The Fiction of Identity: Drag, Affect, Genres, Facticity

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Abstract

This article considers drag as an artform that queers identity through its use of techniques of fictionality that explore and problematize the body as the material ground for truth claims for identity. It examines a recent controversy regarding the position of trans performers within the global media phenomenon *RuPaul's Drag Race* in order to consider how the aesthetics and politics of embodied identity as a site for truth claims are productively disrupted by drag performance.

Identity is a site where modern anxiety regarding the division between fact and fiction in politics and culture routinely finds purchase. *Who* one is has long been understood as an unshakeable reality authenticated and stabilized by specific facts that are treated as immutable: one's date of birth, the gendered identity inaugurated by the assignment of sex at birth, the genetic identity of one's parents, one's ethnicity or race. Yet the large body of critical work since the middle of the twentieth century has recast discourses of identity as practices that do not merely stabilize empirical facts, but that construct the power/knowledge system in which those facts are produced. This work has established that the "facts" of one's identity are not natural realities that are merely rendered legible within cultural and legal frameworks. Rather, the conditions under which *who* one *is*—and indeed whether or not one is perceived to be a subject who may be in possession of an identity to begin with—are rendered through political, cultural and social processes with long histories embedded in contestation over the right to determine the conditions of life in regard to gender (Butler, *Bodies*), sexuality (Berlant and Warner 552-8), and race (Puar). As the history and present of race- and gender-based violence reminds us, identity categories shape access to physical conditions for flourishing, or mark out specific individuals and populations for imprisonment and death through targeted action or neglect.

As the means of subjectification and categorization, identity is both profoundly personal and impersonal. Individual embodied identity is the ground that structures our individual passage through the social field and the physical world, and is the fulcrum of our experience. When we fall in love, endure a boring situation, experience the physical fluidity of sex, dance or sport, our affects and senses anchor our place in the world. At other times, the generic nature of our identity is foregrounded—as a citizen or migrant, a gendered or raced subject, a student or next of kin—and the impersonal nature of identity markers can either lubricate our movement through the world (when we get to use the shorter queue for those holding specific passports, for example) or become an obstacle to the achievement of our intentions (such as when we are denied access to certain spaces because of our gender, race, age,

or legally sanctioned relationship to someone). At moments such as these, the reality that our identity is *read* as much as it is lived becomes apparent. In both its personal and impersonal instantiations, identity works on and with the body (Puar 159-62).

Indeed, the work of feminist, queer, trans, postcolonial, and critical race scholars has considerably advanced our understanding of the importance of reading and interpreting the body to the functionality of identity as a social and legal category. The practice of *passing*, for example, depicted in Nella Larsen's canonical novel, highlighted that seemingly fixed, naturalized identity categories rely on how the body is dressed, comported and interpreted by others in mundane everyday situations (Butler, *Bodies* 167-85). Such everyday acts belie the enormous political, legal and cultural work that is undertaken to shore up sexuality and race as categories that can be relied upon to produce facts about individuals and populations. So too, the accounts of lives of gender non-conforming and trans people who live or spend time in the world as a gender that differs from the one assumed to adhere to their sexed body, or as a person whose gender is indeterminate, disrupt the naturalized relationship between sex and gender (and object of desire) that underpins the discourses that naturalize patriarchy and heterosexuality (Bornstein).

Queer lives and identities have long been a force for challenging and reshaping common-sense ideas of why and how particular "facts" are taken for the truth of identity. In this essay, I explore one specific place where a highly visible site of queering identity has become a space for pedagogy and negotiation around the identity categories of race and gender within the American queer community, and globally through television streaming and networked media platforms, such as Twitter and Instagram. The highly successful reality television program *RuPaul's Drag Race* (*RPDR*) uses the competitive format of the reality genre to advance the profile of drag as a queer artform in contemporary popular culture. As RuPaul Charles, and casts from various seasons, gain visibility in media sites structured by heteronormative and racialized discourses of identity, drag's power as an artform that explicitly works "the double exposure" (Nielsen et al. 68) of fact and fiction in relation to identity in order to hold open the discourse of gender for criti-

cal engagement is powerfully demonstrated. At the same time, as recent comments by Charles evidence, the challenge of critiquing the impersonality of identity categories through aesthetic practices is dramatized.

