“History? No, Henny, This is HERstory” — Queer History as Entertainment in RuPaul’s Drag Race

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Samantha Martinez Ziegler
samazi [a] utu.fi
MA, doctoral student
Digital Culture
University of Turku

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The reality competition franchise Drag Race has been credited for bringing drag culture to mainstream television. The franchise has RuPaul, the most famous and commercially successful drag queen of all time, as the host, mentor, and inspiration. Its first instalment, RuPaul’s Drag Race, aired in the United States in 2009, and has been awarded twenty-nine Emmy awards, among other accolades. As of 2024, the show has over sixteen seasons, with numerous spin-offs including Untucked and All Stars, and several international adaptations spawning in four continents. From its first season onwards, the series has adopted elements from earlier LGBTQ subcultures and moulded them to fit the episodic structure of the competition. RuPaul’s Drag Race provides new ways to present and celebrate queer history, while educating its audience through a creative and varied entertainment formula.

At this year’s double premiere of *RuPaul’s Drag Race All Stars* Season 9, Ohio-native contestant Nina West walked the runway dressed in a leather outfit, a cartoon-style dark wig with a black police cap on top, and a face full of make-up accentuated with a thin moustache. In the rim of the leather skirt and neck of the outfit, the words, “yours sincerely, Tom of Finland,” are handwritten in

cursive. The category was “Drag Imitates Art,” part of the Paint Ball maxi challenge, where contestants were asked to create a look inspired by an artist.

Tom of Finland was the pseudonym of Finnish artist Touko Laaksonen (1920–1991), who left an imprint in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) community with his highly provocative and sexually liberating illustrations. Nina, whose real name is Andrew Levitt (1978–) and has over twenty years of experience as a drag artist, comments on her choice to show exposure to Laaksonen’s art by saying “Tom of Finland is an artist who celebrates queer male eroticism, I’m flirting and cruising my judges,” in a voiceover as she models for a panel of judges (RPDR All Stars S9E2, 40:13: Figure 1).

The sentiment is seconded by legendary drag queen RuPaul, who is the head judge and host of the competition. While deliberating on the outfit, RuPaul remarks “I love that you chose Tom of Finland, an artist who has meant so much to the queer community, and it really does need to be seen by people because it’s so beautiful,” (RPDR All Stars S9E2, 49:08). Moments like these are plenty in *Drag Race*, where the aim is not only to entertain the audience through gender performances, but to educate and bring awareness to queer cultural history and the LGBTQ people who paved the way decades prior (Brennan & Gudelunas 2023, 5).

Figure 1. Nina West, Drag Imitates Art. RuPaul’s Drag Race All Stars, Season 9, Episode 2 (2024).

The American reality competition television series *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (RPDR [Logo, VH1, MTV 2009 –]) has become a cultural phenomenon, mostly due the backing of the queer community ever since it began airing fifteen years ago (Hermes 2023, 130). The premise of the series is to have

a group of drag queens competing in several challenges to earn the title of *America's Next Drag Superstar* and a cash prize of $200,000 ($20,000 in the first season). Contestants get to showcase their skills in makeup, dance, comedy, and overall drag performance throughout the entire competition. RuPaul (RuPaul Andre Charles, 1960–) is the face of the show, and acts as executive producer in addition to his on-screen roles. Out of drag, RuPaul identifies as a man and uses he/him pronouns. However, his homonymous drag persona is a female, and uses she/her pronouns. As of 2024, the series has over sixteen seasons, nine *All Stars* seasons, several spin-offs, and numerous international adaptations across the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Australia, and plenty of accolades, including twenty-nine Primetime Emmy Awards.

Today, Drag Race sits atop showbiz as a worldwide franchise, opening the door of LGBTQ culture to mainstream audiences. The following article reviews the ways in which RuPaul's Drag Race presents queer history as entertainment, both explicitly and implicitly. By reviewing several examples from the American reality series, this article aims to highlight the vast influence of queer subcultures, such as the ballroom culture captured in Jennie Levingston's documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990), drag rituals and traditions, the Club Kids scene, gay icons, as well as LGBTQ experiences, struggles, and stigmas.

Drag Race and the Rise of Modern Drag Culture

For over fifteen consecutive years, RPDR has been shining the spotlight on drag artistry by featuring performers from diverse backgrounds who specialise in different styles of drag. Its episodic structure combines competition, drama, comedy, and unique, strong visual aesthetics that are characteristic of the world of drag. Over time, the show has adopted and established its own tropes, rituals, catchphrases, and traditions, most of which are rooted in LGBTQ history and/or popular culture (Fitzgerald & Marquez 2020, 20).

