# *RuPaul's Drag Race* and the Toronto Drag Scene

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Popular Culture

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Faculty of Social Sciences, Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario

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For the drag artists who taught me to re-think gender.

Abstract

The debut of the television show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Barbato, Bailey, and Charles) in 2009 marked the start of a new drag boom. The program's commercial success throughout the 2010s brought drag performance into the mainstream cultural arena, prompting a host of effects on the historically grassroots culture of drag. This thesis project explores the show's impact on one particular geographic community, the Toronto drag scene, which has been active in some capacity for at least 70 years. This ethnographic study is drawn from a year and a half in the field in the Toronto drag scene and a series of semi-structured interivews with nine research participations who took part in the 2018 edition of the Toronto-based drag pageant *Crews and Tangos Drag Race*. Using this group as a case study, this thesis demonstrates how *Drag Race* has influenced both the politics and aesthetics of the Toronto drag scene.

Drawing from scholar Will Straw's work on scene theory, I argue *Drag Race* now acts as global drag culture's dominant system of articulation (Systems 369) and that it not only dictates trends in drag, but also provides the contemporary drag fan a rubric for understanding drag's cultural meaning. I contend the show influences how drag is interpreted by fans and informs how gender, race, and economics are negotiated in the Toronto drag scene. *Drag Race* has created a new, economically-driven global drag scene, which looms large over the local scene in Toronto. Using Straw's concept of lines of influence, I argue there is a two-way dialogue between local drag in Toronto and the *Drag Race*-driven global drag scene. The participant interviews and field work showcased in this project demonstrate how the Toronto drag scene receives, re-interprets, and resists the vision of drag presented by *Drag Race*.

Keywords: Drag, Reality Television, RuPaul's Drag Race, Popular Culture, Queer Studies

# Preface

This research began in autumn 2018 with a digital ethnography of a Toronto-based drag competition, *Crews and Tangos Drag Race*, henceforth *CTDR*. Since then, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, henceforce *RPDR*, has continued to proliferate and *RPDR*'s influence over the city's drag scene has expanded in two important ways. First, the Toronto scene's own Brooke Lynn Hytes made their debut as the first Canadian contestant on *RPDR* during the show's eleventh season, further igniting an already vibrant local fan culture for drag and *RPDR* in Toronto. Then came the announcement of *Canada's Drag Race*, which made its debut on the streaming service Crave in July 2020, shortly after this research concluded. The production of this new series is yet another example of drag's immense popularity in Canada and how *RPDR* serves as a system of articulation (Systems 369) for drag culture. This research explores how Canada's largest drag scene has interacted with *RPDR* during the drag boom the show has ushered in. After *Canada's Drag Race*, the local culture is certain to shift once again in both exciting and potentially troubling ways, but such developments are outside the scope of this thesis.

Drag has been the focus of my research focus throughout my time at Brock University and given this groundwork, I have employed key concepts and theories used here in previous research. For example, the definition of drag – "Any staged act of gender performance" – I use here was also used in two previous papers. I have also drawn from the work of two key scholars, Alexander Doty and Matt Hills, more than once in order to frame my scholarship. When relevant, I will state that I have previously explored a particular concept or idea and cite the paper that contains my previous work on the topic. These include: 1) "Queens of their scene: A netnography of *Crews and Tangos Drag Race*"; produced for Dr. Derek Foster's class Research Methods in Popular Culture. 2) "Scene and be seen: The Toronto drag scene and the

participatory fan culture of *RuPaul's Drag Race"*; produced for Dr. Dale Bradley's class Cultural Theory and Popular Culture. 3) "*Dragula* and the queer performance of The Monstrous-Feminine"; produced for Dr. Cristina Santos' class Unbecoming Female Monsters in Film, Popular Culture and Narrative and 4) "Hyper Queens: Queering the female performance of femininity"; produced for Dr. Trent S. Newmeyer's class, Critical Sociologies of Gender and Sexuality. Each paper noted above is detailed in my Works Cited.

A portion of research from this thesis relating to Toronto's drag history was presented during a panel about queer theory and queer identities produced by The Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, The Centre for Women's and Gender Studies, and The Social Justice Research Institute at Brock University in October 2019. The framework for this research was presented at Brock University's 2019 Social Sciences Research Colloquium and Brock's January 2020 Research Forum in Communication, Popular Culture and Film. Preliminary findings were presented at the Crossing Borders conference at Brock in March 2020.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge my research participants: Barbra Bardot, Harmony, Lucinda Miu, Miss Fiercalicious, Miss Scotto, Porcelain Tylez, Selena Vyle, Silencia, and Tash Riot. This work is greatly indebted to this group of performers, who generously shared their experiences with me. Thank you to Dr. Karen Fricker for the wise counsel, moral support, and inspiration. This work was championed by Dr. Marian Bredin, Dr. Sarah Matheson, and Dr. Derek Foster at Brock University and I'm grateful for their support. I would not have been compelled to take this research project on without the Toronto performers who have inspired, entertained, and educated me: Allysin Chaynes, Jacklynne Hyde, Tynomi Banks, Fay Slift, ZacKey Lime, and Archie Maples.