The Body Is Read, The Body Is Lived: Fictionality and Fact

Drag plays with identity by heightening the audience's attention to discontinuity (Halberstam, *Female* 236). A performance-based artform long practiced in bars and nightclubs, documented in the work of artists such as Andy Warhol (in the portrait series *Ladies and Gentlemen*), and in the films of John Waters, drag is now taking its place among the visual and performance cultures of the internet through Instagram and Twitter. It is also, thanks to the efforts of African American drag performer RuPaul Charles, having a breakout moment on television and a renaissance in live performance. "In a drag performance [...] incongruence becomes the site of creativity" (Halberstam, *Female* 236) rather than revealing disfunction or pathology.

As an artform, drag utilizes what theorists of rhetoric have called the rhetorical mode of "fictionality": a "rhetorical act in which somebody on some occasion intentionally signals his or her use of a discursive invention to someone else for some purpose(s)" (Phelan 235). Distinct from the literary genres of fiction, such as the short story and the novel, fictionality is a mode that can be momentarily utilized in non-fictional, non-literary spaces of communication such as speeches, essays, conversation and debate (Nielsen et al. 62). A rhetorical approach to thinking about modes of communication emphasizes the speaker's intention, analysing any act of communication as a "means to an end" (Nielsen et al. 63). This approach aims to parse why it is that a speaker chooses the mode of fictionality at a given moment in a given context. Drag deploys fictionality in relation to gender through the aesthetics of costume, wigs, make-up, comportment, vocalization, dance, and characterization in order to render gender hyperbolic. Thinking about drag as a performance art that utilizes fictionality highlights that it "provides for a double exposure of the imagined and real" in order to

"invite" audiences "to map an engagement with representations of *what is not* onto *what is*" (Nielsen et al. 68; emphasis in original) in order to influence the audience's understanding of what is, or what is possible in relation to identity.

Yet, as we shall see, drag's reliance on highlighting and disrupting the naturalized relationship between the sexed body and gender using fictionality occurs with larger discursive structures that shape how audiences receive the performance in ways that a rhetorical approach cannot account for. For this reason, an analysis of drag needs to combine the limited focus on intentionality from rhetoric with Judith Butler's theory of performativity in order to account for drag as a form of communication that is intended, and which exceeds those intentions. Drag is a communicative and artistic act which each drag queen or king spends considerable time crafting and refining in order to achieve their aesthetic and communicative ends. This conscious crafting occurs within a scene informed by larger discourses of legibility which exceed and structure the scene of performance. As I hope to show below, it is only by thinking the fact and fiction of identity at the level of the personal (embodied and intended) and the impersonal (discursive) that we can begin to grasp the complex and shifting practices through which identity is produced and reworked. Drag is particularly well-placed, at this cultural and political moment, to hold open gender as a fact-producing discourse for critical reflection, while never fully exceeding the logic it seeks to disrupt.

A poetics that combines the (seemingly) nonfictional status of the performer's body with invented and crafted gendered performance, drag highlights the centrality of the body as the site where discourses of identity are materialized. Because of this, drag was a key case study in early thinking about the performativity of gender. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler discusses drag in order to think through our inherently compromised state in relation to the discourses of gender and sexuality which precede and shape, but do not determine, subjectivity (223-42). In Butler's account, drag is not inherently subversive because it may have the effect of reifying heterosexual logic. This reinscription of heterosexuality occurs when drag uses fictionality to allegorically work the oppositional

logic that insists upon two normative genders that are linked through a melancholic relation of desire. This gendered melancholy is the result of the negation of identification with one's own gender that is required in heterosexist logic—where the heterosexual woman must repudiate any desire for the female, and the male subject for the male (Butler, *Bodies* 233-8). The truly subversive potential of drag, for Butler, comes from the way collectives of drag performers—often referred to as a house and family—reformulate heterosexual kinship relations through the resignification of terms like "mother" to refer to the relationships of mentorship, love, support and friendship that form between drag performers who share an aesthetic (*Bodies* 240-1). This form of queer kinship became widely known to audiences beyond queer communities through the documentary *Paris is Burning*, released in 1990, and was widely discussed by feminist theorists such as Butler and bell hooks.

