents gay men and drag queens. The remainder of the discussion will be organized in loose chronological order (starting with contestants on season one and ending with contestants on season four). The discussion will address the secondary questions asking how *RDR* represents race, size, and socioeconomic backgrounds as these identities become relevant to the discussions of individuals. For the most part, discussions of individuals will rely on their interactions with other contestants from their season. However, when general subjects overlap, chronological order will be overlooked for the sake of the discussion.
Although the contestants identify as men during their time on the show, they generally refer to each other using female pronouns and their stage names; the contestants discuss this as a common practice in drag. This thesis will follow the same practice.

*Paris is Burning* “Tells a Story Like No Other”

*RDR* cites and alludes to *Paris is Burning* (*PIB*) consistently throughout the show; sometimes contestants will quote the film without reference, showing that they have clearly watched the film multiple times. I asked Latrice Royale to explain the significance of *PIB* on modern drag culture. Her response is as follows:

That is the root of it all. Like, *Paris is Burning* shows exactly what the lifestyle was like in the gay and ballroom scene. Like, that’s history. Like, that’s, you know, that’s history. So, um, basically, um, the legends, you know, were made from *Paris is Burning*. That’s, you know, that’s the houses and LaBeija [a queen featured in *Paris is Burning*] and all that. So, that is still going on to this day, the kids are still carrying the legacy. And so, um, you know, basically it’s just paying tribute to, and homage to, our history, you know what I mean? And that tells a story like no other. So, it definitely plays a big part in today’s society because, you know, everybody needs to know where we come from.

Although this is only Latrice’s opinion, I believe it is similar to many of the opinions held by the contestants, and RuPaul, about the importance of *Paris is Burning*. I also mentioned to Latrice that some academics felt the film was exploitative and asked her 

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3 RuPaul also samples dialogue from *Paris is Burning* in his other projects. His 2007 film *Starrbooty* and his song “Looking Good, Feeling Gorgeous” both include quotes from *PIB*. 
opinion; she did not appear to have heard this critique before and did not agree that was film was exploitative. It is worth acknowledging that the opinions of black gay men, the men who are represented in *PIB*, should not be disregarded. That many people within the black gay community appear to find *PIB* empowering is important knowledge. *PIB* is one of the few representations of black gay men that exist. Thus, the academic critiques of the film should be read as simply one aspect of the films’ impact. The film means many different things to different groups. It should be valued for its importance to the contestants on *RDR*, and for the criticism it receives within the academy.

While there are no dissenting opinions of *PIB* featured on *RDR*, there are academic critiques of the film, specifically by bell hooks and Judith Butler. Hooks’ critique of *PIB* focuses on the ways that oppressed groups are represented and made spectacle for the audience. She states, “Watching *Paris is Burning*, I began to think that the many yuppie-looking, straight-acting, pushy, predominantly white folks in the audience were there because the film in no way interrogates ‘whiteness’” (149). Hooks also states that *PIB* revolves around contestants attempts to perfect a femininity that stems from “a sexist idealization of white womanhood” (147). She sees the film as glossing over any of the serious or painful issues that it mentions and ignoring the systemic discrimination that affects its participants’ daily lives. Hooks states that *PIB* is part of a current trend in which, “blackness [is being] commodified in unprecedented ways,” and this commodification has allowed, “for whites to appropriate black culture without interrogating whiteness or showing concern for the
displeasure of blacks” (153-4). She mentions that the director, Jennie Livingston, is a white lesbian, and yet no one has questioned her choice to do a film on black gay culture. Hooks questions if a black lesbian attempting to do a film on white gay culture would be treated in the same way. Butler and hooks both criticize Livingston for the way her film insinuates that her participants will gain some sort of fame from their part in the film. Butler explains, “Livingston's camera enters this world as the promise of phantasmatic fulfillment: a wider audience, national and international fame” (“Gender is Burning” 390). Hooks criticizes Livingston stating:

  Too many reviewers and interviewers assume not only that there is no need to raise pressing critical questions about Livingston’s film, but act as though she somehow did this marginalized black gay subculture a favor by bringing their experience to a wider public. Such a stance obscures the substantial rewards she has received for this work. (153)

Both authors voice concerns about whether participants in the film were eager to do so in hopes of gaining larger recognition and fame. However, Livingston’s unspoken promise of fame is not fulfilled for the vast majority of individuals in PIB.

  Judith Butler begins her critique of PIB by stating, “As much as there is defiance and affirmation, the creation of kinship and of glory in that film, there is also the kind of reiteration of norms that cannot be called subversive and that leads to the death of Venus Xtravaganza [a transgender woman who is murdered during the filming of the documentary]” (384). Butler goes on to question if the film’s depictions of drag are subversive. She wonders at the way the camera views the participants in
the drag balls. Butler explains that in *PIB*, “The camera thus trades on the masculine privilege of the disembodied gaze, the gaze that has the power to produce bodies, but which is itself no body” (“Gender is Burning” 392). Hooks mentions a similar critique stating, “[…] the male ‘gaze’ in the audience is directed at participants in a manner akin to the objectifying phallic stare straight men direct at ‘feminine’ women daily in public spaces” (148-9). Both authors problematize the gaze within the documentary, reminding the reader that no part of a film is objective. Butler ends her piece with a statement of ambiguity, similarly to her views on drag:

In these senses, then, *Paris Is Burning* documents neither an efficacious insurrection nor a painful resubordination, but an unstable coexistence of both. The film attests to the painful pleasures of eroticizing and miming the very norms that wield their power by foreclosing the very reverse occupations that the children nevertheless perform. (392)

Considering the critiques of both authors, it is clear that neither view the film with the same awe that contestants on *RDR* voice. However, not all academic responses to the film were negative. J. Jack Halberstam believes the film was, “quite sensitive to the fact that there were lessons to be learned from the Balls and the Houses, lessons about how to read gender and race, for example, as not only artificial but highly elaborate and ritualistic significations” (“F2M”126). Although the film is seen by many to be a significant contribution to gay subculture, it is also worth considering some of critiques of the film, especially while discussing critiques of its successor, *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. 

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Representations of Queer Cultures on RuPaul’s Drag Race

Appropriation of Transgender Culture

Would Butler believe that RDR exists in a state of similar instability as that of PIB? The show mentions and alludes to a number of complex identities, without necessarily clarifying how these identities differ. Terms and phrases that have perhaps been reclaimed by some, but are still generally considered derogatory, are used regularly on the show. The show’s use of language and puns that many consider harmful may appear acceptable to unaware audiences. When I first started watching RDR, I posted about it on my Facebook profile. My straight-identified cousin commented and asked me, “Who is your favorite ladyboy?” At first, her callous use of such a word shocked me, but I soon realized where she learned this term was acceptable. “Ladyboy” is a term that is constantly used by both RuPaul and the contestants; it is also the name of one of RuPaul’s songs that is occasionally played on the show. Many QLGBT individuals would consider “ladyboy” to be a derogatory term, and its free use on the show may be misleading.

Whenever the contestants have a new message from RuPaul, they hear a siren and then RuPaul’s voice saying, “Girl, you’ve got She-Mail!” This pun is a play on the phrase “She-male,” which is a derogatory term usually used to refer to transgender women; it is often used in exploitative pornography. This phrase does not apply to the contestants on RDR, of which the vast majority identify as men during their time on the show. Both the contestants and RuPaul have also bemoaned the frustration of having their gender identity confused by people. Although they want to be understood
as drag queens, and not transgender individuals, utilizing the phrases “ladyboy” and “she-male” may make it difficult for the average viewer to differentiate. Furthermore, because RuPaul and most contestants live their lives as men, using these phrases is appropriation of an outside group. The appropriation of such derogatory terms while still benefiting from male privilege shows a lack of understanding for the real issues that transgender individuals face.

**Camp Use in Reinforcing Transgender Stereotypes**

In season three episode three, we see a specific example of how camp may be used to normalize problematic and harmful words. In this episode the contestants work in two teams to shoot two skits titled, “Drag Queens in Outer Space: From Earth to Uranus” and the sequel “Drag Queens in Outer Space 2: Return to Uranus.” Their mission is to “boldly tuck where no man has tucked before.” Character names include Hermaphrodite (pronounced like Aphrodite), Lady TaTa, and Boobarella, and they use the phrase “tranny-port aboard.” One of Hermaphrodite’s famous lines is “I am your father, and your mother!” Although the skits are over the top and funny, they continue to use harmful and inaccurate words like “tranny” and “hermaphrodite” in relation to the contestants. Britton states, “It almost seems at times to have become a matter of common acceptance that camp is radical” (136). However there is clearly nothing radical about cisgender men appropriating harmful and outdated words to create these scenes. In using such phrases within these comedic skits, the audience is allowed to laugh at, and feel comfortable with, their use. Britton explains that, “‘Subversiveness’ needs to be assessed not in terms of a quality which is supposedly proper to a
phenomenon, but as a relationship between a phenomenon and its context” (138). Is there anything subversive in our present day about cisgender men appropriating terms for the use of humor? Perhaps at another time this type of humor could be considered subversive. But presently, when queer groups struggle with unifying the LGB and the T together, what might have been subversive simply becomes offensive.

RuPaul’s Lyrics and Their Appropriation of Transgender Culture

Both of RuPaul’s songs, “Tranny Chaser” and “Ladyboy,” which are featured in the show, blur the lines between drag queens and transgender women and reinforce notions of these groups of individuals as cunning, predatory, and highly sexual. I will include important portions of the lyrics of the songs obtained from RuPaul’s official website before I analyze them. A portion of RuPaul’s lyrics for “Tranny Chaser” follows:

Is some tranny chasers up in here? Lemme make one thing clear (fierce fierce) / Make a move, what you wanna do? I ain’t got no time for no looky loo, boo / Hey (work) give a dog a bone. Looky-loo, looky look at you who/ Hey (work) give a dog a bone. Look at you, lookin’ at Ru Ru I see the way you want it, and you want it bad / You can’t regret the candy that you never had / So take a bite baby, better do it fast / Hurry up cause you won’t get another chance / Just because you want me… that don’t make you gay / Every time you watch me… that don’t make you gay / Do you wanna be me… that don’t make you gay / Or do you wanna f@#& me… that don’t make you gay / So the hunter got
captured by the game / It ain’t the first time a player got played / Won’t be the last time you hear a t-girl say / You want it wet then you betta make it rain […]

A portion of RuPaul’s lyrics for “Ladyboy” follows:

Nobody rocks like the girls i´m running with / Sitting on a secret and everybody’s in on it / Some girls talk to the boys in the chat room / My girls talk to the boys in the back room

Hit me up, i´m that chick you know / That my world won’t stop if you clock me [“clock me” refers to whether or not one can tell that a drag queen is not a “real” woman] […]

This groove is for my girls, little lady boys and girls […] If you wanna dance i´m the girl with something extra / If you wanna dance you betta put it on me mister / Ladyboys be shaking like they haven’t got room / The t-girls make their ass go bumpity boom […]

Both of these songs focus on finding men for sexual encounters and the fact that these men may or may not know about their romantic interests’ anatomy. The songs discuss “fooling” men who believe RuPaul, or other drag queens, are cisgender women. The lyrics for “Tranny Chaser” which state, “So the hunter got captured by the game / It ain’t the first time a player got played,” suggest that men who pursue women in a predatory way deserve to be fooled into pursuing a man. Both of these songs also refer to seducing or enticing straight men to experiment sexually with “trannys,” and in order for this to happen, the men must spend money. As stated previously, because of the use of terms like “ladyboy” and “tranny” and the lack of
distinction made between drag queens and transgender women, these songs reinforce harmful stereotypes about both transgender women and drag queens. Julia Serano explains, “The media hypersexualizes us [transgender women] by creating the impression that most trans women are sex workers or sexual deceivers, and by asserting that we transition for primarily sexual reasons (e.g., to prey on innocent straight men or to fulfill some kind of bizarre sex fantasy)” (16). RuPaul’s appropriation and sexualization of such derogatory terms is irresponsible. These songs fetishize and dehumanize an already misunderstood minority group. Furthermore, because RuPaul lives as a man, he does not experience any of the negative repercussions that such songs can cause for transgender individuals.

Gay Male Stereotypes

In addition to reinforcing stereotypes about drag queens and transgender women, *RDR* also reinforces gay male stereotypes through jokes, puns, and the assistants—known as the pit crew—that appear on the show. The show’s pit crew consists of two muscular men who never wear more than underwear and assist with various parts of the show. They are also occasionally put in sexually suggestive situations with the contestants. Although the pit crew is entertaining, they reinforce a number of stereotypes. They are always muscular and fit, thus, they emphasize the belief that all gay men should look this way and desire this type of body. The show could have taken the opportunity to provide a more holistic view of gay men’s bodies and desires. Instead, the show reinforces hegemonic notions of gay men as super fit and overtly sexualized. The contestants and RuPaul often ogle the pit crew and make it
clear they find them sexually desirable. The use of the pit crew reinforces the stereotypical belief that gay men have an, “omnipresent manifestation of sexual desire for men” (Newton and Williams). Although this is meant to be comedic, it is also exploitative of gay men’s bodies (the audience is led to believe that the pit crew is gay). In these ways, the pit crew reinforces shallow stereotypes about gay men.