Thank you to Salvatore and to my family for the emotional support needed to finish this thesis. And finally, to my dad, Neil Martin, who drove an hour each way to campus to earn *his* Master's Degree while working full-time: thank you for showing me this was possible.

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# Chapter One: Introduction

In the decade since the television show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Barbato, Bailey, and Charles) debuted, the world of drag has undergone a stunning transformation. As the show, henceforth *RPDR*, grew from niche queer fare into a cultural sensation, it helped bring the art of drag into mainstream culture. This migration has had a profound impact on grassroots drag scenes. This thesis explores the influence *RPDR*, a global, corporate entity, has had on the Toronto drag scene, which has been active in some capacity for at least 70 years. It is an ethnographic study that draws from scene, fandom, queer, and feminist theory for its analysis. The findings in this study are drawn from interviews with a group of Toronto-based drag artists who took part in the 2018 edition of a local drag competition, *Crews and Tangos Drag Race*, henceforth *CTDR*. I argue that *RPDR* has introduced a new level of commerciality and mainstream visiblity to the drag scene in Toronto, which has historically operated separately from the city's mainstream, heterosexual social and entertainment culture. As a highly produced commercial product, the show's neoliberal leanings have also impacted how gender, race, and economics are negotiated in the Toronto drag scene.

The analysis in Chapter Two begins with a short summary of the Toronto drag scene's origins and a brief look at the historical roots of the chief problematics that emerged from my ethnography – racism and sexism. Chapter Three provides background information on RuPaul, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and *Crews and Tangos Drag Race*. In Chapter Four, I use Canadian scholar Will Straw's work on scene theory to situate *RPDR* as global drag culture's dominant "system of articulation" (Systems 369). In other words, *RPDR* is the prevailing lens through which audiences view drag culture; not only does the show dictate trends in drag, it also provides the contemporary drag fan a rubric for understanding drag's cultural meanings. This is not,

however, a one-way dialogue. I contend, like Straw (Systems 371, 373), that the lines of influence between *RPDR*-led global drag culture and local drag culture in Toronto represent a two-way dialogue; what happens in local drag scenes such as Toronto's also influences global drag culture. As this study shows, the Toronto drag scene has its own unique localisms and has demonstrated a capacity to resist RPDR's most normative ideologies.

I spent over a year and a half in the field for this study, as detailed in Chapter 4. As that chapter explains, this study is a participant observation from a scholar-fan perspective, meaning that while in the field I acted as both a fan and a scholar (I will detail how the scholar-fan perspective informs this work shortly). This project was designed to answer three basic research questions: 1) How does *RPDR* influence the Toronto drag scene? 2) What are the prevailing sociocultural concerns at play in the Toronto drag scene? and 3) How do those concerns compare to and interact with sociocultural concerns seen on screen on *RPDR* and within the *RPDR* fandom? The first question is answered in detail in Chapter Five, which looks at how *RPDR* sets trends in drag culture and details the drag baby boom that followed *RPDR*'s 2009 debut. The second and third inquiries are addressed in Chapter Six, which explores how *RPDR* has impacted how race and gender are negotiated in the Toronto drag scene and how the show's success has increased the level of commerciality in this once-grassroots scene. This study finds that *RPDR* and its associated fandom has had neutral, positive, and negative effects on the Toronto drag scene. As the results of this ethnography demonstrate, the show has inspired a generation of fans to become drag artists and its popularisation of drag has led to many opportunities for today's drag artists. The opportunities are not, however, equally split – this global-local inequality is explored at length in Chapter Six.

With this thesis, it is my aim to make a queer contribution to both fan studies and the study of Canadian popular culture. I believe I am also adding a new scholarly perspective from which to consider *RPDR*, and in doing so am adding to the growing body of work on RuPaul and *RPDR*. While there is a bounty of scholarship considering *RPDR* from a variety of standpoints (e.g. Brennan and Gudelunas; Brown; Hodes and Sandoval; Zhang), there is very little that considers how the show has impacted drag culture at the local level, as this study does. To my knowledge, this is the first thesis to consider the relationship between *RPDR* and the Toronto drag scene. There is likewise not yet a large body of work about either the *RPDR* fandom in fan studies or much scholarship on Canadian drag in general. I am hopeful this work will continue the academic conversations about drag's migration into mainstream culture and about grassroots queer communities. Finally, it is important to note the limitations of this study. The results of this study are specific to the Toronto drag scene and, at times, even more granularly specific to the drag competition that is the primary site of this ethnography, *CTDR*.