However, much has changed in queer cultures in relation to gendered identity since the release of *Paris is Burning* and the publication of Butler's important work in 1993. As Halberstam notes, Butler prioritized drag queens in gay male culture when she considered drag in relation to the theatricality of protest and compulsory heterosexuality (*Female* 236). A proliferation of terms for resisting naturalized gender categories have evolved in queer cultures; terms such as trans, genderqueer, nonbinary and gender fluid are utilized alongside longer standing terms such as butch and femme. These newer terms explicitly name—and seek to make intelligible—gender identities that bear little relation to the gendered binary and refigure the supposed stability of the body as the material foundation for identity. The increased visibility of drag from these queer spaces within mainstream and online media platforms which are structured by a heterosexual gaze and logic means that drag as a performance practice now invites different readings of the body than one organized by the male/female, masculine/feminine binary. This new form of drag, underpinned by subcultural ideas about queering gender by disrupting a view of the body as an immutable fact of identity, has become a key point of contact between queer cultures and popular culture, where queer world-making practices (Berlant and Warner 558) interact with the institutional and representational cultures

that maintain a commitment to the facticity of heterosexuality and gendered identity as an organizing principle. As I discuss below, when drag queens talk about their artform in contexts where the facticity of two genders is taken as a given, the conversation can become one in which both the audience and the performer struggle to understand what, precisely, the role of the body is in materializing the truth of gender.

Thus, our consideration of what drag is and does must take into account how drag as an artform of queer world-making has shifted since it was discussed in the 1990s and early 2000s. Moreover, Butler's discussion of drag occurred when it was largely a subcultural practice produced and viewed within explicitly queer spaces such as dance halls, gay bars, and at Pride Parades.[1] However, we are now in a renewed period of contact between drag queens (rarely kings) and institutional and popular culture sites where queer ways of being are not the norm. Drag performers now appear in full drag on breakfast television programs, at industry award ceremonies such as the Emmy's, and in spinoff television programs broadcast by mainstream services such as Netflix, thus it is timely to reconsider drag as an invitation to audiences to think differently about the relationship between the body, gender, and identity. The reconfiguration of the logic of fact and fiction—what is real and what is invention—that drag performers undertake is queering gender and sexuality in spaces far beyond the queer communities and audiences. Thus, drag queens such as RuPaul, Sasha Velour (winner of Season 9 of *RPDR*), and Peppermint (the first competitor on the program whose trans identity was known during her participation in the program, also in season 9) extend the traditional role of the drag queen as a fabulous and fierce personality within a local queer scene, to the role of ambassador for drag as an artform that works with a specific aesthetic of fictionality in relation to gender, sexuality, and race within popular culture. The insertion of drag into popular culture through the genre of real-

1 It is also important to acknowledge that drag and other forms of gender nonconformity have always also existed within non-queer spaces. Drag queens, trans men and women, and gender nonconforming people must travel through and inhabit spaces organized by heterosexist logic. This necessary negotiation means that gender nonconforming people have long played the role of teachers on the subject of gender, as well as being the subject of gender policing and violence.

ity television is a means for RuPaul to translate his career path into a model for other drag performers to follow, and to elevate drag as form of popular culture (Poletti and Rak). At the same time, alongside the work of trans activists (and not always in agreement with it, as we shall see) it has become a vehicle for intervening in the public discussion about the stability and facticity of identity and the (assumed) relationship between identity and the body.[2]

