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You Better Work: RuPaul and
Queer Representation in the Media
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Abstract

This paper discusses the early career developments of drag queen RuPaul Charles and looks at the recent notoriety of his show *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Their combined influence on increasing queer representation in mainstream media has allowed for a wider audience to absorb queer culture thus allowing for a greater sense of acceptance toward the LGBTQ+ community. Additionally, drag queens on *Drag Race* have increasingly pushed the boundaries of conventional gender constructs and has given an underrepresented demographic the chance to see representation on a national scale. While there are certainly some problematic aspects of how this representation is achieved, its overall contribution provides a much overdue acknowledgement of a group of people who have consistently influenced many aspects of American pop culture following the Stonewall Riots in 1969.

Keywords: RuPaul, queer representation, drag queen

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Since its premiere in 2009, RuPaul's Drag Race has been increasingly influential in spreading the cognizance of queer identities through performances of drag queens. But even before the show was picked up by Logo, RuPaul Charles had already established himself as a prominent figure in American drag culture thanks to his success as both a singer and TV personality. His breakout single *Supermodel (You Better Work)* brought him widespread recognition and even charted on the Billboard Hot 100, and since then has been used in movies like *The Brady Bunch Movie* and *The Lizzie McGuire Movie*, and Posh Spice sashayed down the runway to it during The Return of the Spice Girls tour in 2007. Three years after the release of *Supermodel*, Ru continued his career in show business with his eponymous program on VH1 *The RuPaul Show* becoming the first gay talk show host in US TV history. His influence has spanned nearly four decades and continues to reach new audiences every day, and it is because of his success that there has been an incredible increase in representation of many queer identities in the media.

Becoming a Superstar

Before we can look at how Ru's influence has changed the landscape of queer representation in the media, we must look at his journey to becoming the superstar we know and love today. RuPaul Andre Charles was born into a working-class family in San Diego, CA as the third child of Ernestine "Toni" and Irving Charles, both Louisiana natives. After getting married in Houston, they moved west to California hoping to provide a better life for their children. Ru's

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parents divorced early in his life at age seven, leaving him as the only boy in a five-person household, which Ru credits as a strong influence on his future feminine persona. In his autobiography, Ru (1995) states that:

Above all, she was my ultimate inspiration because she was the first drag queen I ever saw. She had the strength of a man and the heart of a woman. She could be hard as nails, but also sweet and vulnerable—all the things we love about Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, and Diana Ross. To this day when I pull out my sassy persona, it's Ernestine Charles that I'm channeling. (p. 32)

Though they had a turbulent relationship, Toni Charles left a lasting impact on Ru as a person and a performer. In addition to his mother, Diana Ross played a pivotal role in Ru's journey in becoming a drag queen and solidified his desire to become a superstar.

At age 15, Ru made the decision to move in with his older sister and her husband to relieve himself from the iron rule of his mother, and eventually followed them to Atlanta. He attended Northside High School, a performing arts magnet school north of Atlanta on the outskirts of town, and it was there that Ru was able to develop the side of him that we see on stage. During his junior year of high school, Ru dropped out and began working for his brother-in-law transporting luxury cars from across the country to sell in Atlanta.

His career as a performer began in 1981 with a stint on *The American Music Show* that inspired him to start his own band, RuPaul and the U-Hauls, who performed in shows across Midtown Atlanta. Eventually, Ru started another band with two high schoolers called Wee Wee Pole that broke up only a few months after its creation, but after having tasted the Big Apple

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during one of their shows in New York City, Ru was set on making a life for himself there. He packed his bags and travelled to New York City with a few friends, including the legendary Lady Bunny, eager to break into the lucrative drag scene of the East Village. He spent most of his time as a go-go dancer in the notorious Pyramid Club, bouncing from crash pad to local park before returning to Atlanta and refocusing his energy on building his reputation there. Starting in 1986, Ru starred in several low-budget films such as *Starrbooty* and *Voyeur*.