Each episode includes mini and maxi challenges, where RuPaul asks contestants to showcase four qualities: their "charisma, uniqueness, nerve and talent," an iconic phrase (and also acronym for C.U.N.T.) that is repeated ad nauseam throughout the entire competition. Mini challenges often call for quick thinking and adaptability, such as the ability to get "in drag" in just fifteen minutes (as opposed to the hours it usually takes the performers to transform their appearance), and are rewarded by momentary help, a small cash prize, or special advantages. Contrastingly, maxi challenges are the main challenge of the episode. They require the drag queens to showcase the

full extent of their drag artistry, including acting, design, modelling, dancing, among others. In addition to maxi challenges, each episode sees the queens showcasing their creativity and style on the runway, inspired by a themed category previously determined by RuPaul. Based on their performance in that week's challenges and their runway look, the judges determine the top and bottom queens for the episode. Commonly, the bottom two contestants must partake in a lip-sync battle before a panel of judges, which sees RuPaul using the catchphrases "shantay, you stay" and "sashay away" to determine who stays and leaves the competition respectively.

Harris (2023, 133) credits RuPaul as one of the biggest contributors of drag in popular culture, shaping modern drag. In this vein, Brennan & Gudelunas (2017, 91–92) consider that RPDR has brought "drag out of underground gay subculture and into mainstream reality TV". This is supported by the worldwide success of the Drag Race franchise. From the 2010 onwards, the phenomenon has expanded beyond television, with former contestants taking their careers to the cosmetic, music, and film industries, as well as "taking over YouTube and Instagram, and getting Netflix specials" after their appearances on the show (Harris 2023, 133–134).

Drag has a rich history that predates the mainstream exposure granted by RPDR. Historically, drag has been at the centre of queer culture and history for decades on end. In Ester Newton's *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (1979) insightful research of the world of drag of the 1970s, drag is described as a "homosexual term for a transvestite," and drag queens as professional homosexuals that "represent the stigma of the gay world" (Newton 1979, 3). Newton's research was considered groundbreaking when published, but the artistry and meaning of drag have since then evolved greatly. Nowadays, drag is understood as an art form, a performative act where its performers attempt to present "new, altered, transgressive, or, most importantly, parodic gender identities within the context of performance" (Moore 2013, 17). Accordingly, drag encompasses several artistic expressions; from gender nonconformity, lip-syncing, dancing, and humorous impersonations to glamorous and fierce transformations, drag is an amalgamation of cultural experiences and creativity (Berkowitz & Belgrave 2010, 161–162). Drag queens and kings showcase their artistry by displaying what they excel at; it can be live performances, it can be hair and make-up, it can be extravagant outfits, it can be stand-up comedy, it can be burlesque acts. There are little limitations because, to borrow from UK-based queer artist and author Felix Le Freak (2020, 15), "drag can be anything it wants to be". When a drag queen is

on stage and a microphone in her hand, people will be clapping. In this sense, drag is as much a skilled artistic expression as it is entertainment.

As is the case with art, and especially a queer expression that breaks free from societal gender norms, drag is also a political statement (Hermes 2023, 142). Drag performance challenges and rejects dominant gender rules rooted in heteronormativity, and in doing so, it becomes an act of resistance. Throughout history, drag performers have been at the forefront of queer movements, as a form of gender non-confirming counter-culture, to organising and running AIDS/HIV -benefit shows for decades, or purely by "keeping time and urging the community to continue pressing on" during the gay liberation movement (Fitzgerald & Marquez 2020, 189–190; Figure 2). Hence, while drag has a rich cultural history, it has also played a significant role in the much larger history of the LGBTQ community.

Figure 2. Gay rights activists at the New York City Hall rally for gay rights: Sylvia Ray Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, Barbara Deming, and Kady Vandeurs, photographed by Diana Davies (1973). Source: Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

The drag scene was long confined to gay bars and nightclubs, which acted as safe spaces for queer individuals to meet and express their gender and sexuality (Kucharski 2018, 2). The drag community began to thrive in their own-made queer spaces, particularly in a growing ballroom

scene (Harris 2023, 132–133). However, drag culture remained out of the public eye for decades. It was not until the 1990s that elements were brought into the public eye through Madonna's hit song *Vogue* (1990), Jennie Livingston's documentary on New York City's ball and drag culture titled *Paris Is Burning* (1990), and RuPaul, who became the most commercially successful drag queen in the US and globally with the release of the single *Supermodel (You Better Work)* (1992) (Harris 2023, 133). However, as noted by Fitzgerald & Marquez (2020, 150), the popularity and visibility of drag performance and its culture in popular media fell at the turn of the century all the way until 2009, when the first season of RPDR aired.