Discursive Norms and Genres: Knowing and Feeling Facts

Throughout *Bodies That Matter*, and in later work such as *Giving An Account of Oneself*, Butler frames subjectivity as both produced and read within the pre-existing discourses of identity that constitute the social field. The legibility and consistency of performance, in each iteration, is central to identity functioning as a stable category; daily practices of self-presentation constitute the self that other people see and come to rely on; they do not express it. The "success" of an identity performance is dependent on its legibility, and the terms of legibility—what can "count" as a good enough instance of self-presentation—are structured by discursive formations. To acquire and maintain an identity is to cite norms of subjectivity over and over again (and often to fail in them), thereby creating the impression of a stable identity to which accrues the association of naturalized reality. Performativity is not a consciously chosen set of actions, but an unconscious, compelled response to the requirement to give a legible "account of oneself" in order to be recognized as a member of the social field. The requirement for identity to be readable invariably brings with it questions of aesthetics and poetics, invention and creativity, but these are always bounded by our inevitable immersion in the very discourses we may seek to challenge or expand (Berlant, *The Female* 4). "How will we know the difference between the power we promote and the power we oppose?" is the ques-

[2] For an indication of the discussion where drag and trans intersect, diverge and connect, see the entries "Cataloguing," "Postmodernism," "Television," "Translatinas/os," and "Umbrella" in Stryker and Currah.

tion Butler uses to connect the question of identity to the inherent instability of textuality: we cannot predict, nor control, the meanings or legacies of the text that is our performance of identity (*Bodies* 241).

Thinking more specifically about the aesthetics and poetics of queering gender by bringing drag into heteronormative media sites highlights the complexity and difficulty of this conundrum. Discursive norms have aesthetic forms: they adhere to specific genres, modes of narration, visual presentations and sounds. This concretization brings with it not just cognitive and psychic forms of legibility, but affective components as well. Specific genres and their aesthetics make affect legible and ground collective and public forms of connection with others (Berlant, *The Female* 5-13). The concretization of discursive norms of identity and affect through aesthetic practices, Lauren Berlant argues, also makes genres sites in which we not only find legibility but in which we "flail" (Berlant, "Big Man"). To think of genres as structures in which we flail points to how genres provide a horizon of expectations which both structures what is intelligible, expected and desired when we use texts as a means of forming collective, public connection, and how those very structures—and expectations—can fail to produce the recognition and sense of belonging we desire.[3] Thus we flail when we utilize a genre but do not get the result we expect, and we flail when the situation we find ourselves in cannot be adequately formulated—made intelligible or available for discussion—through existing genres. Despite these limitations, we try anyway. "In times of crisis," she suggests, "we engage in genre flailing so that we don't fall through the cracks of knowledge and noise into suicide or psychosis" ("Big Man"). The #MeToo movement, trans activism and scholarship, and the continued debates regarding the legal status of queer forms of kinship have worked to keep the issue of gender on the agenda of popular culture and politics. Thus, gender (along with sexuality and race) remains a site of contestation regarding norms of identity, safety, and inclusion which are assumed to define liberal democracies (Puar 37).

[3] See Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint* for an explication of this theory of genres as sites of expectation and disappointment.

But in this scene of contestation, it is not the queens themselves who flail, although *RPDR* includes many moments where the affective labor and psychic costs of drag are narrated. Rather, in crafting their bodies as sites where the social, psychic and affective genre of gender is rendered hyperbolic, the drag queen's fierceness (the unapologetic glamour and precision of the queen's performance) opens up a space where gender becomes visible as a genre in which we are all flailing. Sasha Velour's trademark bald head—often visible in her performances and photographs, or (infamously) revealed at heightened moments of affective intensity in her performance—disrupt an interpretation of her drag as a desire to be read (to pass) as adhering to the existing norms of femininity. Her drag works explicitly with juxtaposition: between complete baldness (a violation of the feminine norms of presentation) and hyperfeminine make-up and elaborate costumes, in order to evoke, engage and disrupt the horizon of expectation that associates gendered styles of embodiment and gender identity. Velour describes herself as "genderfluid," (Velour, "About.") and a hallmark of her performance is fluidity, where transformations often feature (as in the infamous removal of her wig to produce a shower of rose petals in the final of *RPDR* season 9) and unexpected combinations of music styles and modes of embodiment (as in her adaptation of the song "Pirate Jenny" from *The Threepenny Opera* by Kurt Weil and Bertolt Brecht [Velour, "One Dollar."]). The fearless performance of drag queens like Velour works to keep open, or re-open, gender as a space where we might "forag[e] a better good life from the freshly uneven ground we're wobbling on" (Berlant, "Big Man").