Although RuPaul and the contestants may feel that the pit crew allows them to be open and honest about their homosexuality with the audience, it may actually be reinforcing many of the stereotypes that feed into discrimination. Russo states, “There is enormous pressure to keep gay people defined solely by our sexuality, which prevents us from presenting our existence in political terms” (xii). In fact, the show avoids opportunities to make political statements, even ones that would benefit all QLGBT individuals. Although there are times that RuPaul will educate the audience about things like Stonewall, the personal discrimination that the contestants discuss experiencing is not mirrored in the show’s treatment of oppression. The show often focuses on how much better things are now for gay people, while avoiding discussing what kinds of oppression the contestants still experience in their lives. One example are the videos that contestants make in episode nine of season three. Each contestant makes a video with the theme, “Why I Love the U.S.A.,” which RuPaul says will be sent to the United States armed forces overseas. Although these videos are slightly subversive, because “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” had not yet been repealed when their episode was aired, they are also problematic. The videos reinforce the idea of American exceptionalism and ignore the very serious problems that the United States
has with QLGBT rights and beyond. RuPaul could have chosen to focus the challenge on a (relatively) small political issue like repealing “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” but instead he decided to ignore the myriad of ways that our government continues to discriminate against queer individuals and other minorities and focus on a fictional idyllic United States. *RDR*’s focus on overt sexualization of gay men and de-emphasis of political issues contributes to the silencing of queer individuals and the concealment of their needs for political rights.

**Policing of Drag**

*RDR* provides a limited view into the lives of gay men and drag queens. Although there are many different types of drag, *RDR* only values and encourages certain types of drag. The judges criticize contestants who want to experiment with androgynous drag or “gender fuck” drag. In *Lettin It All Hang Out*, RuPaul discusses doing “gender fuck drag” (91) when he was younger. However, he presently appears to view this type of drag as immature and unpolished. RuPaul states that when he experimented with “gender fuck drag”, he wore similar outfits during the day and night, which is very different from present day. He makes it clear in his most recent book, *Workin’ It*, that he only wears drag for performances. RuPaul’s “gender fuck” drag seems similar to the “street fairy” label that Newton discusses. According to Newton, this label is given to queens, “who refuse to segregate their activities into clearly defined work and private domains” (17). Many “professional” drag queens in Newton’s ethnography express contempt towards queens who wear drag when they are not performing. Newton describes “street fairies” as, “jobless young homosexual
men who publicly epitomize the homosexual stereotype and are the underclass of the gay world” (8). Conversely, stage impersonators make an effort to, “[segregate] the stigma from the personal life by limiting it to the stage context as much as possible” (8). This overt contempt for the feminine and non-binary gender presentation has lessened in the past 50 years, as more gay adults are able to be out to their loved ones and co-workers without fear of losing their job or friendships. However, the push for drag queens to continue to segregate their professional lives from their personal lives still appears important according to RDR contestants. Furthermore, more androgynous drag, similar to “street fairy” drag, still appears to be valued less, and is discouraged on RDR.

Rejection of Androgynous Drag

Contestants on RDR walk a fine line between being criticized for looking too feminine and not feminine enough. Ongina from season one and Milan from season four both receive criticism from the judges for their androgynous appearances. Ongina’s style of drag rarely involves wearing wigs; she prefers to leave her bald head exposed and don various headpieces. RuPaul criticizes her lack of a wig in the first episode explaining, “When I see you, I still see a little boy.” After RuPaul’s critiques Ongina makes an effort to feminize herself in episode two saying, “I want to elevate that [my style] this week to not-so-much ‘boy in a dress’ but ‘drag queen in a dress.’” In episode five, Ongina is sent home for appearing too masculine. The episode five challenge requires that each contestant turn a female athlete with a “masculine” gender expression into their “drag daughter.” Ongina decides to wear pants and put her drag
daughter in a dress, and the judges criticize her for this choice. Santino Rice, one of the main judges, states, “A woman in a pants suit is really great. A drag queen in a pants suit—not tucking—is a man.” Ongina had already mentioned previously on the show how she does not like to tuck because it is painful. RuPaul says, “We were looking for mother-daughter and you gave us father-daughter.” Ultimately, Ongina’s choice to try a different type of drag sends her home.

Milan experiences similar criticism. In episode five of season four, Milan impersonates Janelle Monae (an R&B musician who wears a suit and tie) during her runway performance. The judges criticize Milan for appearing in the suit. Santino Rice says, “I see you as a man. […] It [Milan’s outfit] all reads as ‘boy.’” Milan tries to defend her outfit saying she wanted to stay true to Janelle’s look, but Michelle Visage (another judge) disagrees with her saying, “Bottom line, it’s still a drag queen competition and you’re giving us drag king.” In Milan’s last episode, episode six, she is discussing drag communities in New York City with the other contestants. During her individual interview she states, “I don’t want to be pigeonholed as just a drag ‘queen’ [Milan holds up her fingers to mime quotes]. I think it’s important for people to see that there is an artist on stage.” The challenge for this episode is to design a small float for a pride parade. The judges critique Milan’s float for being about her instead of a message about pride because it says “The Milan Invasion” on the side. However, Willam wins the challenge with a boat that is covered in star-shaped stickers of his face. During the judges private discussions Billy B. says Milan’s, “body language is totally ‘dude in a dress.’” Michelle Visage states, “If she lip syncs tonight
and that wig comes off…stop it already!” Milan is in the “bottom two” three times during the competition. Each time she “lip syncs for her life” (the bottom two contestants must lip sync against each other) she tears her wig off during her performance. During the Untucked! episode, Willam asks Milan about her choice to not wear breasts with her outfit, although Willam made the same choice (and the judges complimented her for it) in episode one. Milan tries to explain that she likes to do a different type of drag, but the camera shows us the incredulous faces of the other contestants. During her final lip sync, Milan tears her wig and costume off at the climax of the song and the camera shows us the surprised faces of the judges and other contestants. Phi Phi O’Hara, a fellow contestant, laments, “Milan…girl! That’s clearly a dude.” In Milan’s exit interview she says, “With this particular competition, there’s a certain style; a certain vision. And some of those elements, I did not bring to the table.”

Milan’s and Ongina’s choices to perform a more androgynous type of drag led to criticism and their ultimate dismissal. Newton would say that both contestants perform with an opposition “between ‘appearance,’ which is female, and ‘reality,’ or ‘essence,’ which is male” (101). Newton explains that one of the drastic ways to play out this opposition is by taking off one’s wig during their performance. The judges consider Milan’s choice to take her wig off during her performance, and Ongina’s choice to not wear a wig, too drastic for RDR. Although some oppositional performances are rewarded on RDR, Milan’s and Ongina’s are not. Contestants are ultimately criticized if they show too much opposition between reality and appearance.
Conversely, contestants who have “too little” opposition between reality and appearance are also criticized.

*Devaluation of Femininity Within Individual Contestants*

Contestants who have been criticized for being too pretty and not looking “drag enough” include Tatianna, Carmen, and Mariah. Contestants criticize Tatianna from season two for admitting that she sometimes feels mixed about her gender identity. Jujubee asks Tatianna how she feels when she is in drag, “do you feel like a woman or do you feel like a drag queen?” To which Tatianna replies, “a little bit of both.” It quickly becomes clear that this type of gender ambiguity is not acceptable to many of the other contestants. Tatianna also discusses doing drag in high school and the difficulties of being out and using drag to cope. Jujubee, in episode nine states, “Tatianna is stuck in the realm of ‘I am a girl.’ I think as a drag queen you should culture yourself, you should be chameleon.” Tatianna responds to some of the criticism that she is too ‘feminine’ and lacking talent in the reunion episode. She states, “As long as I have a dick between my legs and wig on my head I’m a drag queen.”

Mariah experiences similar discrimination in season three. Shangela is especially vocal about Mariah’s “feminine” appearance. In episode two of *Untucked!* Shangela calls Mariah a “tranny” and asks her friend, Alexis Mateo, in private, “Is this America’s Next Drag Superstar or America’s Next Tranny Superstar?” Carmen from the same season is also critiqued for her femininity and her body. In episode one of *Untucked!*, contestants criticize Carmen while she is absent, because she walks around
the workshop/dressing room naked. India Ferra complains, “Bring some boy clothes to walk around in the drag workshop, bitch.” Alexis Mateo implies that Carmen is not “drag enough” stating, “Drag for me is larger than life. If you want to see a real girl, go to the mall.” Carmen, it is worth noting, has since come out as transgender, but Mariah and Tatianna have not. All three of these contestants are critiqued for looking more like “real” women than drag queens. Although all of the contestants work as drag queens, this disdain for femininity shows a discomfort with contestants who do not completely separate their working drag personas from their “real lives.” While it could be argued that a desire for less “natural” types of femininity in drag is more subversive, the general disdain towards the queens who prefer to look more “feminine” is still disturbing.

Masculine and Feminine Schism

The treatment of femininity on the show must be examined in conjunction with the treatment of masculinity. Many times on RDR, the contestants who speak about their gender reinforce the fact that they identify as men. Phrases like “man up” and “be a man” are used seriously by the contestants. Although the contestants enjoy performing as drag queens, many do not wish to give up their male privilege, and do not want the audience to forget that they are men. Private interviews with contestants are always conducted out of drag. Hence, during some of the most intimate moments, the contestants appear as men, and the audience is reminded that they are men. This reinforcement of the contestants “masculinity” helps explain why some contestants show discomfort about those who do not break with the feminine outside of their drag
performances. Gordene Olga MacKenzie explains, “The standard audience expectation for drag performances is that at the end of the show the performer will return to “normal” dress and the appropriate bipolar gender role and behavior[...]” (111). This expectation is reinforced by contestants emphasizing their masculinity through their own language and through the show’s decision to conduct individual interviews out of drag. Contestants criticize those who do not return to “appropriate bipolar gender role[s]” out of drag, and their gender identities are called into question.

“Dude Queens” and the Policing of Bodies

During our interview, Latrice Royale discussed with me the RDR rule that all contestants must be male-bodied. She states,

In the future I feel like, the show as it evolves, should bring girls like Carmen and Sonique [contestants who have come out as transgender] onto the show because that is showing all aspects of drag, and it’s not just that we are dudes. Although that is where the stock is, that’s where the meat and potatoes of it all comes from, is padding and, not enhancement silicone and body work. But, that comes from, you know, transforming and creating an illusion. But that’s why I understand why she [RuPaul] has just boys on the show [...] to retain that, you know, ‘cause that’s what she is, RuPaul is a dude queen, a boy.

Currently, in order to participate on RDR, contestants must identify as men. However, it is not clear where the show draws the line on acceptable surgical enhancements. While it appears that surgeries such as breast augmentations and penectomies are unacceptable, many of the contestants admit to having other types of
cosmetic surgeries done specifically to enhance their performances. Most common are discussions of having lips and cheeks surgically enhanced. However, while all of these surgeries relate to creating femininity, only some of these surgeries are acceptable for contestants on *RDR*.

The rules for *RDR* contestants operate on a rigid male/female binary that leaves little room for gender/sex non-conforming individuals. Indeed, the belief that hormones, breasts and/or a vulva are the only things that make a “woman” is a regressive and hegemonic view of gender. Obviously, since there is no way to actually guarantee that every contestant identifies as a man, certain physical characteristics are monitored to ensure that the contestants fit into a narrow definition of “man.” Assumedly, these characteristics include the surgeries mentioned above and hormones, none of which actually stipulate a person’s gender identity. *RDR*, uses the slogan, “Gentleman, start your engines, and may the best woman win!” yet still forces contestants to define their gender identity according to a limited dichotomy, and bases this dichotomy on the construction of contestants’ bodies. Ultimately, the show’s nominal celebration of gender as a social construction does not translate into the show’s treatment of its contestants, and the contestants’ treatment of each other.

**Pseudo-Feminism and the Masking of Misogyny**

Although women are only visible as members of the judges’ panel on *RDR*, femininity is an important part of the show. There is much feminist debate about whether or not drag mocks or reveres the feminine. On the show, RuPaul will often use the term “herstory” to describe a historical anecdote. “Herstory” is a term
associated with the second wave feminist movement, and RuPaul’s use of the term could be read as solidarity with feminism, or as an appropriation of feminism.

Marilyn Frye would probably agree with the latter. Her opinion on drag queens is as follows:

But as I read it, gay men’s effeminacy and donning of feminine apparel displays no love of or identification with women or the womanly. For the most part, this femininity is affected and is characterized by theatrical exaggeration. It is a casual and cynical mockery of women, for whom femininity is the trappings of oppression, but it is also a kind of play, a toying with that which is taboo. [...] What gay male affectation of femininity seems to me to be is a kind of serious sport in which men may exercise their power and control over the feminine, much as in other sports one exercises physical power and control over elements of the physical universe. [...] But the mastery of the feminine is not feminine. It is masculine. It is not a manifestation of woman-loving but of woman-hating. Someone with such mastery may have the very first claim to manhood. (N.p.)