Since then, both Drag Race and drag performance have "become a much more visible and mainstream cultural phenomena" (R. Ellis 2022, 107). Today, Drag Race leads the way in the field of queer entertainment. Now, viewing drag culture as the foundation for the television series, RPDR can and should be credited for further introducing important pieces of queer history to a younger LGBTQ generation and, above all, to the masses. In doing so, Drag Race has gained a pedagogical dimension, helping newer generations to understand more about events, movements, and people that have impacted the community at some point in history (Brennan & Gudelunas 2023, 5).

"You Wanna Talk About Reading? Let's Talk About Reading" – Paris is Burning and Ball Culture

In 1990, a documentary following the New York ballroom scene of the 1980s was created. Jennie Levingston's *Paris is Burning* is a seminal work of LGBTQ cinema, exploring the culture of Harlem drag balls and the struggles and marginalisation faced by the queer people who competed at the balls, most of whom were from the African-American and Latino community (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Ball contestants lining up as emcee Junior LaBeija announces the category of "Butch Queen First Time In Drags At a Ball." Paris is Burning (1990).

Historically, the culture of drag balls in New York City can be traced back to the 19th century, when queer masquerade balls took place (Lawrence 2011, 3). Although any perceived gender and sexual deviation were considered threats to society and, thus, criminalised through the late-19th and early 20th centuries (Harris 2023, 154–155), drag balls continued to exist all the way through the mid-1900s. In fact, more than 3000 contestants and spectators were reported to have attended a Harlem ball in 1953 (Lawrence 2011, 3). The sixties saw the origin of drag houses, an alternative family for LGBTQ individuals of colour who had experienced racism and discrimination in the ballroom scene at the time (Cunningham 1995). Notable houses include the legendary House of LaBeija, the House of Xtravaganza, the House of St. Lauren, and the House of Dupree (Fitzgerald & Marquez 2020, 35). Houses compete at balls together, and are led by "mothers" (e.g., the House of LaBeija was led by Crystal LaBeija), who offer support and guidance to their "children" (members). The history and evolution of the houses is captured in *Paris is Burning*, and the events are told by the individuals that were part of this queer subculture themselves.

Although as a reality competition series RPDR borrowed elements from other reality series such as *America's Next Top Model* (2003–) and *Project Runway* (2004–), the New York ballroom culture immortalised in *Paris is Burning* has served as the queer cultural foundation upon which RPDR was built (Brennan & Gudelunas 2017, 20). The influences of the documentary itself can be found in the structure of the show. Take the Werk Room for example. The Werk Room is the main room where contestants are seen out of drag as they prepare for challenges and get their runway looks ready (Fitzgerald & Marquez 2020, 11; Figure 4). The events that take place in this setting, as contestants are seen as themselves and not as their drag personas, are viewed as "authentic instances of reflection and discussion," and echo how out-of-drag interviews were conducted in Paris is Burning (Brennan & Gudelunas 2017, 20). RuPaul, who acts as a mentor for the queens in the competition, is often referred to as "Mother Ru" or "Mama Ru," carrying on the long tradition of houses and mothers. Moreover, on the runway, this influence becomes clearer and more direct, from RuPaul echoing the words of legendary emcee Junior LaBeija (1957–) to introduce that episode's runway category ("*category is…*"), to the names of the categories themselves (e.g. "eleganza extravaganza").

Figure 4. On the left, Dorian Corey is interview as she gets in drag. Paris is Burning (1990). On the right, contestant Kim Chi gets into drag in the Werk Room as she reveals her family is unaware about her drag career. RuPaul's Drag Race, Season 8, Episode 1 "Keeping It 100" (2016).

Figure 5. The common setting of the Reading Challenge. RuPaul's Drag Race, Season 5, Episode 7 "RuPaul Roast" (2013).

The origins of several concepts and practices found in modern drag and LGBTQ culture were captured in *Paris is Burning* (Fitzgerald & Marquez 2020, 33; Campana et al. 2022, 1962). For example, "reading" and "shade" are oral traditions found in the drag culture of the 1980s that continue to live on today. In the documentary, drag queen Dorian Corey (Frederick Legg, 1937–1993) describes reading as "the real art form of insults," witty insults remarks or jibes that originated as a survival technique for queer individuals, while she considers shade as a more developed form of reading; "I don't tell you you're ugly, but I don't have to tell you because you know you're ugly" (Levingston 1990, 33:54 to 35:50). These traditions have been kept and popularised by RPDR, particularly with the introduction of the "Reading Challenge" in the second

season and onwards. Also known as “Reading is Fundamental,” RuPaul commonly introduces this mini challenge by crediting the documentary with some iterations of the phrase, “in the great tradition of Paris is Burning, get ready to visit the library, darling!” (RPDR S5E7, 3:48; Figure 5).