The "we" who is "wobbling" in Berlant's formulation are those minority communities whose ways of being and forms of intimacy come off second best when the discourses that render the truth of identity are structured by hierarchical forms of exclusion that posit norms and forms of gender, race and sexuality as the natural fact of human experience. Certain identities and populations are viewed as deviations from the norm, and claims about this deviation often cite the materiality, fixed reality of the body as evidence. Yet, as Butler and Berlant both acknowledge, attempting to reshape existing norms to better suit the aims of social inclusion and justice is compromising and painful. Compromising

because, in Butler's formulation, we cannot fully escape the genres that materialize the discourses which produce the truth of identity even as we seek to remake them:

> Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a "pure" opposition, a "transcendence" of contemporary relation of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure. (*Bodies* 241)

As we enter the scene of flailing about gender that drag opens up in heteronormative mainstream culture structured by racial hierarchy, there are inevitably negative experiences and affect: "[T]his is what it means to make elbow room amid crisis. It can be awkward; it can hurt and be hurtful" (Berlant, "Big Man").

I will now explore how a recent public debate sparked by RuPaul's comments regarding the necessity for drag to function as an artform that uses techniques of fictionality to question the facticity of gender elucidates Berlant's idea of what it means to flail in a genre. It also demonstrates how drag pulls us back into gender and race's power as discourses of truth about identity, even as drag performers use fictionality to generate moments in which that discourse can be critiqued and questioned.

It's the Body That Matters? Drag and the Materiality of Gender Play, Race and Affect

> Drag loses its sense of danger and its sense of irony once it's not men doing it, because at its core it's a social statement and a big f-you to male-dominated culture. So for men to do it, it's really punk rock, because it's a real rejection of masculinity. (Charles, qtd. in Aitkenhead)

In March 2018, *The Guardian* published a profile on RuPaul Charles and the global success of *RPDR* under the headline "RuPaul: 'Drag is a big f-you to male-dominated culture.'" With the statement cited above, and comments that he would "probably not" accept a contestant on the show who had had breast implant surgery, Charles sparked a debate among drag queens, the queer community, and fans of *RPDR* regarding the importance of the male sexed body as the material foundation for drag's use of fictionality. Charles used the trans contestant Peppermint's surgery (undertaken after she competed on the series) as an example of changing the body beyond what he perceived the material limits which authorize drag's subversive potential. By using this example, Charles enacted Butler's warning that using the power of discourse to reshape the facts it appears to authorize is an impure and inherently compromised practice. In this interview Charles is flailing in the genre of gender: struggling to conceptualize and formalize what he thinks is the frisson between the bodily "reality" that underpins the text of the drag queen's performance of identity. For Charles the frisson *is* the fact of the male body underpinning the fictionality of the female identity that is constructed and performed by the drag performer. Peppermint publicly discussed her discomfort at being mentioned in the interview (without her knowledge), and having her decisions regarding her body used as an example; highlighting the fraught publicness that contestants on *RPDR* must negotiate as they seek an increased public profile within media spaces that do not regularly cover queer lives and gender non-conforming people (Mic). Charles later apologized for these statements in the profile, positioning himself as a willing student of the queer community: "You are my teachers" (@RuPaul).