**1. Language**

Many of the key concepts and terms in this paper are heavily contested and, like queerness itself, many of these terms are fluid; they have been used in a variety of ways during different periods and connote variant meanings dependent on context. This is, in part, because prior to *RPDR* and the rise of social media, drag scenes were only loosely connected to one and other. This disparate history led to a broad lexicon of terms that are often used in different ways depending on era and geographical location. Many drag terms are used interchangeably or are closely related to other terms. Drag is also a field in which language evolves rapidly. Following the lead of drag ethnographer Stephen J. Hopkins, I have elected to use terms as I have observed

them to be used in the field and as such, my use of language reflects the localities of the Toronto drag scene (137). In the interest of clarity, I will now define a number of terms and explain how they will be used.

First, what is meant by "drag"? There are many theories about the linguistic roots of the term, with the most popular being that drag was originally backstage slang for "the petticoat or skirt used by actors when playing female parts," which would drag on the theatre stage (Baker 17). As drag evolved as its own culture beyond the cross-dressing seen in early theatre, the word acquired new meaning and a specific association with queer art (I will broach the word "queer" shortly). The most prominent early drag scholars, such as Steven P. Schacht, Lisa Underwood, and Esther Newton, were primarily concerned with "gender illusion" — cisgender men performing femininity and cisgender women performing masculinity. Schacht and Underwood in particular define drag as "female impersonation" and use the two terms interchangeably in their 2004 book *The Drag Queen Anthology: The Absolutely Fabulous but Flawlessly Customary World of Female Impersonators* (3). In the 2002 paper "Four Renditions," Schacht defines drag queens as "individuals with an acknowledged penis, who have no desire to have it removed or replaced with female genitalia (such as transsexuals), [and who] perform being a woman in front of an audience that all know they are self-identified men, regardless of how compellingly female – 'real' – they might otherwise appear" (159). As I note in "Hyper Queens," this definition is problematic in both its focus on genitalia and its exclusion of queens who were assigned female at birth (AFAB) and the wide array of trans performers working in the drag world. It is nonetheless reflective of much of the popular scholarship on drag queens from the 1970s to the early 2000s. Like more recent scholars such as Rachel Devitt and Meredith Heller, I seek to widen the definitions of "drag" and "drag queen." As Heller posits, "Just as our current

definition of 'queer' may describe sexualities, political beliefs, cultural stigmas, and academic theories, the words 'drag' and 'gender-bending' should also stand for a broad swath of practice" (19).

I define drag as simply, "Any staged act of gender performance." This is a purposefully broad definition meant to include a variety of related practices and a wide array of drag artists including queens, kings, trans and non-binary performers, performers who persona does not adhere to the gender binary, and those artists whose gender performance aligns with the gender they were assigned at birth. I have defined drag as "staged" here and in my previous scholarship in order to differentiate it from gender performance in everyday life, as famously described by Judith Butler. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler uses drag as a metaphor to illustrate how men and women "perform" gender in society (31, 210). I view drag as a hyper-extension of Butler's concept of gender performance, meaning that drag performances exaggerate the stereotypical characteristics of femininity and masculinity for comedic and artistic purposes. Though not all of my research participants intend their work as explicit commentary on gender, I argue that the act of transformation in drag always illustrates the socially constructed nature of gender Butler describes. With the word "staged," I am not arguing that gender performance must take place on a literal stage to be categorised as drag; rather, I am gesturing towards the intentional exaggeration of gendered notions of dress and presentation for specifically artistic purposes. This notion of staging may also include drag performances on social media, television, and within fan culture, such as dressing up in drag as an audience member at a drag show.

In this research, the word "queer" is used as an umbrella term encompassing a wide range of LGBTQ+ identities and, following Alexander Doty's definition in *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, to signify an attitude beyond gender or a "way of responding that begins in a place not

concerned with, or limited by, notions of a binary opposition of male and female or the homo versus hetero paradigm" (xiv, xv). As an unequivocally fluid term, queer is used here as both a noun and a verb, with the latter connoting a blurring of the lines between man and woman and heterosexual and homosexual. On occasion I will also refer to specific queer identities such as "gay" in order to describe the unique challenges and privileges that apply to particular sub-groups within the queer community.