The mini challenge formally begins with the question of “because reading is what?” to which the queens answer in unison “fundamental.” Traditionally, a pair of flamboyant reading glasses are passed between the contestants as they take turns reading and throwing shade at each other. The drag queen who manages to develop the wittiest and most playful remarks is rewarded as the winner. To illustrate, the winner of the Reading Challenge in the fifth season of the series was Alaska. One of her reads was addressed to fellow “Rolaskatox” stable member Detox, stating “you’re so seductive, but unfortunately, it’s illegal to do it with you because most of your parts are under 18 years of age” in reference to Detox’s previously disclosed cosmetic procedures (RPDR S5E7, 6:20). Alaska’s words here can be viewed as shade: she is not explicitly insulting Detox’s appearance, but rather implying that most of her body has been subject to plastic surgeries. In doing so, Alaska aims to mockingly “expose” one of Detox’s “flaws” to the public (Campana et al. 2022, 1967). The comment was met with laughter, and has stayed one of Alaska’s most memorable reads in both of her Drag Race appearances.

Throughout the seasons, RPDR has also included quotes and direct references to the act of reading and shade in Paris is Burning as part of other challenges. For instance, the words of Venus Xtravaganza (1965–1988), a drag queen and transgender woman featured in the documentary, have been frequently cited by several contestants through the years. As an example, season two contestant Jujubee regularly quotes Venus’ legendary read ad verbatim in her season (“Are you going through it? Are you going through some psychological changes in your life?” [RPDR S2E10, 35:00; Figure 6]). Likewise, season four contestants Willam and DiDa Ritz quote Venus in a maxi challenge, saying “touch this skin, honey, they can’t take it, they’re overgrown orangutans” (RPDR S4E2, 18:18). Granted, these references are often quick and could be mistaken as impromptu remarks to those unfamiliar with Levingston’s documentary. As a reality TV series, RPDR is scripted (Brennan & Gudelunas 2017, 32), and because of that, it is not wrong to assume that the producers of the series have had the intention to include word-for-word references to Paris is Burning through the years. After all, RuPaul herself had previously referenced Venus’ read in the 2004 single *Looking Good, Feeling Gorgeous*. By constantly reproducing the words of marginalised

queer people featured in Paris is Burning, RPDR carries on their legacy and makes sure that their influence in modern drag is well-felt.

Figure 6. Venus Xtravaganza's influential read in Paris is Burning (1990).

Fitzgerald & Marquez (2020, 18) consider all of these "gestures, references, slang terms, and technical knowledge that gets passed on and mutated as it moves through generations" in drag culture as part of a larger LGBTQ cultural heritage. In that regard, in the chapter *Super Troopers: The Homonormative Regime of Visibility in RuPaul's Drag Race* (2017), Anna Antonia Ferrante suggests that many drag expressions and rituals "would have been lost if RPDR had not adapted the setting of those traditions" (Brennan & Gudelunas 2017, 155). Today, the influence of drag culture has reached spaces beyond queer spaces, such as the mainstream fashion industry (e.g. with make-up techniques such as contouring and baking to create a "beat face"), and modern slang terms (e.g., words like *slay*, *sickening*, *mother/mothering*, *kiki, gag*). From that viewpoint, RPDR has become an agent of heritage that plays a role in keeping drag cultural history alive.

Celebrity Impersonations and Tributes

For a long time, the term "drag queen" was synonymous with "female impersonator" (Newton 1979, 46; Schacht & Underwood 2004, 4). Over the years, as drag has evolved into a large platform for self-expression, creativity, and gender nonconformity, a big distinction has been put between the two. While a female impersonator usually attempts to portray a woman, drag performances try to challenge and push the boundaries of gender norms; a drag queen presents an exaggerated representation of a woman, both physically and in the way she acts. In this sense, drag gains a role-playing nature (Brennan & Gudelunas 2017, 31). Notwithstanding, impersonating celebrities "is a very old form of drag with a long tradition behind it" (Fitzgerald & Marquez 2020, 46). From Judy

Garlands to Chers, from Madonnas to Lady Gagas, drag queens have carried on the old tradition of adopting and mimicking the traits and behaviours of celebrities and morphing them with their drag personas to put on a show for the audience.