Charles's attempts to conceptualize drag as an aesthetic practice for a non-queer readership produced a genre flail in relation to the body and gender. This flailing erased the long-standing contribution of trans people to the artform, and the history of drag kings and performances of masculinity by women studied by Halberstam and documented in lesbian scholarship and archives. In one possible reading, Charles's public flailing evidences the power of drag as an aesthetic practice that radically pries open the discourse of gender to (in Butler's phrase) trou-

ble its validity as the source of truth about who one is *because* one of its most famous practitioners was himself unable to adequately describe the rhetorical intention of drag as he understands and practices it.

Yet the format of the celebrity profile written into a media environment structured by heterosexuality and racial hierarchy is also a factor in occasioning a genre flail in gender that created controversy. Earlier in the piece, a large quote from RuPaul outlining how his use of drag intervenes in racialized and gendered readings of him as an African-American man provided explicit commentary on how race functions as a discourse that shapes readings of the racialized body. These comments received far less public attention and were not explicitly linked to Charles's controversial statements about gender.[4] This is in part because the profile failed to connect race and gender in relation to drag, and much of the public response ignored how Charles had framed drag as a means of attempting to disrupt the white audience's association of African-American men with anger:

> People have always been threatened by me as an African-American man, because of the inherent black rage that all black people have in our culture, the underlying black rage because of what happened to us in this country. It's always there; it's a glaring issue that's saying, "First of all, let's talk about the black rage." So one of the ways that I've been able to dilute that perception is to dress as a character that says, "Look I'm fun, I can have a sense of humour about life because I'm in drag. I acknowledge black rage, but we're going to have some fun." So then people are like, "Oh OK, so we can laugh together, we don't have to address the black rage." (qtd. in Aitkenhead)

Establishing African-American anger as a given, Charles describes his drag as a means of re-directing the interpretation of his gendered and

[4] We should also keep in mind the importance of controversy as a media strategy designed in the attention economy of online publishing and globalized media. The journalist's decisions regarding how Charles's comments were presented should be considered with this in mind.

raced identity that reads his body as evidence of his identity and disposition. The drag persona of RuPaul intervenes in a white audience's expectation that a male African-American entertainer will embody specific feelings ("inherent black rage") and that those feelings will be the first thing he asks his audience to think about ("First of all, let's talk about black rage.") Charles posits "black rage" as a fact ("the inherent black rage that all black people have in our culture") acknowledged by all members of the American social field, and the problem of identity this creates for him: the male African-American body is always read as a material repository of "black rage." This association of the black male body with rage is a cornerstone of racial violence in the United States: as generations of civil rights activists and black artists, most recently the Black Lives Matter movement, have articulated.

Rather than confirm his right to these feelings of rage, and to demand audiences engage with them, Charles narrates fictionality as a strategy for intervening in the truths that are generated by an interpretation of his body: "[O]ne of the ways that I've been able to dilute that perception is to dress as a character that says, 'Look I'm fun, I can have a sense of humour about life because I'm in drag. I acknowledge black rage, but we're going to have some fun.'" Rather than denying the truth of the anger attached to racial oppression, Charles uses the drag persona of RuPaul to invite an alternative reading of his identity and the negative affects that are materialized in racialized readings of his body.

The structure of the profile on RuPaul—where his observations about race and gender are not engaged with by the journalist (the quote above is its own paragraph and is followed by the provision of biographical detail regarding RuPaul's childhood), and his observations about gender are not connected to his earlier statements about race—demonstrate the continued difficulty of thinking race and gender as discourses that work together to authorize identity (Puar 23). Indeed, Charles's characterization of the male black body as inevitably interpreted by audiences as embodying *a posteriori* racial anger differs starkly from bell hooks's interpretation of drag, which she feared yoked black performers to a middle class, white version of femininity that further entrenched the alienation of African American women,

and working-class women, from understandings of female experience. In her discussion of drag, hooks goes further than Butler in thinking about the inherent melancholic logic of drag that takes white bourgeois femininity as its lost object. While not taken up by the interviewer, or commentators that responded to the interview, RuPaul's statement confirms the necessity of forging a critical framework for thinking about how discourses of race, gender, and class intersect in the performance of identity for African-Americans that the work of hooks and other black feminists enacts. RuPaul Charles's comments about the sexed body produce a flail in the genre of gender partly because the journalist writing the profile ignores Charles's invitation to fold the question of race into a discussion of gender by leaving these statements disconnected.