He trekked back and forth between Atlanta and NYC for the next few years and made his way into the Club Kid scene of New York, but it was not enough to provide Ru with a sense of fulfillment, so he went back to his native California to try and do some soul searching. DJ Larry Tee, whom Ru had met with the Club Kids, called him one day and gave him the kick in the rear to get back to NYC and put his name in lights. Up until this point, Ru had been performing drag as means of gender bending and wanted to push the limits of gender construction, but when he returned to New York, he saw that “the call was for drag queen realness” (RuPaul, 1995, p.107), so Ru put on a bra and began serving up fish.

Queen of Manhattan

Ru’s first taste of national exposure came with his role as a dance extra in the music video for *Love Shack* by the B-52’s, who had seen him perform with Wee Wee Pole, in 1989. He began to make a name for himself in the New York club scene and was awarded the most prestigious title of the queer underground: Queen of Manhattan. Geraldo Rivera gave Ru several appearances on show that he used as a platform to educate the public that the club scene was not just about booze and pills or kids dressing up, and that Ru’s schtick was all about love. On the

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British show *Manhattan Cable*, Ru had an iconic woman on the street segment where he interviewed the sex workers in the aptly named Meatpacking District. These television appearances gave him the platform to launch himself as a fully realized brand and allowed him to achieve the stardom of which he had always dreamed.

In 1993, Ru's freshman album *Supermodel of the World* was released and launched "Supermodel (You Better Work)" to the top of the billboard dance chart, cementing Ru's status as a superstar, and his fame continued to expand the following year when he signed a modeling contract with MAC Cosmetics. The success of the single was compounded when his Supermodel Tour went cross-country and eventually cross-continental, which was bolstered by appearances as a guest on *The Arsenio Hall Show* and presenting an award at the 1993 MTV Video Music Awards. Ru did not simply use this status to pump up his ego, because now that he had an international audience, people listened to him, and Ru took on the role of LGBTQ+ spokesperson and performed at the March on Washington in 1993. Following an appearance at the VH1 Fashion and Music Awards in 1995, Ru landed a deal with them for his own talk show that had visits from Diana Ross to Nirvana, Cher to Lil Kim. To the dismay of its cult following, the show was abruptly cancelled in 1998 and Ru left for Los Angeles, taking a hiatus that lasted almost a decade.

Cover Girl

Though he made a few media appearances during his break from showbusiness, Ru is best known in the modern day for the competition reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (RPDR) that was first broadcast on Logo and has since moved to VH1. The show is centered around finding

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“America’s next drag superstar” and has given over 100 queer performers a platform to share their talents with the world thus allowing for a broader normalization of queer culture. In the United States, gender and sexuality are usually depicted and understood as binaries (i.e. masculine or feminine, straight or gay) (Taylor and Rupp 2006, 12; Valocchi 2005), but more contemporary understanding of gender studies contend that it is not a binary but instead a spectrum. Modern drag culture draws its roots from the underground ball culture of queer people of color in New York in the 1980s where drag performances were judged based on realness, which Goldmark (2015) describes as “the successful performance of sexual, gendered, classed, and racial forms of capital that may not map onto a performer’s lived experience” (p. 501), and this was the ideology imposed upon the contestants of the early seasons of RPDR after it premiered in 2009. However, subsequent seasons have included queens that have unapologetically challenged this structure who have presented gender within their own interpretations of the concept.

Many academic works criticize *Drag Race* for reinforcing and perpetuating the heteronormative presentations of gender by criticizing queens for not looking “fishy” enough, meaning the fail to embody traditional feminine gender presentation. Upadhyay (2019) remarks that, “in a cis-heteropatriarchal society, drag remains outside of what is deemed mainstream...[it] challenges dominant notions of gender and sexuality” (p. 481), but the more recent seasons of RPDR have allowed for drag to become part of the mainstream.