In RPDR, "the Snatch Game" serves the function of carrying on this tradition once every season. Snatch Game is one of the series' recurrent maxi challenges, first introduced in the second season of the show ("In the great tradition of drag, you'll be asked to appear doing your best celebrity impersonations, and you'll be judged on your looks, precision, and wit" [RPDR S2E4, 9:00]). It parodies the American game show *Match Game* (1973–1990), a staple of 1970s day-television where contestants are asked to answer fill-in-the-blank questions (Fitzgerald & Marquez 2020, 49). For the Snatch Game, the gender of the celebrity drag queens choose to impersonate does not matter. For example, the All Stars 7 Snatch Game saw impersonations of celebrities such as boxer Mike Tyson, singer Prince, actress and singer Judy Garland, as well as mythological creatures such as the Boogeyman and Lucifer (RPDR All Stars S7E2; Figure 7 & 8).

Figure 7. Celebrity impersonations for the Snatch Game challenge. RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars, Season 7, Episode 2 "Snatch Game" (2022).

In addition to creating a physical resemblance to the celebrity of their choosing, a successful Snatch Game performance is found in the balance of managing mimicry while injecting comedy and humour that "somehow feels truthful to the person being portrayed" (Fitzgerald & Marquez 2020, 51). The performances of Jinkx Monsoon (Hera Hoffer, 1987–), the winner of the fifth season of the series and the seventh season of All Stars, particularly stand out. Jinkx's Snatch Games impersonations included fashion icon Little Edie (1917–2002), who starred in the cult

documentary *Grey Gardens* (1975), actress and comedian Natasha Lyonne (1979–), and the aforementioned Judy Garland (1922–1969), an icon of the LGBTQ community. In relation to the two latter performances, Michelle Visage praised Jinkx's ability to embody the characters and asserted that it was "some next-level shit that most people can't do," while Ross Matthews echoes the sentiment by telling Jinkx that "what you did was a master class in Snatch Game, I don't think I'll ever see anything like that again" (RPDR All Stars S7E2, 50:06).

Jinkx's success reflects how important impersonations continue to be in a competition that puts a spotlight on the different skills and techniques required to master the art of drag. In fact, while judging the Snatch Game performances in season four, RuPaul emphasises this by stating, "that's what drag is about, you have to have a knowledge of pop culture" (RPDR S4E5, 35:48). In and out of drag, RuPaul stands by this statement by showing encyclopaedic knowledge of popular culture history and fashion history, often adopting pedagogical techniques to share this knowledge with contestants and the audience (Fitzgerald & Marquez 2020, 131).

Figure 8. Jinkx Monsoon impersonating Judy Garland for the Snatch Game. RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars, Season 7, Episode 2 "Snatch Game" (2022).

Although the Snatch Game is one of the most anticipated challenges in every season of the series, the impersonating abilities of the contestants are also put to test through themed maxi challenges. Particularly so in musical theatre challenges like Rusicals, where contestants are expected to show their acting, singing and dancing skills. The theme of Rusicals varies every season, but often include parodies of famous musicals or pop culture celebrities. For instance, Rusicals covering the careers of Cher and Madonna took place in the tenth and twelfth seasons of the show respectively, while

the second season of All Stars featured a Rusical entitled “HERstory of the World,” where the queens pay homage to LGBTQ icons like Britney Spears, Evita, and Princess Diana.

Thematic maxi challenges also serve as a way to pay homage to legends of the drag scene. The Rusical featured in the seventh season episode entitled “Divine Inspiration” falls under this category. RuPaul introduces the challenge as follows:

> This week, we are paying tribute to the Sultan of Sleaze, The Baron of Bad Taste, the legendary director John Waters. From his early cult classics like *Pink Flamingos* (1972) to his mega hit *Hairspray* (1988), John worked with one of my idols, the late, great Divine. And when these two worked together, they made magic. (…) I hope you take some Divine inspiration from that because for this week’s maxi challenge, you’ll be screen testing for parts in a new Rusical based on some of John Waters’ most iconic scenes. (RPDR S7E9, 7:38-8:35)

Figure 9. On the left, Edith Massey, and Divine in Pink Flamingos (1972). On the right, Ginger Minj and Violet Chachki recreating the scenes as part of the maxi challenge. RuPaul’s Drag Race, Season 7, Episode 9 “Divine Inspiration” (2015).

Divine (Harris Glen Milstead, 1945–1988) was a legendary drag queen and icon of camp, a style of drag that is hyper exaggerated and theatrical. Divine was known for using drag “as a form of cultural terrorism, turning herself into such a spectacle that she used to force people to look at

her" (Fitzgerald & Marquez 2020, 79–80). As explained by RuPaul, her fame was closely entangled with the one of American filmmaker John Waters (1946–), who created a strong queer counterculture in the 1970s with their collaborations in dozens of films, particularly two in Waters' "Trash Trilogy:" *Pink Flamingos* (1972), and *Female Trouble* (1974) (Figure 9). Divine had claimed the purpose of her performances was to provoke, to "get out there and shock them," and Waters helped take this presentation to further and new extremes (Fitzgerald & Marquez 2020, 78). Divine pushed boundaries and societal norms with her art, and her legacy is visible in most instances of camp today, even serving as inspiration for the villain Ursula in Disney's 1989 adaptation of *the Little Mermaid* (Bell et al. 1995, 182).