The Invitation to Flail

While Charles was rightly criticized for his response to questions about the relationship between the body and the performance in drag, the public condemnation of his statements, particularly within media environments structured by naturalized assumptions regarding heterosexuality and race, evidences the impossible bind that queers of colour are placed in when they undertake the work of acting as representative subjects who mediate between subcultural sites and institutionalized spaces of publicness. This bind "holds queer of colour organizing and theorizing to impossible standards and expectations, always beholden to spaces and actions of resistance, transgression, subversion" (Puar 23), overemphasising the individual experience and agency associated with identity, and downplaying its impersonal component. For theorists such as Puar, Butler, and Berlant, this is the true fiction of identity: it is assumed to be within our control, an expression of our will and agency, rather than the very terms in which our agency, desires, and experiences are constituted and communicated. In publicly flailing, and in using their artform to open up a space in which audiences can flail within the genres of identity of gender and race, drag queens utilize the tension between fact and fiction creatively in order to foster new conversations about identity that ask us to remain attentive to this tension.

This intervention and invitation is issued by artists nurtured within the strong counterpublic spaces of gender play and deconstruction of queer subcultures. These subcultures develop reparative modes of identification and community that ameliorate and buffer the ongoing hostility to gender nonconformity and queer sexuality that shape the narratives of identity that have traction in social and political discourse. Vitally, reparative practices such as drag are a direct rejection of the assumed causal relationship between queer identity and unhappiness that is central to the heterosexist logic that posits queer existence as fated to incompleteness and isolation from the goods that constitute the good life of reproductive heterosexuality enshrined in the nuclear family.[5] As RuPaul's comments about race indicate, this hostility is experienced and enacted differently for those whose bodies are read through the lens of race and class. *RPDR* includes many "behind the scenes" conversations where the complex intersection of race, class, religion and queer culture are discussed by contestants. These conversations evidence the costs and exclusions that come in manifesting a fierce commitment to troubling the normative investment in the body as the material ground for the truth of identity, as the queens reveal and discuss their experiences of sexual violence, eating disorders, drug and alcohol addiction and their struggle for acceptance (particularly finding intimate partners) within gay culture. While their public performances invite us to flail, the reality TV format and its use of "behind the scenes" dialogue between contestants evidences that the strength to work the line between fact and fiction in regards to gender is often born out of complex personal struggles to find a means of living one's identity authentically.

For audiences who take up the invitation to flail offered by drag, the artform becomes a scene of possibility for the reconsideration of the horizons of expectation of gendered identity, and to think anew about the role of the body in authenticating and stabilizing it. Yet despite the pleasure derived from watching the performance, this reconsideration

[5] Many queer theorists have re-interpreted the heterosexist association of queer identity with melancholy, isolation and failure in what is sometimes refered to as queer theory's embrace of negative affect. See for example, Lee Edelman's *No Future*, Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, and Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness*.

also involves an uncomfortable, and possibly painful, encounter with the limits of our ability to do away entirely with the genres and expectations that render us intelligible to each other.

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@RuPaul, "Each morning I pray to set aside everything I THINK I know, so I may have an open mind and a new experience. I understand and regret the hurt I have caused. The trans community are heroes of our shared LGBTQ movement. You are my teachers." *Twitter,* 5 March 2018, twitter.com.

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Biography

Anna Poletti is associate professor of English at Utrecht University, the Netherlands, and Senior Research Fellow at Monash University, Australia. Her research focus is contemporary forms of life narrative, with a particular interest in youth cultures, ephemera (both digital and analogue) and the role of mediation and materiality in autobiography. Her recently published research examines the use of audiences' bodies in the work of Marina Abramović, drag as automedia, and the materiality of genre.