As a queer feminist researcher, I have elected to use gender-neutral language in my scholarship when possible in order to suggest an equality amongst all genders and to avoid mis-gendering an artist or academic who has not publicly disclosed their gender identity. In particular, I have elected to use the pronoun "they" in lieu of "he" or "she." They has been used as a singular pronoun dating back to the 1300s, though in recent years it has found new use by the queer community as a way to describe individuals whose gender identity does not conform to the male / female binary (Merriam-Webster). As an ethnographer, I have elected to use the language I observed used in the field and "they" is commonly used by this particular community as a gender-neutral singular pronoun. I have not, however, changed the gendered pronouns used in quotations by research participants or other sources. When gendered language is used, it is always in accordance with the way the person I am referring to has publicly self-identified. For the sake of consistency, I have elected to use lowercase letters when referring to ethnicity, such as saying a performer is white. I do not mean any disrespect by this and recognise some ethnic groups prefer to capitalise the first letter of their group's name. Due to this, I have kept the capitalisation in direct quotations from other scholars.

As with the term queer, it is sometimes necessary to refer to specifically gendered experiences and, in such cases, gendered terms are used. For example, the synonymous terms

"hyper queen" and "AFAB queen" are used to describe cisgender women who perform as drag queens; the latter acronym refers to drag queens who were assigned female at birth. In "Hyper Queens," I used the term "hyper queen" following the logic of a Toronto-based AFAB performer, but have since shifted to using AFAB as a descriptor as I have observed it to be the most common term used in the field. This is a field in which language evolves quickly, and while I have attempted to use respectful, correct terminology that reflects the vernacular of the drag world, some of the terms or phrases I have used may become outdated or even offensive in the future despite my best attempts.

I will now define a handful of terms and acronyms which are commonly used in the drag scene but may not be widely understood. The acronym BIPOC refers to black and indigenous people of colour while the acronym QTPOC refers to queer and trans people of colour. AMAB refers to someone who is assigned male at birth. The elusive term "camp" is used to connote an over-the-top, parodic visuality as well as a politically queer sensibility. I use the term in accordance to the definition put forward by Moe Meyer, who defines camp as "the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity, with enactment defined as the production of social visibility" (4). Drag queening refers to the staged performance of femininity, drag kinging to the staged performance of masculinity; non-gendered terms such as drag artist or drag performer are inclusive of both types of performance (and those that challenge the binary). The term genderfuck is defined by June L. Reich as the deconstruction of the "psychoanalytic concept of difference without subscribing to any heterosexist or anatomical truths about the relations of sex to gender" (255). As a final note on language, all research participants are referred to solely by their stage names and I have avoided linking their names and comments with their non-drag personas. While the participants spoke about their off-stage

lives at times, I have elected to use drag names here instead of off-stage names because the scope of this research is primarily concerned with the research participants' experiences as performers.

**2. The scholar-fan perspective**

This research is informed by my position as an "aca-fan" or "scholar-fan," defined by Matt Hills as, "the professional academic who draws on their fandom as a badge of distinction within the academy" (2). My scholarship on drag is heavily influenced by my experiences within the *RPDR* fandom and the Toronto drag scene. I have been an active member of the *RPDR* fandom for six years and an active fan in the Toronto drag scene for about four years. I have participated in drag fan culture online through message boards, email lists, and social media sites such as Reddit and Facebook and have attended a variety of offline fan events such as live tours featuring *RPDR* contestants, meet-and-greets, and a live finale party orchestrated by the show's producers. As a fan I have seen drag shows in Toronto, New York, London, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Montreal, Ottawa, Winnipeg, and Savannah. I also run a do-it-yourself *RPDR* fantasy league and founded a drag zine called *Feel Your Fantasy* that covers drag culture on both the local and international levels. I began this research while I was working on the third edition of *Feel Your Fantasy*, which covered the reality competition show *Dragula* and Toronto's alternative drag scene. In my role as the editor of *Feel Your Fantasy*, I have also occasionally acted as a producer of live drag events in Toronto, which has provided me an on-the-ground understanding of the mechanics of the local drag scene.

I have additionally written about drag culture and interviewed a number of *RPDR* contestants as a journalist. During the research period for this thesis, I worked on a handful of drag pieces as a journalist and editor, including a series of articles for *Flare* magazine that looks

at the intersection of drag, queerness, capitalism, and personal finances; a Q+A with the first Canadian contestant on *Dragula* for *Xtra*; and a *Shameless* magazine profile of the co-founder of a Canadian drag collective that works to shine a spotlight on QTPOC artists. I believe that my dual identities as a scholar-fan and a queer person helped convince research participants to participate in this study. Additionally, when meeting with participants, I often noticed a change in demeanor when they realised I was a fan conversant in the ins and outs and politics of the local scene. Knowing they were speaking to a fellow fan, I believe, set the participants at ease and allowed them to open up and speak freely. Finally, as a nod to the importance of identity politics to this particular discussion, I would like to note that this research has also been informed – perhaps even unconsciously – by my identity as a white, cisgender gay man and a non-performer.