John Waters had a special appearance in the episode "Divine Inspiration" as guest judge. Three scenes from these films were paid tribute to in the episode, two from Pink Flamingos and one from Female Trouble. The seven remaining contestants were separated into three teams. Trixie Mattel and Ginger Minj were featured in a musical parody of the Eggs scene of Pink Flamingos, portraying Divine/Babs Johnson and Edie, Divine's mother in the film, respectively. Kennedy Davenport and Katya Zamolodchikova perform in *Cha Cha Heels*, a scene inspired by Female Trouble, with Kennedy playing Divine's character Dawn Davenport, and Katya portraying her mother. Lastly, the trio of Violet Chachki, Pearl, and Miss Fame recreate the infamous final scene of Pink Flamingos, which sees Divine eating dog faeces. The trio play three versions of the same character, as the reimagined scene shows Good (Pearl) and Bad (Miss Face) renditions of the character trying to convince Divine (Violet) to eat dog poop ("Don't touch that doo-doo, Oh, do touch that poo, What should I do?" [RPDR S7E9, 28:39]).

The decision to celebrate the LGBTQ individuals that paved the way for drag queens all over the world can also come from the contestants themselves. Case in point, drag queen and season nine winner Sasha Velour (Alexander Hedges Steinberg, 1987–), often pays homage to the influential drag artist Lypsinka (John Epperson, 1955–), who revolutionised drag by introducing the art of spoken word in lip-sync performances (Fitzgerald & Marquez 2020, 165). Lip-syncing has been a common practice in drag for decades, and performers who specialised in it were referred to as "record vocalists," developing individual and recognisable styles in the drag scene (Newton 1979, 46).

In RPDR, the art of lip-syncing plays a role in how well contestants perform in the competition, as lip-sync battles take place in the closing segment of every episode. Sasha Velour has credited

Lypsinka as her biggest inspiration, stating that "she absolutely transformed what a drag performance was in the '80s and '90s in New York (…) and if I can have even half that legacy as a drag performer, I would feel proud" (Capital Buzz 2020, 4:45). In the grand finale, Sasha won the competition with an iconic lip-sync rendition of Whitney Houston's *So Emotional* (1987), bringing the entire crowd "to an ecstatic standing ovation by pulling off her wig in a tremulous fit of what looked like very Lypsinka-esque rage" (Fitzgerald & Marquez 2020, 166; Figure 10). Sasha's performance has gone on to become one of the most iconic lip-sync performances in the history of RPDR, and Lypsinka's legacy and image will forever be linked to it.

Figure 10. On the left, Lypsinka. Source: Ruby Washington/The New York Times (2014). On the middle and right, Sasha Velour's lip-sync in the grand finale. RuPaul's Drag Race, Season 9, Episode 14, "Grand Finale" (2017).

"Head-to-Toe, Let Your Whole Body Talk" — Bringing HERstory to the Performance

Figure 11. On the left, Kim Pendavis works on a ball outfit. Paris is Burning (1990). On the right, RPDR contestant Shangela works on a Studio 54 disco inspired look. RPDR All Stars 3, Episode 5 "The Pop Art Ball" (2018).

Before contestants take the main stage to showcase their runway looks, RuPaul is the first one to walk the runway in full drag as her single *Cover Girl* (2009) plays. The song has become the designated intro and a staple of the runway presentations, featuring the chorus lyrics "Cover Girl, put the bass in your walk, head-to-toe let your whole body talk" in every episode. And, indeed, drag queens often let their looks do the talking when paying tribute to queer history and drag artistry. As Fitzgerald & Marquez (2020, 131) point out, the runway segment of every episode pays direct and indirect tribute to drag influences, styles, and LGBTQ history.

As previously established, drag balls are part of the drag heritage and LGBTQ culture. The ballroom scene is present in RPDR through the series' own Ball Challenge, in which the queens are expected to bring unique looks to the runway, usually split into three themed categories, "in the great tradition of Paris Is Burning" (RPDR S4E11, 7:56). Traditionally, at least one of the runway looks must be created from materials that can be found in the Werk Room by the contestants themselves. Handcrafted outfits (Figure 11) allow queens to show their creativity and ability to make inspiring and jaw-dropping looks out of limited resources and time, which in itself is a tribute to the "street queens who had to pay it no mind and make do with whatever life laid at their feet" (Fitzgerald & Marquez 2020, 21–22). *Paris is Burning* documents the DIY principle of drag, showing performers working on their outfits despite poverty, discrimination, and violence, as Cunningham (1995) puts it, creating "baroque fantasies of glamour and stardom, all run on Singer sewing machines in tiny apartments."