Frye’s statements can also help explain the discrimination that contestants face when they identify too closely with the feminine outside of their drag performances. Other terms commonly used on the show also lead one to question whether RDR reveres or mocks the feminine. “Fish” is a term that is used constantly on the show to refer to a queen who looks particularly feminine. It is seen as a compliment. If one is “serving fish,” it means they look like a “real woman.” The term fish has many
different colloquial meanings. According to Urban Dictionary, “fish” can also refer to a woman, or to a new inmate in prison. Almost all of the definitions of “fish” on Urban Dictionary that refer to people are referring to the feminine. Although the term is meant as a compliment on RDR, it references misogyny. When I tried to question Latrice Royale on the meaning of the term “fish” and its origin, she laughed and avoided explaining the term, but eventually did admit that it refers to women because of the association of female genitalia with unpleasant odor. Clearly, this term refers to a fear of, and disgust with, the female body, a disgust imposed on women and reinforced through a highly profitable industry based on the belief that women’s bodies are naturally dirty. The term is a compliment only because everyone knows that the person is actually male. The person can enjoy the performance of “fish” without any of the burdens associated with actually possessing female genitalia.

Another phrase repeated consistently on the show is “charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent,” a phrase used to refer to the qualities that “America’s Next Drag Superstar” is supposed to possess. The phrase is also an acronym for “cunt.” Cunt is also seen in the term “hunty” which the contestants use to refer to each other. “Hunty,” according to Urban Dictionary, is an “amalgamate of honey and cunty.” Cunt is derived from the term cunctipotence, which Jane Caputi says can be traced back to mean “female and female-identified power, potency, possibility, and potential” (N.p.). However, in modern times, cunt is generally used as an insult. Caputi explains, “A ubiquitous misogynist insult against the cunt concerns its scent, literally its ‘essence’” (N.p.). Similar to fish, cunt is used to invoke a female essence, or power, but
ultimately falls short of showing any reverence for that female power. The femininity associated with both the use of the terms cunt and fish refer to a vulgar and superficially sexual feminine essence that patriarchy endorses. Caputi states, “awareness and understanding of female potency, has been appropriated and distorted, suppressed, discredited, erased and trivialized through patriarchal colonization” (N.p.). Here, the cosmic power once associated with the vulva is trivialized and used to enhance the performances of the contestants, without forcing them to consider or appreciate any of the deeper meanings behind such terms.

Women are mocked in more overt ways on the show as well. In episode two of season two the mini challenge requires that the contestants use a RuPaul doll to “turn a lady into a tramp.” RuPaul emphasizes, “I want to see these little ladies turned into six bad girls that work hard for the money, if you know what I mean.” Mystique describes her doll, Shaquanda: “I call her broke down stripper. When she wanna be naughty, all you got to do is turn her around, [shows the thong the doll is wearing] she ready for access.” The doll that wins is called Shafreeforal and has a black eye, a cast on her arm, and a missing front tooth. Her creators explain, “She’s had a little bit of a rough night. She has lost her shoe, [RuPaul laughs] her other heel is broken but she still has the heel in her hand […].” Shafreeforal is the doll that most explicitly evokes images of abuse, rape, and poverty, and is the doll that RuPaul finds most entertaining. Although all of the dolls look sexually provocative, they do not all specifically reflect the stereotypes and stigmas associated with prostitution. RuPaul clearly finds these dolls humorous, and no thought is given to why Shafreeforal’s look is seen as funny
instead of disturbing. This mini challenge mocks the living conditions of many impoverished women, as well as the inequalities that sex workers face because of a lack of legal recourse.

Figure 1: Winning doll, Shafreeforal (screen grab from RuPaul’s Drag Race).

The humor enjoyed behind these disturbing associations of abuse also relates to the phrase used on RDR to discuss makeup. If a contestant’s face is “beaten” or one is said to have “beat your face,” it means that their makeup is expertly done. This compliment calls to mind the untold numbers of women who have attempted to cover the evidence of an abusive spouse with makeup. Both this term and the insensitivity shown towards abused and impoverished women in the mini challenge mentioned above leads to the conclusion that little thought is given to the lives of women on a show based around the ability to perfect the illusion of womanhood. Carol Sheffield states that sexual violence is not taken seriously in our culture, and that “[s]ociety manifests this attitude by simply denying the existence of sexual violence, denying the
gravity of these acts, joking about them, and attempting to legitimate them” (126).
Ultimately, linguistic expressions and humor that allude to violence against women are part of the ingrained and insidious belief system in patriarchy that allows the abuse, rape, and murder of women to continue.

In addition to the general analyses that have been discussed so far, there are many representations of individuals contestants that are worth examining. The following sections will discuss the representations and characterizations of individual contestants and their relationships to larger, systemic stereotypes.

“Creature”: BeBe Zahara Benet as the “Exotic” Other

Just as women’s lives are devalued on RDR, there is a similar tactless treatment of people of color. Because the contestants perform feminine gender expressions, stereotypes that are also specifically related to women of color become apparent. These stereotypes, like those mentioned above, serve to reinforce hegemonic beliefs about women and other marginalized groups. Specifically, stereotypes about exotic and sexualized cultural Others are emphasized in the representations of various contestants. BeBe Zahara Benet, the winner of Season one, was born in Cameroon, a fact the audience was never allowed to forget. During BeBe’s time on the show, RuPaul would consistently introduce her by yelling out, “Cameroon!” every time she appeared on the runway. No other contestant has been more associated with her place of birth than BeBe. The audience was always reminded of the fact that she was the “cultural Other” (Mohanty 55).
In episode three, RuPaul says, “Not only is BeBe carrying all of Africa on her shoulders, she’s also carrying all of Rene of Paris wigs on her head!” His casual joke reveals the truth that he views BeBe as an ambassador for the entire continent of Africa. This statement generalizes and obscures BeBe’s actual heritage, and puts her in the impossible position of speaking for an entire continent. BeBe wears a traditional Cameroonian woman’s dress during her video challenge for the MAC Viva Glam Campaign for the fight against AIDS. In her video BeBe says, “I come from a faraway place, a place where HIV/AIDS is very rampant. That place, my home, is called Africa.” Although it is true that HIV/AIDS does have higher rates of infection in certain parts of the continent of Africa versus the United States, it is also true that this is one of the few things that Americans associate with Africa. BeBe’s choice to speak about HIV/AIDS as an “African,” reinforces this one-dimensional stereotype. Furthermore, BeBe continues to exoticize herself by her choice of costume.

Although in one way we could view BeBe’s choice of Cameroonian dress as subversive, because she is actually a cis-gendered man wearing traditional women’s clothing, she is also making it easy for the audience to focus only on the exotic aspects of her performance, rather than encouraging her audience to view the myriad peoples of Africa as multi-dimensional human beings. By calling her home a “faraway place” and referring to it only as “Africa” rather than specifying her home country of Cameroon, BeBe reinforces the American notion of Africa as a single monolithic country, rather than reminding us that it is made up of many different countries. BeBe’s choice to identify herself as only “African” also solidifies the concept of the
monolithic third world as discussed by Chandra Mohanty. Trinh Minh-ha maintains that third world peoples are, “Exploited, looked down upon, and lumped together in a convenient term that denies their individualities” (98). BeBe’s portrayal of the exotic African furthers the stereotype of Africa as homogenous and stagnant. Although BeBe does not identify as a woman, she presents herself as one in her performances and feeds into many of the stereotypes of third world women that hold strong in Western knowledge.

Figure 2: BeBe in "Creature" (Musto).

In episode three while BeBe is walking the runway, we hear her voice over saying, “Africa isn’t only about the leopards and the lions and the tigers and all that stuff. You know, it’s also about dignity.” As she finishes this sentence, BeBe pulls off her jacket revealing a skintight leopard print cat suit. This statement feels contradictory to her performance; her discussion of dignity appears disjointed with her sexualized and animalized costume. BeBe’s runway outfits were predominantly animal prints, and although we have no way of knowing if she actually chose them herself, the audience is led to believe that the contestants make their own costume.
selections. Hill Collins reminds us that marginalized groups’ associations with nature are a means of suppression. She states, “defining people of color as less human, animalist, or more ‘natural’ denied African and Asian people’s subjectivity and supports the political economy of domination that characterized slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism […]” (78). Since leaving the show, BeBe has opened up a show of her own in New York titled “Creature.” The Village Voice describes it: “Against pulsing visuals of African tribespeople and pouncing wildlife, BeBe emerged in a shaman (or maybe sha-woman) costume as six hot male Alvin Ailey types danced around in grass skirts and two singing divas in tight black sequins belted the backups” (Musto). Daniel M. Mengara tells us that popular culture characterizes Africans as “the embodiment of primitivism, chaos, and sexual lust, among other negative characterizations” (1). From the above description, it sounds like BeBe’s show, “Creature,” is successfully perpetuating all of those stereotypes. BeBe’s images of a dehumanized African body are an example of “the successful infusion of dominant ideologies into the everyday cultural context” (Hill Collins 305) and of the far-reaching effects of the hegemonic domain of power. However, it is worth acknowledging that BeBe’s portrayals of these African stereotypes may well come from a place of pride for her heritage and her country. She may not see them as stereotypes at all. In acknowledging this, I want to convey that my analysis of BeBe’s performances is my own, and that there are many complex and varying reasons contributing to BeBe’s performances.
Mystique as the Fat Sapphire

Other racial stereotypes appear on the show, and some of them are compounded with size stereotypes. Fat contestants on the show are treated with varying degrees of discrimination; hegemonic values about their size intersect with other identities they inhabit, creating unique stereotypes. The first season of RDR has only one fat contestant, Victoria Porkchop Parker, who goes home the first episode. In the second season, the only fat contestant is Mystique; the show portrays her as overly dramatic, emotional, and quick to complain. Both Mystique’s size and race marginalize her. In the first episode, when Mystique’s dress form is not large enough, RuPaul suggests she pad it, and cites it as one of the challenges in show business. However, in later seasons, the dress forms appear to reflect the diversity of contestants’ sizes. Furthermore, Mystique’s concern about the size of the dress model represents a larger resistance to accommodating contestants that are above an “acceptable” size.

Mystique has trouble creating an outfit for the runway, stating that the fabric given is not large enough for a dress in her size. The rest of the contestants feel that she is using her size as an excuse. Mystique appears to be cold and unfriendly to the other contestants. In the corresponding Untucked! episode, Mystique refuses to discuss her critique from the judges with her fellow contestants. Then, while other contestants chat, we hear Mystique’s voice say, “I can fight. I can start a fight.” However, we do not see her say this phrase. The awkwardness of this phrase alludes to some strategic editing, and the audience does not hear her motivation. Later, Mystique and Morgan
McMichaels have a verbal fight, culminating in Mystique threatening to, “whoop [her] fucking ass.” Although Morgan appeared to have started the fight, Mystique is portrayed as the more volatile individual. The audience sees Mystique’s opinions after the fight; we do not see Morgan’s responses. In individual interviews Morgan says, “When she stood next to me [on the stage, after the fight] everything was fine, we’re professionals.” Then we see Mystique’s interview, “If she walked past me, should I trip her? Or should I hit her?” Where Morgan appears to have calmed down after the fight, Mystique’s interview establishes that she is holding a grudge.

The other girls quickly ostracize Mystique; at the beginning of the second episode, she must work alone while everyone else works in pairs of two because no one chooses her as their partner. Later in the same episode, she is picked last when the contestants split up into two teams. Tyra Sanchez, the eventual winner of season 2, states that she wants to be on the team with “all the skinny bitches,” voicing the belief, at least for some contestants, that Mystique’s body is part of the reason she is an undesirable teammate. In the third episode, the mini challenge is an eating contest. Raven, a fellow contestant declares, “Mystique’s going to finally win a challenge.” Mystique does win the challenge. RuPaul yells out, “fuck these skinny bitches!” as Mystique eats, emphasizing the stereotype that people are fat because they cannot control their eating, and that thin people carefully control their eating. For winning the eating contest, Mystique is one of the team captains for the main challenge; her teammates comment that they are surprised that she is such a good leader. Members of the opposing team continue to make fun of Mystique for winning the eating contest.
RuPaul sends Mystique home at the end of episode 3; during her final walk on the runway, RuPaul describes her as, “Star Jones before the Pilates.” Later, fans criticize Mystique for “giving up” on the show. However, considering the treatment Mystique experiences within the first three episodes, it is not hard to see why she might feel unmotivated to continue.

Mystique’s race is a part of her characterization as unfriendly, rude, and overly emotional. Le’a Kent states, “Fat women of color often tell of simultaneously encountering racism and fat oppression after growing up in more fat-affirmative home cultures” (131-132). Mystique experiences intersecting marginalization and stereotyping as both fat and black. She embodies the stereotype of the Angry Black Woman, or the Sapphire. Marilyn Yarbrough and Crystal Bennett explain, “in the stereotype of Sapphire, African American women are portrayed as evil, bitchy, stubborn and hateful” (636). David Pilgrim describes the Sapphire as, “a shrill nagger with irrational states of anger and indignation [who] is often mean-spirited and abusive.” Mystique’s portrayal is akin to that of the Sapphire; Mystique appears to be mean, spiteful, and emotionally unstable. The television show uses editing techniques to emphasize these qualities. Mystique’s racial caricature and her fat body mark her as uncontrollable.