## Chapter Two: Toronto's drag history

In order to understand the current state of drag in Toronto, it is important to first consider the origins of the local drag community, the early artists who influenced future generations of drag performers, and drag's historical sociocultural context, both in Toronto and beyond. Likewise, in order to understand the impact of *RPDR* on the Toronto drag scene, it is vital to assess the makeup of the scene prior to the show's debut. In this chapter, I introduce drag's theatrical beginnings, then explore the development of the Toronto drag scene from the mid-20th century through to the 2000s. This brief history demonstrates that drag in Toronto prior to *RPDR* was, with few exceptions, a grassroots phenomenon that operated separately from mainstream, heteronormative culture. Knowing this grassroots history and drag's place in the social fabric of Toronto prior to the *RPDR* era provides the context for the argument presented in Chapter Six – that *RPDR*-led global drag culture has made drag in Toronto more commercial. I additionally chart the considerable precedent of drag competitions in Toronto prior to *RPDR* in order to set up my discussion of *CTDR* and consider a handful of historical examples of the major sociocultural themes that emerged from my ethnography, including gender politics, race and racism, and drag's interactions with mainstream culture. The chapter was informed in part by a previous paper, "Hyper Queens."

Pinpointing the origins of drag is a complex and elusive task. Most classical theatre featured some form of cross-dressing, including early theatrical productions in China, Japan, Italy, and Greece (Baker 23, 24). However, there is an important distinction between cross-dressing in classical theatre and the contemporary gender-bending art form of drag that is the subject of this research. The major ideological difference between early theatrical cross-dressing and the queer art form of modern drag, in my view, is that the latter functions as a commentary

on gender as a social construct. It is also essential to note that majority of early theatrical cross-dressing took place out of necessity as women were not permitted to participate in the theatre as actors (Baker 35). Further, actors who cross-dressed as part of early theatrical productions performed in accordance with the style of the production they were participating in rather than drawing from drag sensibilities such as camp framing and ironic posturing.

As previously stated, my definition of drag is "Any staged act of gender performance," which certainly includes drag in traditional theatre settings. However, while contemporary drag is influenced by cross-dressing in classical theatre, it is a performance practice with its own culture and history. When I use the word "drag" in this paper, it is in reference to this particular culture rather than the wider-spread practice of cross-dressing in theatre. In *The Drag Queen Anthology*, Steven P. Schacht and Lisa Underwood trace the origins of the modern drag performer back to London's Molly Houses in the 18th century and the drag balls of the late 19th century in Europe and the United States (5). This is a useful marker of drag's emergence in popular culture and its development as a performance practice beyond traditional theatre productions, but these eras should be seen as points of increased visibility rather than an unequivocal point of origin. Like queer culture, drag culture emerged slowly and drew inspiration from many other practices and cultures.

## 1. Early drag in Canada

Drag was largely unfamiliar to Canadian audiences prior to World War I. One of the earliest examples of drag in Canada is the vaudeville-style shows staged for Canadian soldiers during World War I and World War II, which frequently featured female impersonators (Halladay 22). One such troupe, The Dumbells, gained a considerable following and went on to

tour across Canada following World War I with an act that included female impersonation and even found success internationally with a sold-out 12-week run on Broadway in 1921 for their show *Biff! Bing! Bang!* (Halladay 22). Initially, the female impersonators within Canada's military ranks were presumed to be heterosexual, but suspicions about their potential homosexuality grew during World War II (Halladay 22). Laurel Halladay speculates this was one reason drag was phased out during World War II, demonstrating how once drag became coupled with homosexuality in Canada, drag artists were subject to homophobia (22). Many of the military's female impersonators went on to find work in theatre, film, and television and their work had a profound impact on early drag in Canada and helped to set the stage for the emergence of the Toronto drag scene (Halladay 32).