Balls explore several concepts and thematic, usually focusing on fashion, aesthetics, and popular culture. On some occasions, Balls are also used as tools to celebrate queer history and culture. For example, the eleventh episode of the ninth season of the series was titled "Gayest Ball Ever," (Figure 12) and it was split into three categories: Rainbow-She-Better-Do, Sexy Unicorn, and Village People Eleganza Extravaganza. Sasha Velour, who would go on to be crowned the winner of the season, assumed a pedagogical role in her performance, particularly in her rainbow-inspired look. Sasha chose to deconstruct the rainbow flag by wearing monochrome garments for a retro-inspired outfit, accentuated by a big hat atop her bald head and shiny ruby slippers. Midway through her runway, Sasha removes the big hat to reveal a small house with a small rainbow flag. In a voiceover, Sasha herself explains the outfit by saying, "I'm giving a little nod to *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and the importance of Dorothy to the gay community" (RPDR S9E11, 23:05). Characters and lines from the Wizard of Oz have been part of LGBTQ culture for decades, and, historically, the

phrase ”friend of Dorothy” has been used in slang by gay men when referring to other gay men (Hopcke 1989, 65). RuPaul would expand on this a few years afterwards, during the fourth season of All Stars, highlighting that the term was frequently used “as a secret code to help closeted people identify each other” (RPDR All Stars S9E4, 7:58).

Figure 12. Sasha Velour, Rainbow-She-Better-Do. RuPaul’s Drag Race Season 9, Episode 11, “Gayest Ball Ever” (2017).

While the Ball Challenge only takes place once a season, each episode features at least one themed category, and thus, opportunities to bring queer history to the runway. To illustrate, the ninth season of the reality series featured runway outfits inspired by the Club Kids scene, an underground subculture that thrived in the New York nightlife of the 1980s and 1990s, of which RuPaul and Michelle Visage were part of themselves (Fitzgerald & Marquez 2020, 142). Club Kids experimented with fashion, creating extravagant and counterculture couture. In this episode, the queens discuss the Club Kids scene as they sit in the Werk Room and start to get in drag. One of the contestants, Trinity the Tuck, confesses that she does not have much knowledge about this subculture, because she comes from the world of pageantry, a more glamorous style of drag (Newton 1979, 49). Sasha opens up the conversation by explaining that “in the nineties, the Club Kids changed drag forever,” as photographs of individuals from the Club Kids scene were shown on the screen (RPDR S9E9, 17:16; Figure 13). Shea Couleé, who would later win the fifth season of All Stars, continues Sasha’s words by stating that “Club Kids have influenced drag today in going beyond female impersonation and really thinking about becoming a piece of moving art” (18:00).

Their words are reflected minutes afterwards, when they walk down the runway in over-the-top ensembles and bright, in-your-face colours.

Figure 13. On the right, photographic material of the Club Kids shown in the series. On the right, Shea Couleé Club Kids inspired look. RuPaul's Drag Race Season 9, Episode 9, "Your Pilot's on Fire" (2017).

Traditionally, several of the categories featured in RPDR include the word "realness" in their name (e.g., Tony Award Realness, Banjee Girl Realness, Platinum Card Executive Realness). The term realness is important in LGBTQ history and especially in ballroom culture, as explained by Dorian Corey and Junior LaBeija in *Paris is Burning*:

> In real life, you can't get a job as an executive unless you have the educational background and the opportunity. Now, the fact that you are not an executive is merely because of the social standing of life. That is just a pure thing. Black people have a hard time getting anywhere. And those that do are usually straight. In a ballroom, you can be anything you want. You're not really an executive, but you're looking like an executive, and therefore you're showing the straight world that "I can be an executive. If I had the opportunity, I could be one because I can look like one." And that is like a fulfilment, your peers, your friends are telling you, "oh, you'd make a wonderful executive."
>
> (…) When you're gay, you monitor everything you do. You monitor how you look, how you dress, how you talk, how you act. Did they see me? What did they think of me?
>
> (…) To be able to blend, that's what realness is. If you can pass the untrained eye, or even the trained eye, and not give away the fact that you're gay, that's when it's realness. (Livingston 1990, 14:25–18:38).

Figure 14. A ball contestant in the category of Executive Realness, Paris is Burning (1990).