Season 3 contestant Raja frequently pushed the bounds of gender presentation, and as Strings and Bui (2014) note “[she breaks] down the femme/butch binary not by performing as

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one and then the other, but by embodying *both* and thus neither” (p. 830), which ultimately allowed her to win the season. This transition into mainstream American culture, *Drag Race* has also brought an increased awareness and education of and about the limited boundaries of the traditional gender binary. Gonzáles and Cavazos (2016) argue that RPDR presents the audience with the criteria that “*fishiness* is valued over *butchiness*” (p. 663), but such a position is no longer true with the success of queens like Adore Delano, who identifies as non-binary and, despite being read for having a “hog body” on All Stars 2, has recorded three successful studio albums, or Sharon Needles, who is well-known for her macabre style that won her the crown in season 4.

In addition to presenting drag culture on a wider, mostly cis-heteropatriarchal audience, *Drag Race* also spotlights many issues that have long affected the queer community. The first season featured an episode with a main challenge where the queens had to screen test commercials for MAC Cosmetic’s VIVA Glam line, which promotes a campaign to spread HIV/AIDS awareness and donates 100% of the proceeds to the cause. During her shoot for the challenge, Ongina disclosed that she is HIV positive, and Hargraves (2011) explains the significance of the scene in that it challenges the common misconception that someone who is positive is either an innocent victim, usually a heterosexual cisgender woman, or is a gay AIDS carrier with insatiable sexual desire because she knowingly had unprotected sex but does not fit the media’s characterization of gay men with AIDS (Hargraves, 2011, p. 29).

The show also includes storylines that negate the stereotype that gay men necessarily are polyamorous since many of the contestants are in long-term, committed relationships, and this

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also allows people without the experience of being a gay men to see that being in a relationship isn't a political statement but simply an expression of conventional human emotion. Season 6 contestant Courtney Act hails from Australia and, while she already had a prominent career as a singer there prior to participating on the show, exported the culture of drag queen acceptance in the US when she returned to her home country. Though this was probably primarily due to her ability to pass, or present as a biological female, As noted by McIntyre (2017) who describes Courtney as “a taut, leggy blonde...who expertly enacts ‘womanliness’” (p. 94). Nevertheless, the simple fact of her presence promotes the acceptance of queer people in the somewhat surprisingly conservative Australia.

Being an adamant viewer of the show, I can attest to the problematic representation that occasionally appears on the show, but I do not feel that this negates the overall impact of the show on mainstream American culture. In learning about Ru's journey to stardom, I have learned more than I had expected about the origins of numerous facets of modern queer and drag culture. As such, I have decided that my zine will focus on Ru's influence on both mainstream and drag culture in the US through his show, and how playing with gender is no longer a taboo subject among my peers. The show has certainly influenced my own perceptions of what gender means and how it is presented, and I feel it is crucial to impart that knowledge on a wider audience that might not necessarily watch a competition reality show about drag queens.

Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve & Talent

Whether you are a Drag Race zealot or only know the catchy hook of “sashay, shante,” one cannot deny the incredible influence of RuPaul, who has been stomping around pop culture

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in his pumps for almost 40 years, paving the way for queer representation at every step. With roots in New York City ball culture, drag has long been an underappreciated and marginalized form of art, but Ru has harnessed the power that genderbending seems to provide and created an empire of music, TV, movies, and literature. His show *RuPaul's Drag Race* has a rapidly expanding fanbase, and while some aspects of it perpetuate problematic behaviors within American culture, it fosters the spread of queer culture into the mainstream and promotes representation of marginalized queer identities. The show's influence, and that of the queens on it, can be seen in numerous sectors of American pop culture from contouring and highlighting, to the phrase “spilling tea”, and even of the 2019 Met Gala theme “Camp: Notes on Fashion.” A fierce artist and influential icon, Rupaul Charles has been, and no doubt will continue to be, a pivotal player in the ultimate goal of widespread queer acceptance.

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