*Left: The Dumbells member Ross Hamilton as "Marjorie," right: sheet music for the "Dumbell Rag" (both photos: Library and Archives Canada)*

## 2. The birth of a scene

The opening of Toronto's first queer-friendly bar, Letros Tavern, in the 1940s serves as an important marker in the history of the city's drag scene (Strub). Letros Tavern and another bar, the St. Charles Tavern, were important sites for drag artists during the Toronto drag scene's infancy, but it wasn't until the late 1950s that drag performances became a staple of queer entertainment in the city. Prior to that, the drag scene wasn't just separate from heteronormative culture and entertainment – it was literally hidden. In the 1940s, there was an underground "dress-up" scene in Toronto in which small groups of queer folks would get together and dress in drag at private parties (Snow, Forbidden). At that time, there were very few spaces where queer people could safely socialise and even fewer where they could participate in cross-dressing. As drag moved into public spaces in Toronto, female impersonation became directly associated with homosexuality, which was illegal at the time and not decriminalised until 1969 (Kimmel and Robinson). While there is an overt link between drag and queerness today, such has not always been the case. Early theatrical cross-dressing was not associated with homosexuality and when drag emerged as a distinct art form in England the 1800s, audiences did not necessarily read female impersonators as gay. According to Laurence Senelick, the link between drag and homosexuality (in this case, sexual relations between men) became well-known during the mid-eighteenth century in England, though the association was likely less widely understood in other parts of the world (Changing 302). In previous eras in Canada, such as around the time of WWI, the art form was not explicitly linked to sexuality. As Laurel Halladay notes, drag's ties to homosexuality came to light in Canada in the 1940s (22). When this link became known to authority figures such as police and the military, those who participated in drag became subject to violence and oppression.

Toronto drag performers in the 1950s faced substantial homophobic harassment and violence, often at the hands of the police. In this period, there were no laws protecting people who took part in cross-dressing and drag parties at private residences ran the risk of police raids (Stevenson). Police would often raid drag shows and harass the performers, checking to see if they were wearing women's underwear (Richards, Wheeler). During this period, men who wore women's clothing were commonly handcuffed and beaten up by the police (Strub). While homophobia certainly still exists in Toronto, the treatment of early drag performers stands in sharp contrast to their relative acceptance today. As I argue in Chapter Five, *RPDR* played a substantial role in normalising drag performance for non-queer audiences in the 2010s; the show's role in lessening stigma against drag artists is one of its most positive effects.

### 3. Competitions

Competitions – sometimes known as "balls" – such as *CTDR* were part of drag culture long before *RPDR*, especially in Toronto, where they have served an important social function as a site of community-building for at least 70 years. Letros Tavern hosted one of the city's first drag competitions, *The Gay Ball*, which ran annually from 1952 to 1956 (Toronto the Gay 102). The popular event was staged as a fashion show in which drag queens showed off feminine garments, but very few designers were willing to work for drag queens, so the majority of the outfits for the pageant were created by the performers themselves (Toronto the Gay 102). This is another example of how drag culture existed outside of Toronto's heterosexist mainstream culture. While there was a smattering of similar events during the 1950s, none produced the enduring legacy of Toronto's now-legendary Halloween drag balls.

The Halloween ball tradition began in the 1940s, but it was during the 1950s that the event took off at Letros Tavern (Halloween Balls 102). Those balls featured a competition in which drag artists would compete for the title of "Miss Letros," but they also served as a safe haven. At the balls, queer folks could experiment with drag and express their queerness through cross-dressing, which was more accepted than it would be on a non-holiday thanks to the permissive, carnivalesque atmosphere of Halloween (Strub, Toronto the Gay 43, Halloween Balls 103). I argue competitions such as *CTDR* continue to serve a similar social function, despite the increased acceptance of both drag and queerness in contemporary culture. In my interviews, I learned several of my research participants came from geographic areas and ethnic and religious cultures in which queer identities are not widely accepted. For them, like previous generations of drag artists, participating in *CTDR* was both a liberating experience as a queer artist and a chance to create strong social bonds with fellow queer people.

The first Halloween ball to rival the one hosted by Letros Tavern took place at the St. Charles Tavern in 1963 and by the 1970s, the St. Charles event was a bona fide cultural phenomenon in Toronto (Halloween Balls 103). Years before Toronto's first Pride parade in 1981, large crowds gathered to watch queer revelers enter the St. Charles tavern in drag. At its peak, the event attracted a crowd of 2,000 onlookers (Strub). The majority of the crowd came to see magnificent costumes, but many were also homophobes who shouted insults and threw eggs and ink at attendees (Wheeler). There were many reports of harassment and violence outside the event, including an incident in 1971 in which a 16-year-old who attended the event in "semi-drag" was "tied to a post and left there until morning" (Toronto the Gay 210). The complicated history of Toronto's Halloween balls as both a major local cultural phenomenon and the site of intense homophobia make them a crucial point of consideration for this thesis. The mass interest

in the balls shows how drag competitions were sites of queer cultural creation prior to the *RPDR* era. The history of homophobia associated with the balls shows how the relationship between Toronto's heterosexual mainstream culture has shifted; as Chapter 5 demonstrates, while many forms of homophobia persist, drag culture in Toronto now successfully engages directly with heterosexual audiences.