“No Fat Girls Allowed” Raja and the Tyranny of Thinness

In season three, the division between fat and thin contestants becomes more pronounced as more fat contestants join the show. The first episode of season three introduces the audience to the new contestants by showing us clips from their audition
tapes. Raja, the tall, lithe contestant who ultimately wins that season shows us her closet of costumes with the warning, “Definitely have to be thin, no fat girls allowed.” Raja emulates the culturally constructed meanings encoded on the thin body, “the slender, fit body as a symbol of ‘virile’ mastery over bodily desires that are continually experienced as threatening to overtake the self” (Bordo 15). Raja discusses her weight multiple times during the season, and makes various comments related to restricting her food intake. RuPaul encourages this, while she is walking down the runway in episode four. RuPaul comments, “nothing tastes as good as skinny feels.” Although this alludes to the workout video challenge from that episode, it also appears to be RuPaul’s personal belief. She writes in detail about her eating habits in her second book (Workin’ It!). In season two, episode nine, when the contestants appear on the runway in “Teen Diva Awards” outfits, RuPaul jokes about the high rates of bulimia among young girls and women. As Raven walks down the runway, RuPaul whines in a high-pitched affected voice, “I really wanna lose three pounds Raven!” at which point Raven mimes gagging herself with her finger. RuPaul replies, “Yeah!” and everybody laughs. This light exchange mocks the very serious body image issues that young women (and some men) suffer from. It also reinforces the importance that many of the contestants, and RuPaul, place on controlling and maintaining their thin bodies. This mockery of self-starvation is also illustrated by the “lunch” that the top three contestants have with RuPaul at the end of each season. This lunch is a large bowl of Tic Tacs that the contestants share with RuPaul while they talk. At the end of the lunch, the girls will often joke about how full they are. All of these jokes hide the
truth, which is that control over hunger is something that RuPaul and many of the contestants are actually striving for.

During the first episode of season three (after Raja has warned us that “no fat girls” are allowed in her closet), RuPaul mentions that they received many submission tapes from “plus sized ladies. And let me just say, the bigger the cushion, the better the drag queen.” Although this statement shows nominal approval and support of fat contestants, the segregation of the fat queens’ submission tapes from the rest of the tapes shows a belief that there is some essential difference between thin queens and fat queens. The clips from all of the submission tapes from “plus sized ladies” focus on their discussions about their bodies and the challenges they experience as fat drag queens. After this montage of queens discussing body image issues, RuPaul introduces the next two contestants: Mimi Imfurst and Stacey Layne Matthews. The show introduces Delta Work, the third plus size queen, later during the open auditions.

**Mimi Imfurst**

In her submission video, Mimi Imfurst states, “I’m the fat bitch you’re looking for. You need to put a fat bitch on the show who’s gonna tell it like it is.” Mimi is loud and boisterous, a dangerous combination with an already “unruly” body. During the first challenge, Mimi breaks down crying because she is worried about her outfit; some of the other contestants take her concern for weakness, and believe she will be sent home. When the judges compliment her outfit on the runway, the camera shows that some of her fellow contestants appear irritated. In the next episode while they shoot a skit, Mimi appears to be over-acting, refusing to listen to judges’ direction, and
overconfident. Mimi tells the camera that she thinks there is a good chance she will win this challenge. Later, while RuPaul announces the winner, the camera makes sure to stay up-close on Mimi’s face so the audience does not miss any of her disappointment when she does not win. In the next, and Mimi’s last, episode, Mimi lifts up her opponent, India Ferra during the final lip sync. This action is shown in slow motion to emphasize its absurdity. After the lip sync, RuPaul chastises Mimi, and camera closes in on her face as she struggles to hold back tears. Kathleen LeBesco and Jana Evans Braziel’s description of the psychological associations with fatness characterize Mimi’s portrayal, “Fat equals reckless excess, prodigality, indulgence, lack of restraint, violation of order and space, transgression of boundary” (3). Mimi appears to embody all of these, going so far as to carry a fellow contestant in an attempt to get attention. Mimi’s characterization reinforces the stigma that fat people are uncontrollable and insatiable.

Stacey Layne “Bryant” Matthews—The Triple Threat: Native America, Fat, and Rural Southern

Stacey Layne Matthews is a fat, Native American drag queen from Back Swamp, North Carolina, and the clips of her submission video focus on the challenges of being a drag queen, especially a plus size drag queen, in a Southern rural area. We are reminded of her hometown and her rural background regularly during her time on the show. Stacey describes her home as, “a dirt road surrounded by corn fields. Can’t get much more country than that.” During the introduction to the next episode, RuPaul introduces the new season stating, “We’ve taken everything you loved…and
supersized it,” as she finishes this statement, the camera stops on an image of Stacey. During individual interviews, Stacey tells us, “Being a plus size queen living in a drag community is so vicious. It’s built me up to be who I am.” During the contestants’ first time undressing together, Raja mentions that Stacey still looks like a woman out of drag. Later, Yara Sofia tells Stacey that she looks like a transsexual; she then asks Stacey if she wants to be a transsexual. Stacey looks slightly embarrassed but shrugs off the question. In individual interviews Stacey confides, “It’s just the way I look, and it’s just the way I carry myself. And, in my everyday life, you know, it’s kind of hard to walk around and people look at you and actually think you’re a woman. But, it is what it is.” Feminine features are inscribed on Stacey’s body. Because she is fat, the other contestants associate her with the feminine. Stacey clearly finds this to be embarrassing. Ganaptai S. Durgadas explains that, “Fatness is equitable to feminization for a man, for heterosexual men, but even more so for gay and bisexual men” (369). As discussed above, there is a fine line between wanting to look like a woman, and actually being associated with the feminine, which many contestants consider undesirable.

Although Stacey’s peers underestimate her, she does well in the next two challenges, and wins the challenge in episode six. Raja seems especially irritated by Stacey, for reasons that are not completely clear. Raja says of her, “We’d probably have a really fantastic time listening to bull frogs and drinking sweet tea in the backwoods that she lives in but I would lose my mind if we had to be in the bottom because of her.” Raja seems convinced of Stacey’s weakness regardless of evidence
to the contrary. When Stacey mentions Billy B.’s (a famous makeup artist) critique of her makeup, Raja, exasperated, asks her if she knows who he is. The audience does not see Stacey’s answer to Raja’s question, and editing leads us to assume that she does not know who Billy B. is, further solidifying her character as an ignorant “hick.”

After Stacey wins a challenge, Manila Luzon comments (apparently in relation to Stacey’s victory), “Whatever the judges are drinking can I have some please?” Delta Work thinks that Stacey won the challenge simply because she chose to impersonate a fat celebrity. For some reason, it is unthinkable that Stacey might win a challenge based on her abilities. Hartley explains, “Fat has become a moral issue unlike any other type of deviation from what society considers normal. The fat woman is often dismissed as sloppy, careless, lazy, and self-indulgent” (65). Stacey’s fellow contestants cannot look past her size and rural background long enough to notice that she is a funny, clever entertainer.

Stacey’s cohorts are not the only ones who police her body. During one of her runway walks, RuPaul comments, “Formerly Stacey Layne Bryant, but she got married,” associating her with the plus size women’s clothing store. In the episode seven challenge, contestants are required to create couture outfits inspired by different cakes. During RuPaul’s workroom walkthrough, he comments on how much of her inspiration cake Stacey has eaten. He then asks Stacey (but no one else) if she understands what “couture” is. When she responds, “Yeah, pretty much,” he goes through some of the qualities of a couture outfit. In a matter of minutes, RuPaul has questioned Stacey’s eating habits and her intelligence. Hartley explains how women’s
bodies are seen as “public property” and fat bodies “are openly censured and scorned” (65). Stacey experiences a similar censorship, from both her fellow contestants and RuPaul. Stacey’s body is available for mocking and commentary, regardless of whether or not she wants it to be.

“The Weather Girls Are Here!”: Delta Work’s Bodily Treatment Versus Stacey and Mimi

Contestants immediately mark Delta Work by her body as well, although she avoids some of the other stigma that Stacey and Mimi incur. When Delta and Carmen, a very thin contestant, meet for the first time Carmen grabs Delta’s breasts and exclaims, “Titties, titties!” Delta’s body, like Stacey’s, also becomes public property; Carmen sees no problem grabbing Delta’s body without permission. After Delta and Stacey both arrive, Manila states, “We’ve got two of you all tonight!” Immediately after that someone says, “The Weather Girls are here,” referencing the plus size duo who sang the song, “It’s Raining Men.” Apparently, there are no other distinguishing characteristics between Delta and Stacey; the most important things about them are their bodies, specifically the size of their bodies. Delta’s body concerns are portrayed in a more sympathetic light than Stacey’s, however. Delta is portrayed as the most emotionally stable fat queen in season three. One of the contestants mentions to Delta that she is glad Delta is here to represent because fat contestants from previous seasons have been “a mess.”

Part of Delta’s positive characterization comes from her race and class privilege. Delta is white and appears unburdened by the rural stigma that Stacey
incurs. Perhaps her close friendship with Raja, one of the thinnest contestants, also allows her to ride on some of Raja’s size privilege. Ultimately, however, she does not escape the emotional turmoil that is associated with being fat. Multiple scenes in her individual interviews show the insecurity she has about her size. In one confession, she states, “The fact is I sit before you at 350 pounds and not a week goes by that I don’t get a letter from someone saying what a pig I am or how ugly I am.” In Delta’s last episode, when the contestants do standup comedy, she wears a large shirt with the body of a thin bikini-clad woman on the front and makes awkward jokes about her size. Delta’s attempts at comedy fall short, and her negative feelings about her body are painfully clear. Ultimately, although Delta is not targeted for ridicule in the same way as Mimi and Stacey, she is still portrayed as unhappy with, and insecure about, her fat body.

“Plus Size Barbie” Jiggly Caliente

Similar to the previous season, season four also has three fat contestants: Jiggly Caliente, Madame LaQueer, and Latrice Royale. Jiggly Caliente, who describes herself as a “plus size Barbie” wins the photo shoot challenge in the first episode. When she is not around, the other contestants complain that she did not deserve to win. The judges criticize Jiggly’s first runway outfit and Jiggly defends her inability to sew in the lounge with the other contestants. Jiggly appears to be unwilling to learn to sew and instead, says she wants to win so that she can pay someone to sew for her.

Jiggly has a verbal fight with another contestant, LaShauwn Beyond. Jiggly appears hot tempered, defensive, and unwilling to hear critique. Jiggly is also quick to
criticize Madame; as long as Madame is being criticized by other contestants, Jiggly is not. After Madame leaves, the other contestants criticize Jiggly more often in large groups. In Jiggly’s last episode, when each contestant is challenged to create a magazine cover, Latrice assigns Jiggly the “Battle of the Bulge” magazine. Jiggly is paralyzed with fear about doing a magazine on fitness, and Phi Phi O’Hara takes advantage of her insecurity and deliberately steers her into failing the challenge. During the Untucked! episode everyone critiques Jiggly’s choices for her magazine in the lounge. Understandably, Jiggly gets emotional and defensive after she has listened to everyone’s criticism. However, the other contestants treat her outburst as uncalled for and inappropriate. By the time Jiggly leaves, she appears emotionally broken, and lacking confidence.

**Madame LaQueer**

At the beginning of the second episode of season four, Phi Phi O’Hara states that Madame LaQueer and Jiggly are both undesirable team members because “they are always complaining.” Madame LaQueer, who is from Puerto Rico, is picked last for the team wrestling challenge. Madame is concerned about the physical nature of the challenge, and mentions a previous ankle injury that she is worried about exacerbating. However, Madame ends up doing quite well and is very funny and entertaining. Madame and Chad Michaels win the challenge as a team. Later, Phi Phi accuses Madame of riding on Chad’s talent; she does not see her as contributing to the team win. Jiggly calls Madame, “Stacey Layne Part 2.” Assumingly, she is referring to the numerous times contestants accused Stacey of being lazy, whether or not there was
evidence of this behavior. Milan tries to defend Madame’s performance and the other contestants in the room quickly shoot her down. Chad and Sharon Needles discuss Madame’s treatment with her. Sharon expresses shock that Madame was picked last again, after winning a challenge and Chad tells Madame that she is highly underestimated. Petra Kuppers explains that the fat stereotype in our culture, “splits away agency and subjectivity, fat takes away the voice and acquires its own vocabulary” (278). Madame’s discrimination is compounded by her fat body and her Puerto Rican identity. She is the only fat Puerto Rican queen in the history of the show and her failure to live up to the stereotype of Puerto Ricans as ‘spicy’ and sexualized intersects with the discrimination she faces because of her size. This chapter will discuss Madame and the other Puerto Rican in depth later on.

“Take Us to Church!”: Latrice Royale as the Exemplary Fat Contestant and Honorable Mammy

The contestants compare Madame to Latrice Royale who has not been complaining. Supposedly because they are both fat, they should be exhibiting the same behavior. Latrice ends up becoming the “model minority” fat contestant for season four. In response to this comparison, Latrice states, “own your shit, be a man,” voicing her agreement with the other people’s opinions on Madame. Latrice Royale made it farther than any other fat contestant; she was fourth place in the competition. During our interview, I asked Latrice why she thought she made it the farthest; her response was that she had come to the contest with that purpose. She states, “I set out to represent, and to really set standards and to really raise the bar.” I also asked her
whether she thought Jiggly and Madame were treated fairly, and this was her response:

You are treated how you allow people to treat you. [...] I set certain precedence (sic) when I enter a room or when I make a statement, because, you know, for me it’s all about respect. Those two [Jiggly and Madame], I don’t know, them seemed like, like they were the targets. [...] You know, it’s like life or death. It’s gonna be you or me. [...] It’s a mental game, you’re under a lot of stress. All you have is you, you don’t know who your friends are. [...] Obviously, you saw, you know, that Jiggly got fed up. It’s things like that that happen because they’re weak minded and they’re not strong individuals. So, it’s not for the weak of heart.