As previously mentioned, the ballroom scene was shaped by the Black and Latino LGBTQ community. Like Corey mentions, they faced a lot of ongoing discrimination in their daily lives not only based on their sexual or gender orientations, but on their race and social status. Becoming a successful executive in the 1980s New York society as a gay Latino man or a black transgender woman was borderline impossible; out of their reach. For them, balls where the spaces where they could express themselves as LGBTQ people without fear and live the dreams that would never be achievable in the society of the 1980s. In this context, realness allowed them to "create a different reality, fighting the stigma experienced in society" (Campana et al. 2022, 1966).

In RPDR, the word "realness" in the category themes implies that the judges will be evaluating the contestants based on their ability to pass according to their runway performance. For instance, for the category of Platinum Card Executive Realness in season six, the queens kept their unique drag styles but created special executive characters with their looks. "My platinum card executive realness character, she's a lady who looks like she could buy and sell you over lunch," says BenDeLaCreme in a voiceover as she walks the runway, while later, Bianca Del Rio walks in a blue office skirt and blouse and claims, "I am serving real-estate-agent realness" (RPDR S6E11, 24:42–25:24). As RPDR preserves the tradition of realness in drag, it highlights the inert performativity of drag, a quality that is part of its rich history (Brennan & Gudelunas 2017, 155).

Lastly, runway looks have also been used to talk about LGBTQ issues and stigmas. Contestants usually have the freedom to interpret the themed categories as they see fit, and they use them as inspiration to talk about their own experiences as queer people and showcase the history of the community, even when it comes to painful topics like illnesses, abandonment, and homophobia (Brennan & Gudelunas 2017, 20). To illustrate, for the category of "Flashback: DragCon 1980,"

season sixteen contestant Q (Robert Severson, 1996–) walked the runway in a dress inspired by openly gay artist Keith Haring (1958–1990) that she crafted herself (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Q, Flashback: DragCon 1980. RuPaul's Drag Race, Season 16, Episode 11, "Corporate Queens." (2024).

During her performance, Q stated that "[Haring] was a really popular activist in the '80s for, like, you know, AIDS awareness, and the lapel of this is like the AIDS awareness ribbon (…) this look is an homage to all the queer people that were lost during the AIDS epidemic" (RPDR S16E11, 40:57). Later in the episode as she stands in the main stage, an emotional Q would reveal that she has been living as HIV positive for the last two years, and declare that she would like to use the platform offered by RPDR to break the stigma that surrounds HIV.

Conclusion

Drag is a form of queer art that has been around for over a century, and has been at the forefront of pivotal movements in queer history. As the Drag Race franchise has brought drag artistry to mainstream television at a global scale, it is important to discuss how queer history is weaved into the core aspects of the series. At the start of this review article, I set out to examine the use and framing of queer history as entertainment in the original American version of the reality competition series, *RuPaul's Drag Race*. With the goal of identifying the influence of past LGBTQ subcultures and icons in RPDR, I drew comparisons between existing documentation of the history of drag and the LGBTQ community, and video material from the show.

Pieces of queer history are on display in every episode of RPDR. The presentation can be clear and direct, as is the case with maxi challenges that celebrate the vibrant history of the community. The Ball Challenge stands out, a a once-in-a-season flamboyant function that pays homage to the ballroom scene and the queer POC individuals who shaped this subculture. Other themed challenges, such as Rusicals, can act as a vehicle to remember and celebrate the LGBTQ icons and legends of drag. The episode *Divine Intervention* honours the camp legend Divine and the works of cult filmmaker John Waters, and through musical parodies of iconic characters played by Divine in his films, RPDR not only celebrates queer history, but educates its audience.

At the same time, this article finds that the nods to queer history can be subtle. It can be seen and felt in the Werk Room every time contestants sit in front of a Singer machine to create a "gag" worthy look for the judges. With every stitch and turn, contestants carry on the spirit of hundreds of drag performers who crafted outfits of whatever little materials they had to compete at the balls. Or in the several textual and visual references built into the show; from RuPaul echoing legendary emcee Junior LaBeija's distinguishable "*category is…*" every episode, the use and continuance of drag lexicon and rituals, contestants paying homage to older drag performers by including their aesthetics or mannerisms in their own performances, or even by discussing painful topics that are of collective significance to the LGBTQ community.

In sum, RuPaul's Drag Race is not merely a medium through which to appreciate drag artistry and culture on a weekly basis, it is also an important repository of modern drag culture and queer history alike. As Jennie Livingston captured the drag scene of the 1980s in Paris is Burning, RPDR has captured the evolution of drag in the 21st century, while at the same time passing down drag traditions and rituals to newer generations. As both entertainment and an agent of heritage, RPDR has adopted a pedagogical dimension: the series educates the viewer about LGBTQ issues and subcultures, of the drag performers who paved the way for modern drag to exist today and more, a pivotal force behind the gay liberation movement.

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