4. Racism

During the 1960s, the soul singer Jackie Shane became a star on the Toronto music scene with a local radio hit, "Any Other Way." While Shane was often referred to as a drag queen in the media, the performer lived as a woman later in life. Contemporary queer writers and scholars including Steven Maynard have reexamined the labels assigned to Shane early in their career and asserted Shane's legacy not as a drag queen, but a trans performer (the word transgender was not commonly used at time) (12, 13). In "A New Way of Lovin: Queer Toronto Gets Schooled by Jackie Shane," Maynard writes that Shane "moved across a range of gender and sexual identifications, always in complicated relation to race and class" (12). One can certainly be both a trans woman and a drag queen, but it is worth considering whether Shane's performance of femininity on stage was a display of their identity as a woman or a consciously staged act of gender performance. Whichever was the case, Shane's representation as a drag queen in outlets such as the *Toronto Star* – and their considerable musical success on the radio and in the clubs – made them one of Toronto's first BIPOC drag stars.

During their reign in Toronto in the 1960s, Shane played in predominantly straight clubs and was celebrated specifically by black audiences; it wasn't until the 2010s Shane was widely celebrated by queer audiences in Canada as a queer figure. This was likely due, at least in part, to

the fact there was considerable racism in the queer and drag scenes during Shane's heyday. The Letros Tavern, for example, was known to deny entry to BIPOC patrons and even into the 1970s drag queens were often the only black folks in Toronto's gay bars (Maynard 16, Warner 92). There is also evidence some of the early drag balls were only open to white participants; the Letros Halloween Ball in particular did not welcome its first black contestant until 1961 (Toronto the Gay 234). Every era of Toronto drag has examples of racism and, as Chapter Six details, racism in drag culture is not a problem of the past; the Toronto scene has been impacted by the racial politics of *RPDR* and its impact on global drag culture, but it also carries with it the baggage of its own history with racism. At the same time, Toronto is a city that celebrates BIPOC performers (see, for example, Anton Wagner's *Divas* and *Latin Queens* and Michèle Pearson Clarke's "Red Spot Nights"); this duality will be explored as I share the results of my ethnography in Chapter Six.

5. Canada's first mainstream drag star

The 1970s saw the rise of Canada's first true drag superstar, Craig Russell. Years before RuPaul broke into mainstream culture, Russell's celebrity impersonations were a sensation on stage and on the big screen. Russell, who considered themselves an impressionist rather than a drag queen, made their stage debut in drag in Toronto in 1970 and quickly became known in the Toronto drag scene. Their life even inspired a movie, *Outrageous!*, that debuted in 1977 (Fulford). *Outrageous!* was a hit on the international film festival circuit and made Russell a star well beyond Canada's borders; they won Best Actor at the Berlin Film Festival and both Best Actor *and* Best Actress at the Virgin Islands Film Festival (Turning Points). Following the

success of *Outrageous!*, Russell went on to tour widely, mounting shows at large venues including Carnegie Hall in New York City (Bradley).

Russell is one of the few examples of a drag performer reaching mass audiences in Canada prior to *RPDR*; in addition to film festivals and performances at large venues, Russell was featured on wide-reaching television shows and covered in the popular press. However, their career remains an anomaly and did not, to my knowledge, have the popularising impact of *RPDR*. A decade after the release of the film, a sequel dubbed *Too Outrageous!* debuted during a gala presentation at the Toronto International Film Festival in 1987 but received poor reviews and failed to gain traction (Waugh 503). Russell passed away of a stroke resulting from AIDS in 1990 but continues to serve as an example of the heights a drag performer can reach in Canada (Waug 503). Russell's success demonstrates a historical precedent for commercially viable drag in Canadian popular culture. While *RPDR* has helped re-ignite mainstream interest in drag in Toronto, this current era is not the first time mainstream, heterosexual audiences in Canada have celebrated drag. Russell's legacy also demonstrates the Toronto drag scene's capacity to create wide-reaching drag culture of its own before the new system of promotion created by *RPDR*, such as the platform of reality television, heavily promoted tours and conventions, and well-funded publicity teams.

Beyond Russell, there are several historical examples of drag reaching mainstream, heterosexual audiences in Toronto via traditional theatre. This thesis focuses specifically on drag within queer venues rather than within traditional theatrical productions, but theatre also played a role in popularising drag in Toronto beyond queer culture. John Herbert's *Fortune and Men's Eyes* (1967), which was later turned into a film (Hart, 1971), is an early example of a piece of Canadian culture that linked drag and homosexuality. The title character in Michel Tremblay's

play *Hosanna* (1973), which premiered in Toronto in 1974, is likewise a drag artist. Theatre artist Sky Gilbert also found success with a series of drag plays including *Drag Queens on Trial* (1985) in the 1980s, which helped establish the queer theatre Buddies in Bad Times. Each of these works represents a point of visibility for drag in Toronto, though I argue none pushed drag into mass culture as Russell did – and as we see in today's *RPDR*-dominated era of drag.