Latrice’s responses to both of my questions show essential thinking about herself and the other fat contestants from her season. Although she agrees that Jiggly and Madame were targets of criticism, she also feels that they are to blame for it because of internal weakness, or deficiency in their character. Latrice’s beliefs about Jiggly and Madame relate to the dualistic mind/body split that permeates our cultural consciousness. Susan Bordo explains our culture values, “the construction of body as something apart from the true self (whether conceived as soul, mind, spirit, will, creativity, freedom…) and as undermining the best efforts of that self” (5). Jiggly and Madame’s emotional caricatures portray them as closer to their bodies, and farther from logic and reason. Their bodies prevent them from controlling their emotions and their actions. Conversely, Latrice speaks as if she has mastered her body, her will
controls her body and because of this, she receives respect and praise from the contestants and the judges.

One hypothesis for Latrice’s starkly different treatment is that she evokes the caricature of a comforting mammy figure. Latrice was often shown mentoring other contestants or listening to their concerns. When she criticized the contestants’ wild behavior during the “Snatch Game” in episode five, all of the contestants appeared thoroughly chastised, as one might imagine a child acting with a parent. These various scenes place Latrice in the position of a respected and loved maternal figure. Along with this maternal role, she is portrayed as the spiritual guidance for the group. When one of the contestants asks Latrice to, “take them to church,” she leads them in a lively song with the lyrics, “Jesus is a biscuit, let him sop you up,” to a tune similar to one might imagine in a Southern Baptist church. During episode three, while shooting a commercial, Latrice dresses up as a woman who is on her way to church, while carrying a fan and handkerchief. Although Latrice self identifies on the show as Polynesian, her skin is dark enough that the average white American would label her as black (although I am not sure if she would label herself that way).

Latrice’s popularity, and her positive treatment compared to other plus size contestants could be explained by analyzing her as a modern-day mammy stereotype. Although Latrice is no one’s servant, she embodies the qualities of “loving, nurturing, and caring” (80) that Hill Collins associates with the mammy role. Yarbrough and Bennett explain the, “Mammy is first and foremost asexual, and accordingly, in this society she had to be fat” (6). Latrice’s personality coupled with her large, asexual,
black body (while many of the contestants discuss lovers, Latrice never mentions having a lover at home) places her in the position of a non-threatening Mammy figure, allowing her size to be overlooked as a reason for scorn (compared to the treatment of many of the other fat contestants).

Figure 3: Latrice Royale dressed as church-going woman (screen grab from RuPaul’s Drag Race).

Latrice Royale’s characterization is comparable to that of Hattie McDaniel, the actor who was famous for her portrayals of mammy figures in the 1930s and 1940s. Donald Bogle describes McDaniel as, “the one servant of the era to speak her mind fully, and the world of her eccentric characters was a helter-skelter, topsy-turvy one in which the servant became the social equal, the mammy became the literal mother figure, and the put-on was carried to the forefront of the action, and the style of the servant overpowered the content of the script” (82). Similar to McDaniel, Latrice embodies some of the nurturing and physical qualities as the mammy figure while avoiding the subservient aspects. Both women exude a “religious, self-righteous sauciness” (82) that appealed to audiences without challenging their ultimate racial stereotypes.
“Escandelo!”: Puerto Rican Contestants

Racial and ethnic stereotypes are also visible in the representations of the Puerto Rican contestants on RDR. The Puerto Rican contestants experience a cultural Othering and exoticization similar to—but unique from—BeBe Zahara Benet. The United States has a long, complicated, and painful history with Puerto Rico (Briggs). Laura Briggs explains that Americans’ ignorance about the fact that Puerto Rico is part of the United States is, “not an accident. This ignorance is produced and maintained through silences in the media, in popular culture, and in the teaching of U.S. history, which exist alongside a prominent public narrative in which the U.S. is a major anti-imperialist force in the world” (2). Richie Pérez states that Puerto Ricans have been victims of, “Cultural domination [which] involves racist omissions, stereotypes, lies, and fantasies which distort history and weaken the consciousness, organization, and resistance of oppressed people” (142). It is important to consider the experiences of the Puerto Rican contestants on RDR within the context of the history of Puerto Rico and America’s cultural consciousness about it.

Pérez states that Puerto Ricans experience three forms of discrimination in the media, “exclusion, dehumanization, and [job] discrimination.” He explains that when Puerto Ricans “do appear in the mass media, we are targets of consistent negative stereotyping, which includes ridicule of our culture and language” (142). RDR does include at least one contestant from Puerto Rico every season; however, the show’s representations of these contestants can be problematic. Shane T. Moreman and Dawn Marie McIntosh’s description of the Latina drag queens they study also aptly describes
the experiences of the Puerto Rican contestants on *RDR*. They state, “Moving between Spanish and English, across differing racialities […] the Latina drag queens’ social locations are complicated because the political and material realities of one location (e.g., gender or race) cannot be separated from the other (e.g., sexuality or nationality)” (116). However, the Puerto Rican contestants’ identities are often simplified on *RDR* to that of a Latina Queen, without taking into account the numerous other identities they embody. Alexis Mateo from season three laments, “What I hate the most is that people label you as the Latin queen […] I’m not just the Latin queen, I’m a star.” The label of “Latin queen” seems to follow many of the Puerto Rican contestants around, either through the ways others describe them, or the ways that editing portrays them.

**Policing the Borders of Identity**

Although Alexis Mateo voices frustration about being confined by a Latina stereotype, there is also an instance of self-segregation. Tatianna de la tierra describes a similar experience stating, “I, along with the other Others, were strangely alienated in a place that promised just the opposite. I developed an Us-against-Them mentality” (363). The Puerto Rican contestants are also among a group of people who are Other, but in this case they become the cultural Other, and are further ostracized. Carmen Carrera, a season 3 contestant, has Puerto Rican ancestry, but was born and raised in the continental United States. Carmen notes that she does not think the other Puerto Rican contestants think she is “Puerto Rican enough” because she does not speak Spanish fluently. Alexis Mateo mentions that she does not think Carmen should be
considered Puerto Rican, because she was not born there. Although most people hold on to their origins of ancestry for many generations, here Alexis decides that being born in Puerto Rico is required for Carmen to identify as such.

Gloria Anzaldúa explains that “most people self-define by what they exclude” *(The Bridge 3)*. This policing of borders around a Puerto Rican identity points to a need for the Puerto Rican contestants to create their own type of identity, one that they can manage; one they feel comfortable with. However, ultimately, this type of identity policing hinders growth and involvement in social justice work. Jody Norton implores, “Let us all, then, avoid becoming Border Patrolmen of identity” (154). Although Alexis may feel comforted by solidifying Carmen’s identity as *not* Puerto Rican, she is also alienating Carmen, and invalidating any experiences Carmen may have related to her Puerto Rican heritage. Kimberly Springer encourages feminists to, “connect with those outside the groups we choose to call home and examine our internal politics to determine what keeps us separated and reinventing the wheel” (382). Neither Alexis, nor any other participant in *RDR*, identifies themselves as a feminist, however, the need to connect with people within and across identities is something that will eventually be necessary for anyone who is fighting against discrimination.

**Kenya Michaels, Sexualization, and “Spicy”ness**

Politics of identity appear on season four between Kenya Michaels and Madame LaQueer as well. As discussed earlier, Madame is ostracized by the other contestants. Her discrimination as both fat and Puerto Rican intersect to marginalize her further. At one point, Madame laments that Kenya is not supporting her as the only
other Puerto Rican. Madame, who is being ostracized by the other contestants, wishes to have solidarity with her fellow cultural Other, Kenya. However, Kenya is privileged by her petite size and “beauty,” and feels no solidarity with Madame. Kenya’s beauty is mentioned multiple times during her time on the show; her looks become an important part of her representation. In episode three of season four, Kenya dresses in a tight, sexualized, “tribal” animal print outfit for the commercial she is shooting. She speaks very little during her part in the video and even licks a bone to mime fellatio. Her few spoken lines are jokes about her isolation on the show due to her strong accent and lack of English fluency. Similarly to the treatment of BeBe, Kenya is represented as sexual and exotic, and is also seen dressed in animal prints. Other Puerto Rican contestants have similar experiences. Jessica Wild is the only Puerto Rican contestant in season two. She also expresses concern about her mastery of the English language, and she is similarly exoticized. During episode three, Jessica is complimented for her Country outfit in an unusual way. Santino Rice states, “Yea I wanna mount her [Jessica]. You are giving thoroughbred realness today.” In a few short sentences, Santino sexualizes and animalizes Jessica. A few minutes later, RuPaul says of Jessica, “I find her charming and a great spicy addition to this line up.” Similar to this, in season one, episode eight, Nina Flowers’ (the only Puerto Rican contestant that season) accent is called “spicy” when she is having trouble pronouncing some words. Here, the term “spicy” becomes code for “a problem,” because her accent is hindering her. For many of the Puerto Rican contestants, it appears the only condition to be considered “spicy” is to have a strong accent.
Language as a Hindrance to Success

Puerto Rican contestants are frequently confined to the realm of Other by the (real or imagined) language barrier between them and other contestants. The accents of the Puerto Rican contestants are often cited as a challenge to overcome, either by themselves or by other contestants. These accents are sometimes mocked or laughed at, even as we see the contestants’ frustration that she is not being understood. The bilingual capabilities of the Puerto Rican contestants are never discussed as a strength that might help them, but always as a hindrance. Madame LaQueer and Kenya Michaels from season four both have negative experiences because of their Spanish language background. In episode three, Kenya Michaels is team captain for a group challenge, however, Milan, quickly displaces her. Milan cites Kenya’s “language barrier” as the reason for her taking over control of the team, although it is unclear why Kenya’s accent would prevent her from delegating tasks to her team. Milan does not discuss this with Kenya. She simply starts interrupting her and talking over her. Because of her accent, Milan assumes that Kenya is incapable of running the team.
Puerto Rico’s history with the United States is fraught with disturbing acts of
discrimination and dehumanization. Americans historically believed Puerto Ricans to
be, “ignorant, unintelligent and stupid because they do not speak English” (Pérez 146).
American bias against other languages, especially Spanish, is still apparent.

In the same episode where Milan supersedes Kenya as team captain, the judges
criticize Madame LaQueer for including too much Spanish language into the
commercial she shot for the challenge. Guest judge, Amber Riley, says that Madame
is being “true to herself” by using Spanish in her video, but then encourages Madame
to step outside of her comfort zone. Essentially, the judges view Madame’s ethnicity
and her language of origin as bad habits, things she needs to “get over” if she wants to
be successful. Madame’s fat body and her Spanish accent keep her from being “heard”
as a talented performer. The other contestants cannot look past these things. In episode
four, Madame’s last episode, she appears aloof and unable to take direction while
filming a skit. During her final lip sync, Jiggly calls her a, “pointer sister,” implying
that her lip sync performances are unoriginal and boring.

Rosina Lippi-Green writes about the experiences of individuals with Spanish
accents. She believes the “ultimate goal” of encouraging Spanish speakers to learn
English is, “to devalue and suppress everything Spanish” (261). She goes on to say, “it
is not enough for the 44 million Spanish speakers to become bilingual: they must learn
the right English—and following from that, the right U.S. culture, into which they
must assimilate completely” (261). She cites a survey in which 48% of Spanish
speakers cited “language” as their primary source of discrimination (262). Lippi-
Green’s findings reinforce the understanding that Spanish speakers in America are constantly Othered by their linguistic differences. The presence of an accent, or the use of Spanish language, is unacceptable in American culture and is barely tolerated, especially in the media business. Kenya and Madame both learn the hard way that being native Spanish speakers will work against them. Puerto Rican contestants must manage their accents, language, physical representations, and interactions with one another.

“Doesn’t Mean you’re Racist. You Hate Everybody, Including Your Own Race”: Cultural Appropriation and (Acceptable?) Racist Stereotypes

Complications with contestants’ representations of their own cultures are only some of the problematic ways that races and ethnicities are represented on *RDR*. There are also a number of disconcerting appropriations of racial and ethnic stereotypes that are adopted by contestants outside of their own cultural backgrounds. Manila Luzon, a Filipino contestant from Season three, portrays multiple Asian stereotypes in her performances on the show. During a challenge in which each contestant must interview a celebrity, she affects a strong stereotypical Asian accent while she is conducting the interview. Later, RuPaul asks her what she would say to people watching who thought her portrayal was racist. Manila’s response is somewhat convoluted. She cites the lack of Asian visibility on television although it is unclear how this is related to her performance. Although her performance is questioned, she is ultimately rewarded for it; RuPaul states, “You broke all the rules…and you perpetuated stereotypes,” before declaring that Manila has won the challenge.
judge, Debbie Matenopoulos, teases, “Doesn’t mean you’re racist, you hate everybody, including your own race.” During the reunion episode, Manila addresses the audience responses that she has gotten about her racist performance. She argues that the people on her Facebook page who said it was racist were all non-Asian and the Asian respondents on her Facebook page thought it was funny.

It is also worth noting that some of the other contestants, especially Shangela, state that Manila’s performance is offensive because she is, supposedly, not a part of the culture she is mocking. Assumedly, Shangela thinks Manila’s performance characterized a different Asian culture than her own, although she never clarifies her comments. After Manila’s controversial performance, she chooses Imelda Marcos, the former first lady of the Philippines, as her celebrity impersonation. Once again, she dons a strong, stereotypical Asian accent and portrays Marcos as completely obsessed with nothing but shoes. Although Manila does not win this challenge, she also receives no critiques for this performance. Shangela states that this performance is less offensive because Manila is parodying someone from her own culture.

Figure 5: Manila Luzon as Imelda Marcos (screen grab from RuPaul’s Drag Race).
The idea that racist stereotypes are acceptable when performed by members of that race is problematic at best. This belief ignores the fact that marginalized groups are just as susceptible to internalized prejudice of themselves as that of anyone else. As Chrystos explains, “Embracing racist doggerel does not give us the last bite” (286); racist images are always racist, regardless of who is portraying them. In fact, images perpetuated by members of the marginalized group may be more dangerous, because the public considers them more acceptable. Hill Collins explains, the hegemonic domain of power reinforces racism because marginalized groups also believe that racial stereotypes are “commonsense.” She goes on to say, “Dominant groups aim to replace subjugated knowledge with their own specialized thought because they realize that gaining control over this dimension of subordinate groups’ lives simplifies control” (305). Hill Collins points out how knowledge can be co-opted, and we cannot assume that something is not demeaning, or dehumanizing simply because of the source. Hegemony works because people at every level of the hierarchical society believe it.

The response to Manila’s racist caricatures is curious, especially when compared to other racist appropriations on the show. Raja appropriates both Native American, and African stereotypes in her runway outfits, and is praised both times. During Raja’s runway walk in her Native American outfit, the judges discuss her outfit: Michelle Visage teases, “Dances with drag queens,” and Santino Rice exclaims, “Take me to your teepee!” When Raja, who identifies as Indonesian, introduces herself on stage, she states, “How,” while raising her hand in imitation of stereotypic
Native American depictions. While in her second outfit, which she describes as, “National Geographic drag,” Raja is once again praised. Santino Rice’s response to her outfit consists of him clicking his tongue in a mock parody of the language spoken by people in Africa’s Kalahari Desert (National Science Foundation). Later, in a different scene, Raja does the same imitation, stating, “Or as they say in the language of my people [clicks tongue],” both imitations are met with laughter by those present. Although both of Raja’s cultural appropriations take place during the same season as Manila’s, Raja receives no criticism from the judges, and, although I am sure audience criticism exists, the show does not mention it. In the next season, Phi Phi O’Hara, imitates the stereotype of a Chonga, a Latina stereotype that Jillian Hernandez describes as, “low-class, slutty, tough, and crass young woman” (64). During her imitation, Phi Phi even plays with a piñata, but her performance receives no criticism. In the same episode, Jiggly Caliente dresses up as a Geisha and makes crude sexual jokes. Again, Jiggly’s performance is completely overlooked.

Figure 6: Raja appropriates Native American (left) and African (right) cultures on the runway (screen grab from RuPaul’s Drag Race).
Why are all of these racist stereotypes overlooked, while Manila’s racist caricature is singled out for criticism? A hierarchy of racial stereotypes appears to be at work here. Sexualized Native American, African, and Japanese stereotypes are common images in American popular culture. Each of these stereotypes is available for purchase as a Halloween costume, and Euro-American popular culture often depicts these stereotypes as frozen in time. Lucy Ganje explains this problem in relation to Native American images, “When all the media give us are images of Native
peoples and cultures taken during annual wacipis (powwows), it feeds the notion that Native peoples do not exist in the present and are not part of a continuum” (116-7).

Similar to this, stereotypical images of Africans in “tribal” outfits (as discussed in relation to BeBe) and Japanese women dressed in traditional robes are common in our popular culture. Perhaps because audiences view these images as part of cultures of the past, or as cultures separate enough from their own, these stereotypes do not incur the same audience outcry. Conversely, an Asian person speaking accented English is someone that people in America are likely to see, and interact with, often. Perhaps because of this, they find this stereotype to be less acceptable.

The racist fantasies that the contestants perpetuate for entertainment are dangerous, they allow people to dehumanize and silence groups. Deborah A. Miranda explains how these types of fantasies can lead to violence: “I don’t know how to argue that whose fantasy is what’s wrong; that your fantasy backed by power is my reality. I have not yet read Robin Morgan’s celebrated aphorism ‘pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice’ (“Theory,” 88), so I can’t rip back with, ‘Pocahontas is the theory and Wounded Knee is the practice’” (196 emphasis in original). These fantasies impose a false reality on marginalized groups, and in the media, these realities are mass-marketed as truth. “Given these developments in the mass media, today negative stereotypes are given ‘eternal life’ and are distributed internationally. This takes on added significance when we consider that many studies argue that when people have no direct contact, most of their learning about other ethnic groups comes from the
mass media” (Pérez 161). Considering this, we cannot ignore images in the media that exoticize, sexualize, or stigmatize entire groups of people.

**Audience Analysis**

**Video and Audio Responses**

This brief audience analysis attempts to document whether *RDR*’s audience members were aware of, or discussing, the hegemonic messages analyzed within this thesis using Jenkins’ previously discussed theories of convergence culture, participatory audiences and the concept of textual poaching. Audience members’ responses will be analyzes using Hall’s encoding/decoding model. Although finding video audience responses to seasons one through four of *RDR* was challenging, there were many episode recaps on YouTube of later seasons. Most of these recaps provide no critical analysis of the show; however, one user named RawRantsUncut did include some critiques of season four. In their recap of episode two, the users discuss how the other contestants attack Jiggly in large groups. They state that Jiggly started with a lot of “spunk” and was a “contender.” However, in episode two, “Her bubbly personality was killed and squashed” and the other contestants are “breaking her down.” They question whether the other contestants have targeted Jiggly because they feel she is a threat. In this first video, RawRantsUncut engages in a negotiated reading of the text. They critique the contestants for their attacks on Jiggly, but they do not connect these attacks to larger systemic implications related to Jiggly’s race and size.

In the next video, the users identify themselves as Latina women and criticize Phi Phi’s Chonga stereotype in episode three. One of the reasons they were upset
about the stereotype is because Phi Phi is “not Latina” and they bemoan her use of a piñata in her performance. They also briefly criticize Milan for taking over Kenya’s role as team captain in the episode. Phi Phi actually replies to the video and states:

LMAO....you girls know NOTHING about me! and my heritage....it is a stereotype....OBVIOUSLY you have not done your homework on me and where I am from and who my friends are! OBVIOUSLY I did it great because you guys are offended....if it wasn't on point you guys wouldn't have got pissed hahaha! Learn you shit before you try to put people on blast!

Once again, Phi Phi’s assumption seems to be that this stereotype is acceptable because she is supposedly Latina. Furthermore, the few comments that are on the video are supportive of Phi Phi and criticize RawRantsUncut for their opinion. While RawRantsUncut engages in an oppositional reading of Phi Phi’s performance and Kenya’s behavior, the other audience members who comment on their video engage in a preferred reading. RawRantsUncut critiques the systemic racism inherent in Phi Phi’s stereotype, while the other commenters see no problems with Phi Phi’s performance. Unfortunately, RawRantsUncut only made four recap videos, and all of them have very poor sound quality and have received little attention or comments from other users. Because of this, it is difficult to gauge if other audience members share their opinions.

Another user, theskorpionshow, discusses a large amount of materials related to race and sexuality in their videos. One of their videos discusses RDR while the first season is airing. One of the men watches the show and encourages other people to
watch it; he cites that because the show is “black and gay” they should support it, however his co-host does not agree with him (both hosts appear to be black men). The RDR fan then mentions that the show is not “stereotypical.” They go on to discuss whether this show and the prizes that the winner receives will put drag queens into the “mainstream,” and both agree that drag queens will not be “mainstream” for some time. In response to their video, one video commenter states, “Umm.....apparently you guys are either: a) too young, or b) don't do enough research, because the mainstream barriers you were commenting about on here, RUPAUL was the trailblazer. HELLOOOOO, in the 90's, Rupaul was EVERYWHERE.” The commenter, named 2conscious, goes on to list all of the places that RuPaul was featured. Theskorpionshow responds to the commenter stating, “But RuPaul was the only one. Its starting to change.” Indeed, 2conscious engages in a preferred reading of RuPaul’s success; they assume that any other drag queen would be able to have similar success. Theskorpionshow also engages in a dominant reading of RDR, although they understand that black gay men and drag queens are systemically marginalized, they see the show as a empowering representation of these groups.

The video audience responses to RDR generally do not appear to contain much criticism of the show and its representations of the various identities discussed in this thesis. Although the users at RawRantsUncut do have some criticism of the show, their opinions are silenced by the poor sound quality of their videos. More engaged discussions of the show can be found on the message boards of the website Television Without Pity.

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Message Board Analysis

I sampled message board discussions for seasons one through four of *RDR* on the website Television Without Pity (televisionwithoutpity.com). The discussions of the contestants on the Television Without Pity forums for season one do not include as much critique of the show in relation to topics discussed in this thesis. Many posters engage in a dominant reading of *RDR* by mentioning that they prefer Ongina’s look when she is wearing a wig versus when she is bald and wearing hats. A couple of posters mention they are happy to see an “out” African on television, but there is no mention of BeBe being exoticized on the show; however, one poster feels that BeBe relies on her “African-ness” too often. Although these posters may be aware of the systemic inequality against people of color, especially from the global south, these users still engage in a dominant reading of *RDR* by not questioning the show’s involvement in this systemic discrimination. There are also a few small discussions about different types of drag, and the different drag styles of the season one contestants. Some users engage in a negotiated reading when state they would like to see more diversity in the drag styles represented on the show. Although they note that there are only certain types of drag that are presented on *RDR*, they do not question to systemic implications related to this fact. One of the most shocking occurrences on the message board is when the user BassInYourWalk, who claims to work for the show and interacts with the users, discusses an email they received from “a transsexual in Alabama who was accusing Ru of being a racist because all but one of the songs were by black artists.” BassInYourWalk goes on to call this person an “idiot tranny” and
receives no criticism from the other users for their users of such a derogatory word.

Once again, the users engage in a preferred reading through their silence, their complacency allows the oppressive and derogatory word to remain with no objection.

The message board posts about season two discuss the argument between Morgan McMichaels and Mystique from episode one. The users generally agree that the argument was at least partly staged and overly dramatized. However, there are differing opinions on whether or not Mystique or Morgan is more to blame for the argument. This negotiated reading allows users to point out tactics on the show, without questioning the larger implications of using such tactics. Along with this discussion, there are many varying comments on Mystique in general. Multiple users express disappointment that Mystique is not doing a better job “representing” the “big girls.” Mybrainhurts states, “What’s funny is that there have got to be better big girl drag queens out there […] I think if you’re going to have big girl drag queens in the contest, pick a really great one or don’t bother.” This dominant reading appears to rely on the belief that Mystique is expected to be the representative for all fat drag queens, instead of simply representing. This reading generalized fat contestants in ways similar to the generalizations they experience on the show, both from the other contestants and from RuPaul. This pressure for Mystique to represent an entire group of people seems to engender more criticism of her performances. This type of generalizing was also discussed earlier in this thesis in relation to BeBe and the contestants from Puerto Rico. Contestants’ individual identities are superseded by their membership in (further) marginalized identity groups. A few uses engaged in
oppositional readings by showing awareness of the cruelty that the other contestants
direct towards Mystique, and how the vast majority of the attacks focused on
Mystique’s size. While some users still engage in preferred readings and generally
seem impatient with Mystique, others do realize that she is battling low self-esteem
and is being unfairly harassed because of her size. User bluvelvet states, “All the back
room jokes about her [Mystique] obviously winning the eating contestant just
reminded me of a bunch of kids teasing the ‘fat kid’, not cool.” Some users do not see
Mystique’s treatment by her fellow contestants as acceptable, while others focus their
arguments on their belief that Mystique is not talented enough to be on the show.

The discussion board also contains some education about drag culture and
terms used on RDR. Users will ask questions about drag names, styles, phrases, and
other information and other users will provide answers. Although the answers are not
always accurate, this discussion shows some of ways that fans try to engage with RDR
and attempt to learn more about drag culture and gay culture after watching RDR. User
AntManBee engages in a oppositional reading and discusses Tatiana’s gender identity
and the treatment she receives from the other queens. AntManBee states,

I wonder if the problems some of the queens have Tatiana has to do with her
blurring the lines of what ‘drag performers’ are. She already talked about going
to school dressed in drag, and has been dressing for 7 years, with only 7
performances under her belt. While she might have been dressing every
weekend, without putting a SHOW ... she’s treads on transvestite territory.
When she mentioned feeling more like a girl in make up (where the others
vehemently retained their male-as-female personas), it almost comes off as more transgendered territory. While there are no cut and dry limitations for any of these, or what Tatiana considers herself ... but I can see her view of dressing/drag as antithetical to the more showqueens.

This user’s thoughtful consideration shows at least some knowledge of queer terms (they mention the difference between transvestite and transgender) and posits whether Tatiana’s gender blurring makes her fellow contestants uncomfortable because of the restrictive gender binary to which many contestants still appear to cling. Bungalow Joy responds to this query stating, “Drag is fucking-with-gender entertainment, not transgender.” Bungalow Joy’s preferred reading relies on stagnant ideas surrounding gender identity and gender expression. They do not appear to realize that many drag queens may also identify as transgender women, and seems to feel that Tatiana’s identity may not be in accordance with the supposed purpose of the show. Zuleikha responds to Bungalow Joy’s statement with an oppositional reading:

This seems very proscriptive to me. I think drag is what it is, and a performer who identifies as transgender or a transvestite can also be a drag queen or king. I think what matters with drag is what the performer does on stage, not what they do off stage. If Tatianna happens to also be some flavor of trans in her daily life, who cares? Is she a good queen or not? That’s what matters. Judge her on her actual performance’s merits or lack thereof.

Zuleikha also mentions that they wish there were more styles of drag allowed on the show, which is a negotiated reading because they do not question the larger
implications behind the show valuing particular kinds of drag over others. Their comments generally show a more counter-hegemonic view of gender expression and gender identity and may have more background knowledge on queer-related subjects. This kind of knowledge, obviously, varies greatly among the users on the message boards.

At the beginning of the discussions of season three, a few users provide a negotiated reading of the first episode by state that they are relieved that a “big girl” was not the first to be eliminated without questioning the systemic reasons that fat contestants have been eliminated early in the show. Some of the users provide an oppositional reading of Raja’s attitude in the first episode and her comment that “no fat girls” are allowed in her closet; they state this comment is mean spirited. Some other users defend Raja and engage in a dominant reading, including vallegirl who states, “Especially since they showed Raja and Delta sharing a very warm and friendly hug indicating they’re friends outside of the competition.” According to vallegirl, because Raja has a friend who is fat, she cannot be fatphobic; this kind of logic is often used to justify discrimination. Now that there is more than one fat contestant on the season, some users begin to group them together. A few refer to them as “plussies,” which is assumedly short for plus size. Similar to the ways that Victoria Parker and Mystique were expected to represent all fat drag queens, the grouping of the fat contestants from season three together will lead to comparisons between the contestants. These comparisons are arbitrarily based on the size of their bodies, rather than a more logical grouping such as the number of years one has performed in drag.
The users discuss the other contestants’ treatment of Stacy and whether it is deserved. Vallegirl feels that Stacy is taking the criticism too personally and engages in a dominant reading when she states, “But if you’re going to be a plus-sized, backwoods queen, you’d think you’d have more self esteem than that.” Vallegirl ignores the systemic discrimination that is working against Stacy and puts the responsibility on Stacy to constantly fight against any injustice she faces. Some users complain about the ways contestants treat Stacy, and cite the discrimination as based on her size, engaging in a oppositional reading. Susie Sunshine believes that Stacy is not being targeted because of her weight. She states, “First and foremost, people assume Stacy is seen as the weakest, because she’s fat, even though Raja, Manila or Phoenix never mentioned her weight.” However, Raja does make fun of Stacy’s weight; at one point she jokes that Stacy does not “carry her own weight, no pun intended.” Susie Sunshine engages in a preferred reading, and assumes that if the other contestants do not specifically cite Stacy’s weight, then it must not be a contributing factor to their treatment of her.

In the season four discussions, many users complain about the quality of contestant’s teeth. They specifically cite Jiggly, Latrice, and Sharon as needing dental work. Chrysaor states, “A good bit of this competition is about appearance, and when comparing the looks of the S4 [season four] queens to each other and to those of previous seasons, it’s going to come up.” While some users do mention the financial constraints that would prevent someone from having cosmetic dental work, the general consensus appears to be that it is a problem that should be corrected. This intense
focus on characteristics that have nothing to do with the contestants’ drag performances or their quality of work is interesting. The focus on the contestants’ teeth appears to be a class bias, as dental work is unaffordable for a large number of individuals who do not have insurance. At least one user mentions Tyra Sanchez’s choice to get cosmetic dental work after she won in season two, inadvertently pointing out how Tyra’s winnings allowed her that economic freedom. This dominant reading relies on Western hegemonic beliefs about personal appearance and financial responsibility, while ignoring the systemic poverty and subsequent discrimination that prevent individuals from affording cosmetic procedures.

Users also discuss Jiggly’s attitude and representation on the show. Rozen states, “Jiggly is almost [as] depressing as Delta Work in her self-loathing. But at least Delta was extremely polished and had a sharp wit when she was throwing shade, Jiggly acts like she is still in middle school.” Rozen’s preferred reading of the show puts the onus of responsibility on Jiggy, while ignoring the treatment she is experiencing from other contestants. During the show, Jiggly states that she thinks it is “gross” for two drag queens to have sex. The users discuss this comment, and some of them cite Jiggly’s self-hatred as the catalyst. MsFortune’s response to the comment is, “I cant (sic) be mad because it was just filled with so much self hate.” Buttercupia states, “Jiggly is like a walking advertisement for internalized self-loathing. It’s sad, because she could be so fierce.” Jiggly’s internal struggles are clear to a good portion of the users. However, once again, these responses predominantly preferred readings,
although perhaps some may be viewed as negotiated. However, there is no discussion of systemic fatphobia in relation to Jiggly representations and attitude on the show.

The discussions of RDR provide some insight into what parts of the show stand out for audience members. While this is not an exhaustive audience analysis, it does not appear that fans are discussing any of the racial implications on the show. The marginalized group that is most often discussed are the fat contestants, and those opinions range. However ultimately, it appears that this is the easiest marginalized group for audience members to identify and discuss. But even in these discussions, generally the users engage in dominant and negotiated readings of the text.

“Dragulator” Regulates Racial Hegemony

In relation to the discussions of the various racial stereotypes and appropriations that take place on the show, it is worth noting similar stereotypes in some of the online materials for RDR. One such material is the “Dragulator” which is a supporting online material related to both RuPaul’s Drag Race and RuPaul’s Drag U (a spin-off show that focuses on giving cis-gendered women drag-inspired makeovers). The online “Dragulator” allows fans to upload pictures of their faces and then choose accessories and clothing. However, the clothing choices available on the website are attached to skin color, of which there are three choices: vanilla, caramel, and chocolate. This choice is curious, as it directly associates style and fashion with (a very limited) array of skin colors. Your choice of skin color affects what kind of clothing you can choose to wear. “Vanilla” skin colors seem to have more large, puffy options, and the “Caramel” and “Chocolate” skin colors appear to have more form
fitting options. Also disturbing is the fact that a good portion of the clothing options for “Chocolate” are animal prints. The stereotypes being reinforced in these clothing choices as they intersect with skin color seem to mirror many of the stereotypes that appear on RDR.

The choice to segregate clothing based on skin color illustrates an essentialist view of race. It subscribes to the belief that a person’s race will determine the choices they make in their life. It also subtly reinforces the idea of white as the “default” race and exoticizes racial Others by associating them with food. Because “Vanilla” is the first option a person sees, it is reinforced as the first or most desirable choice, while “Chocolate” is listed third and is thus the least desirable choice. The associations of skin colors with foods reinforces notions of dehumanization often associated with people of color. Perhaps one could read into a small subversion into the use of the term “Vanilla,” which is often used colloquially to mean that something is dull or boring. However, this small subversion does not erase the larger problems of continuing stereotypes of connecting people of color with non-human nature.
Figure 9: Screen grabs from "Dragulator" in order of appearance: Vanilla, Caramel, and Chocolate.
Sharon Needles, Shirley Q. Liqueur, And RuPaul’s Support of Racist Appropriations

Concerns with racial stereotypes and racist appropriations continue off the set of RDR as well. Sharon Needles, the winner of season four, was the first white person to win the title of “America’s Next Drag Superstar.” Since she has won, Sharon has received criticism for using the n-word in her performances, signing an autograph for a black person with the phrase “love you n****r,” and performing in blackface. An article by Chris Spargo from the gay website NewNowNext (owned by Logo) appears to support Sharon’s actions. The article paints Sharon as being a sensitive individual who was trying to make a political statement and was instead “bullied” to change her act. Ultimately Sharon decides she will not “cave in to their demands” and states “There is far more hidden racism in the LGBT community.” The article is unclear on what the “demands” of Sharon’s protestors were. The article does nothing to critique Sharon’s choices and does no investigation from the point of view of the people who originally criticized Sharon. Hence, Sharon comes off in this article as a victim while her criticizers are invisible villainous placeholders.

In contrast to the article on NewNowNext, The GA Voice interviews the people who protested Sharon’s actions. Dyana Bagby’s article states: Aaron Coady, aka [Sharon] Needles, said he has removed the racial slur from Sharon Needles’ vocabulary and personally apologized to the Ciseauxs [the protest organizers]. But when they asked for a public apology, perhaps in the form of a written statement, Coady refused, saying if he were to do so he
would do it on his own terms. Coady defended Sharon Needles as a “clown” who wants to shine light on the darkest parts of our society and then laugh at those dark parts of who we are so we are no longer afraid of them.

Bagby’s article details the demands of Sharon’s protestors. Although the reader cannot know if Sharon was bullied in the meeting, one can see that the protestors’ demands were not unreasonable. The article also voices some of Sharon’s naïve feelings about dealing with sensitive topics. Sharon seems to believe that insensitivity is the same thing as being edgy or radical.

RuPaul has not made any comments about Sharon’s racial controversy. However, RuPaul has dealt with a similar controversy in the past. In 2002 RuPaul supported the drag queen, Chuck Knipp, a white man who would “dress up in blackface and portray a welfare mother with 19 ‘chirren’ all named after venereal diseases and discount stores” (Roberts) named Shirley Q. Liquor. In his weblog, RuPaul responds to the treatment of Chuck Knipp, comparing it to the Red Scare, Salem witch trials, and the Holocaust. In the post, titled “THESE FOLKS ARE JUST PLAIN IGNUNT!” RuPaul goes on to explain how he knows that Chuck Knipp’s act is not racist. RuPaul states:

[I]n my journal entry, i also stated that i am a fan of CHUCK KNIPP and that if i had sensed any malicious intent in his comedy routine, i would not be able to laugh at it. my gut will not allow me to laugh at deliberate cruelty. […]

black folks call each other “niggaz” and gays call each other “fags” and “dykes”, but no offense is taken because it’s coming from a place of love. […]

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does “shirley q. liquor” pose a threat to humanity? not hardly. but, if you have a chip on your shoulder and a stick wedged firmly up your ass, then i can see how you might think that CHUCK KNIPP’S comedy routine is offensive. people who are not adept at using their intuition would not be able to sense the love and respect that MR.KNIPP has for black culture.

There are similarities between the ways that RuPaul and Sharon both explain their reasoning for stating that the respective performances are not racist. Both individuals downplay the racist implications of the acts by reasoning that there are bigger racial issues that deserve focus. The attempt to switch the audiences focus to other racial issues is meant to invalidate the complaints against the performances. Both of their arguments completely obscure the ways that black face and sexualization have been used to dehumanize black women. Furthermore, the attempt to make audiences ignore these types of racist acts in favor of focusing on other types of racist acts obscures the insidious and pervasive ways that oppression infiltrates all parts of our society. Hill Collins’ theory about the four interrelated domains of power helps explain the importance of focusing on all forms of racism. Hill Collins states, “The structural domain organizes oppression, whereas the disciplinary domain manages it. The hegemonic domain justifies oppression, and the interpersonal domain influences everyday lived experience and the individual consciousness that ensues” (294). One cannot simply focus on violent hate crimes and ignore black face performances, as both of these oppressive acts feed into the same overarching system of oppression. Although performances may seem less violent, they are still operating as part of the
hegemonic domain of power that allows audiences to laugh at dehumanizing and stereotypical depictions of black women.
CHAPTER THREE: CONCLUSION

Findings

Although \textit{RDR} does make attempts at subversion, it ultimately reinforces hegemonic stereotypes related to race and ethnicity, class, sexuality, gender identity, and size. It is possible that \textit{RDR}’s attempts at subversion were overpowered by the hegemonic systems governing the show. The show is produced for Logo, which is owned by Viacom, and the show is expected to adhere to the expectations and limitations of a reality television program. However, it is not possible to know, at this time, how \textit{RDR} would have developed under different constraints, and thus it is necessary to evaluate the show in its current conception.

In \textit{RDR}, we see a number of complex identities that contestants are navigating and interrogating, whether consciously or not. On the show, these experiences are often simplified, or nullified, by the hegemonic beliefs imposed on, or internalized by, the contestants. These hegemonic stereotypes mask the real individuals being represented on the show. Willard F. Enteman explains, “The very nature of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination is that they convert real persons into artificial persons and, as a consequence, treat human beings as objects” (18).

Enteman’s explanation points out why it is not acceptable to simply pass these stereotypes off as pure entertainment. Stereotyping dehumanizes individuals, making
it easy to ignore the inequality they face. Hill Collins’ description of controlling images of Black women is relevant here; these images, “[reflect] the dominant group’s interest in maintaining Black women’s subordination” (79). We cannot assume that stereotypes are harmless; they represent the hegemonic control of entire groups of people through lies and manipulation shrouded in humor.

Although *RDR* only portrays drag queens’ experiences, these experiences relate to larger understandings of our cultural values. Sedgwick explains in her theory of “minoritizing” versus “universalizing” views that queer identities and issues are best understood as part of, “continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities” (244). Thus, the experiences of the contestants on *RDR* are important to larger understandings of our hegemonic notions of people’s bodies, and the identities inscribed on those bodies. Bordo reminds us that, “The body, as anthropologist Mary Douglas has argued, is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body” (165). Even when these bodies belong to the members of a marginalized sexuality or gender expression, they are still subject to our cultural values and expectations. In addition, the experiences of marginalized groups are important in understanding majority groups. This chapter will specify the implications of my findings for queer cultures, fat individuals, and racial stereotypes and generalizations. Following that will be speculation on how such implications can be altered. Chapter
three will conclude with a discussion of the limitations of this study and hopes for future research.

Implications for Queer Cultures

*RDR* makes it difficult for the average viewer to discern the difference between a person’s gender expression, gender identity, and sexual orientation. The show, and the language used on the show convolutes the identities of “drag queen” and “transgender woman.” Monica Roberts discusses how this confusion is not a new problem for RuPaul. Roberts states on her blog, *TransGriot*:

> It really pisses us Black trans women off that you give RuPaul Andre Charles (and Tyler Perry dressed as Madea) more love and respect than you do the average Black transwoman struggling to live their lives and interact with the Black cis [cisgender] and SGL [straight, gay, lesbian] communities without major drama. (N.p.)

Roberts goes on to explain that RuPaul has been confused for being transgender multiple times, even though he has clearly stated that he is not. She explains, “RuPaul is a Black gay man, not a transperson, and the trans community is beyond sick and tired of being sick and tired of him being elevated by cis and gay people to some nebulous ‘trans expert’ level” (N.p.). This kind of confusion is very harmful, especially because, as Roberts cites, RuPaul refuses to stop using the word “tranny.” His use of the word, coupled with both gay and straight communities’ inability to accurately define him as a cisgender man (according to his own identity), makes it
difficult for the public to realize that such words are harmful and generally considered derogatory.

This is especially problematic because RuPaul, and the majority of contestants in seasons one through four, identify as men during their time on the show and are thus incurring male privilege while reifying negative and harmful stereotypes of transgender women. Furthermore, the lack of transgender women on the show symbolically annihilates the substantial percentage of drag queens that also identify as transgender women. The implication is that a person’s gender identity is important to the drag performance. This belief reinforces essentialist notions of gender identity as biologically driven and stagnant. If the concern is that transgender women will have an advantage because they may have surgical alterations (although many do not) then the show should not allow any types of surgical alterations. Who is the say that breast implants give a contestant more of an advantage than cheek implants, collagen injections, or liposuction? Ultimately, the choice to allow some types of surgeries and not others relies on a binary and immobile view of gender and ignores the spectrum of possible gender identities to which one may adhere.

Gay men, although represented with more racial diversity on RDR than most television shows, are still depicted as highly sexualized, feminized, and superficial. In

4 Season five did have a transgender woman on the show named Monica Beverly Hillz. It appeared that she got on RDR by concealing her gender identity. She came out as a transgender woman in episode two and was sent home in episode three. Her elimination was represented as unconnected to her coming out.
addition, to date, there have been no straight-identified contestants, reinforcing the belief that gayness is directly correlated with drag. According to Butler, “Not only are a vast number of drag performers straight, but it would be a mistake to think that homosexuality is best explained through the performativity that is drag” (“Critically Queer” 25). Her statement reinforces the notion that drag and homosexuality are not innately bound to one another, and thus cannot be assumed to describe one another. However, the show appears to take a more essentialist view of homosexuality. The use of camp, the mostly naked pit crew, and the constant allusions to sex and sexuality reinforce the belief that drag and homosexuality are synonymous, and that one cannot be a drag queen without also enjoying and participating in all of these other homosexual stereotypes.

The concept of drag purported and endorsed by RDR can be read as the only acceptable form to drag performance because no other styles of drag are valued on the show. Contestants who attempt to experiment with other types of drag, especially androgynous drag, are eliminated. Those who are labeled as “too feminine” or “not drag enough” have their gender identities called into question by fellow contestants. Because this is the only show on television that focuses on drag culture, its preference for a narrow type of drag reinforces values for this drag over other kinds. Furthermore, because the drag that is valued on RDR is high glamour, it reaffirms beliefs that this type of drag is the best example or definition of what drag means. Drag has very different definitions for different performers, and the show does not encourage or reward these different definitions. Ultimately, the implications of the stereotypes of
transgender women, drag queens, and gay men on the show reinforce notions of apolitical, highly sexualized, and exoticized sexual identity and gender identity and expression minorities. Many of these stereotypes are based on the fear and de-valuing of feminine characteristics associated with these minorities. Thus, a revaluing of the feminine is necessary in the re-imagining of these marginalized groups.

**Implications for the Treatment of Women and the Feminine**

Although women and femininity appear to be nominally valued on *RDR*, the representations of women’s lives and women’s bodies on the show alludes to a devaluation of the problems that women face. The appropriation of terms that relate to women and femininity, such as ‘fish’ and ‘cunt’ can be compared to the appropriation of transgender culture and terms discussed above. Although ‘fish’ is a compliment on the show, the deeper implications of the term relate to a revulsion and fear of female genitalia. ‘Cunt,’ though it is reclaimed by some, is still considered derogatory by many, and as with other derogatory terms, should not be appropriated by individuals that benefit from male privilege. According to Frye, there is a direct connection between phallocentric notions of gay male sexuality and misogyny. She states, “Given the sharpness of the male/female and masculine/feminine dualism of phallocratic thought, woman-hating is an obvious corollary of man-loving” (N.p.). Although I do not believe there is conscious misogyny on *RDR*, the pervasive and insidious beliefs surrounding women in our society make it difficult to recognize the problems with humor that makes light of violence against women. Frye goes on to explain, “Contempt for women is such a common thing in this culture that it is sometimes hard
to see. It is expressed in a great deal of what passes for humor, and in most popular entertainment” (N.p.). The phrase “beat your face” and the mini challenge turning dolls from “ladies” to “tramps” are perfect examples of this problem. The pervasive humor at the expense of women’s health and safety must be recognized and revolutionized. Gender justice cannot take place without an understanding of this humor as unacceptable. Frye gives hope for the future. She states that some men, “have begun to understand the potentially healing and revelatory power of difference and are beginning to commit themselves to the project of reinventing maleness from a positive and chosen position at the outer edge of the structures of masculinity and male supremacism” (N.p.). This reinvention of maleness, coupled with a re-valuation of femaleness is necessary if there is any hope for justice in our future.

Implications of the Representations of Fat Contestants

This re-valuation of femaleness directly relates to the representations of fat contestants, because of the feminizing that such contestants experience. The connection between fatness and femininity is apparent in the ways contestants treat their fellow fat peers. *RDR* generally portrays fat contestants as being burdened by self-hatred, or as a symbol of excess (too loud, too mean, etc.). Some of these portrayals intersect with the contestant’s race, ethnicity, or class, creating new stereotypes. The overall negative attributions given to fat contestants on *RDR* qualitatively annihilates them, and the lack of fat contestants in the “top three” each
season also numerically annihilates them. Each season, the top three contestants appear in one of RuPaul’s music videos. Every season, those top three have always been thin; fat contestants sashay away long before that point. The only exception is Latrice Royale, whose cut at the number four spot could be argued as arbitrary. I do not think the lack of fat queens appearing in RuPaul’s music videos is a coincidence. RuPaul is able to uphold nominal diversity while still having the aesthetic in his videos that he desires.

For the majority of fat contestants on the show, their bodies appear to drown out many of their positive qualities. Kuppers explains that in our popular culture, “speaking from a large body is already arrested—the spoken word, the performance, the gesture all become sucked into the sign of excessiveness that fat connotes” (278). These constructions make it incredibly difficult for the fat contestants to be seen as anything more than their bodies. RDR leaves one hungry for more inclusive and body friendly television, for portrayals of fat individuals who are not burdened with their bodies, or treated poorly because of their bodies.

**Implications of Racial and Ethnic Stereotypes and Exoticization**

The representations of fat bodies and racialized bodies share commonalities. Both groups are generalized because of their Othered bodies, and both are expected to identify with, and simultaneously distance themselves, from their bodies. This

5 Once again, after having three fat contestants on both seasons three and four, season five had only one fat contestant who was eliminated in the first episode.
impossible split makes it difficult for many of these Othered bodies to achieve success on *RDR*. To date, no Puerto Rican contestant has won *RDR*, and when we examine the messages they are receiving, it is no surprise. In order for the Puerto Rican contestants to be successful, they are expected to occupy an impossible position of being separate from their culture, and connected to it. The judges constantly use the terms “spicy” and “escandelo” (Spanish for “scandal”) to describe the Puerto Rican contestants. However if the contestants are too Puerto Rican (if they speak too much Spanish, or if they have a strong accent), then they receive criticism, or they are pushed aside.

Anzaldúa’s analysis of *La Conciencia de la Mestiza* applies to the experiences of the Puerto Rican contestants, “Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages” ("La Conciencia” 422). These contestants exist in a state of “ambiguity;” (423) Puerto Rico is not considered an independent country, yet it is not technically a state. Briggs describes Puerto Rico’s status as “none of the above” stating, “Commonwealth is an unsatisfying compromise, a stopgap that makes no one truly happy” (10). Using the description of liminality posited by Anzaldúa, Puerto Ricans exist in a “liminal (threshold) space between worlds […]. Transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries” (“This Bridge” 1). The Puerto Rican contestants exist between the boundaries of sexuality, nationality, race, and language.

As Anzaldúa mentions, these spaces of liminality can also be the sites of transformation, an opportunity to re-conceptualize the ways we represent Puerto
Ricans, and more broadly, of Latina/os in general. De la tierra asks, “Will Latinos ever be perceived as anything more than spicy and ridiculous ‘yo quiero Taco Bell’ hot tamales?” (360). Similar to these caricatures is the exoticization and stereotyping of BeBe, whose identity is eclipsed by her association with Africa. Minh-ha explains how reinforcing this label of Other is an attempt to separate and exclude non Euro-American individuals. She states, “We no longer wish to erase your difference, We demand, on the contrary, that you remember and assert it. At least, to a certain extent” (89). Excluding people of color and people of the Global South from the ‘general’ population keeps non Euro-Americans segregated and constantly reminded of their own Otherness. However, Signe Arnfred reminds us that we can use this knowledge to change the ways we conceptualize of non Euro-Americans. Arnfred states, “re-thinking necessitates a double move of de-construction and re-construction, developing an analysis whereby, through critique of previous conceptualizations, attempts are made to approach materials in new ways, coming up with fresh or alternative lines of thinking” (7). Thus, these stereotypes can be used to analyze and deconstruct racial stereotyping, allowing us to consider new and inclusive ways to thinking.

**Hopes for a “Queer Time and Space”**

These simplistic caricatures of entire groups of people reinforce the hegemonic domain of power and hinder us from thinking critically about the individual experiences of human beings. However, recognizing these distortions for what they are gives us the opportunity to start thinking about new ways to foster inclusivity and
cultural growth for the United States. Halberstam posits that queerness can create new spaces for individuals. Halberstam states:

Part of what has made queerness compelling as a form of self-description in the past decade or so has to do with the way it has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space. (*In a Queer Time* 1-2)

Indeed, if this is possible, then one can hope that the successors of *RDR* will be able to use what has been laid out before them to create this alternative time and space. To go beyond the limits of hegemonic television genres and create programming that truly promotes the inclusive and anti-discriminatory messages of a new queer identity.

**Limitations of Study and Future Research**

This study is not exhaustive, there is much more to consider in the phenomenon of RuPaul and his television shows, books, and music. Future research could focus on a longer analysis of the representations of each contestant on the show. Although this thesis discussed many stereotypes, there are other contestants that invite further analysis. An in-depth analysis into the role of camp on *RDR* and its connection to hegemonic or counter-hegemonic messages is also necessary to further understand *RDR*’s cultural context. A more exhaustive audience analysis would also be beneficial, one that allowed for a better understanding of how *RDR* audience members interpret the hegemonic messages discussed. This thesis can only posit on possible implications of the messages conveyed on *RDR*. Without a full audience analysis, there is no way to know how audience members are reading those messages. Future research may also
delve into the ways that RDR could be considered subversive and counter-hegemonic. RuPaul’s second show, RuPaul’s Drag U, a reality television show in which drag queens teach cisgender women to “be women,” should also be analyzed. This show’s implications for gender expression and performativity are similar to, but different from, those endorsed on RDR, and are worthy of their own analysis. Possible research questions may ask how RuPaul’s Drag U engages Butler’s theory of gender performativity, and if this show can be seen as subversive or simply reiterating hegemonic notions of emphasized femininity onto cisgender women. This research would be relevant to feminist media and cultural studies scholars and any scholars interested in better understanding the ways that hegemony can be produced through seemingly subversive systems.

It is worth noting that this analysis is one of a myriad of ways that RDR could be examined and that counter-hegemonic messages could be read within RDR. Given all that has been examined in this thesis, I am still a fan of the show and still negotiate my love and enjoyment of this show with my critiques of its messages. I believe that there is much more that could be considered in future research, as briefly mentioned above.

In conclusion, this research has provided relevant and unique analyses of hegemony and the ways that hegemonic messages are communicated through RDR. RDR, although engaging in some subversive activity, appears to ultimately reinforce hegemonic stereotypes related to race and ethnicity, gender identity and expression, sexuality, drag culture, class, and size. These stereotypes, especially while they are
being associated with queer cultures, are regressive and harmful to fights for equality and ending discrimination.
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