## 6. Gender

*RPDR* represents a narrow sampling of the diverse world of drag; the show exclusively focuses on drag queens and almost exclusively on cisgender male queens. By contrast, throughout its history, drag culture in Toronto (and elsewhere) has included a broad swath of types of gender performance, from queening to kinging to performance that defies the gender binary altogether. Drag kinging in Toronto dates back to at least the early 1970s, but the performance style did not take off as a phenomenon within the local scene until the early 1990s (Latchford 171). The first style of drag kinging to gain popularity in Toronto was rather straightforward male impersonation. Frances Latchford notes that this style of drag, typically done by butch lesbians in the 1970s, was "very, very serious, not parodic at all" (171). Though they did not comment on gender through parody as Toronto queens at the time did, these early kings still challenged binary thinking about sex and gender. As Latchford posits, "this type of performance at that time probably would have been considered quite radical simply because masculine women threatened the heterosexual status quo and its assumption that there is a natural affiliation between sex and gender" (173).

In the early 1990s, a group called the Greater Toronto Drag King Society, henceforth DK, brought drag kings to the forefront of the Toronto drag scene and introduced a style of drag

kinging that was more comedic than realistic. DK's performances also offered a critique of social roles rather than a simple embodiment of masculinity. It is important to note that while the group's focus was drag kinging, its performers also took part in queening performances (meaning they performed femininity), providing one of the first documented examples of a welcoming space for AFAB women to perform in female drag in Toronto (Shiller 25, Latchford 176). This set a precedent for the AFAB queens of today, a phenomenon explored in Chapter Six. Latchford documents how the 1990s wave of Toronto drag kings used drag to "reclaim and explore not only butch, but S/M identities and practices" (175). Some of these kings also took their gender performance beyond the drag scene to gay leather and S/M clubs, where they were – perhaps surprisingly – welcomed (Latchford 176). La Chica was even crowned the "Woody's Guy" of 1995 at the prominent Toronto gay bar Woody's, making them the first woman to win the title (Latchford 176). Reflecting on this wave of drag king performances, Romy Shiller writes that this group of kings presented Toronto audiences a new subject position from which to consider gender. By playing with both masculinity and femininity – via butch and femme lesbian identities – Shiller contests, DK made gender play more expansive and introduced new ways of thinking about gender beyond the heterosexist binary of man/woman or the gender play of the cis gay male drag queen (26).

In an interview I conducted with the drag king ZacKey Lime for an article published in *Flare* magazine in June 2019, I learned that there has been a considerable growth in the drag king community in Toronto between 2018 and 2019 (Drag Kings). Lime is a trans man, as are several of Toronto's other currently active drag kings, which adds an interesting layer to their gender performance. Rather than the more traditional notion of kinging – female-to-male cross-dressing – the trans male king's gender performance can be read as an extension and affirmation

of their day-to-day gender identity, adding to Shiller's point about the nuanced positions from which drag kings negotiate their gender play. In researching the history of Toronto drag for this chapter, I observed the best-known form of drag – cisgender male drag queening (especially by white males) – to be the most documented, but groups like DK demonstrate that there is in fact a rich history of many styles of drag performance in Toronto. The diversity of gender play in the scene prior to *RPDR*'s arrival, I contend, offers a framework for today's performers to resist the singular vision of gender in drag (male queening) popularised in mainstream culture by *RPDR*.

7. The emergence of West Queer West

One of the most significant developments of the 2000s was the birth of what's now referred to as West Queer West: a handful of queer and queer-friendly establishments on Queen St. West where queer artists congregate and host events. This sub-scene in Toronto introduced new possibilities for drag artists to be celebrated for offbeat, left-of-centre work and fostered a style of drag that is more radical than that commonly seen in Toronto's Gay Village, paving the way for a local resistance to the normative notions of gender and market-driven drag presented on *RPDR*. The growth of this alternative queer scene was led by the late artist Will Munro, who was a co-owner of the restaurant and bar The Beaver and the creative mind behind the dance and performance party Vazaleen. Alexander McClelland writes that the launch of Vazaleen at the rock bar El Mocambo in 1999 "marked a do-it-yourself shift in the orientation of queer nightlife in the city" (McClelland 247). While most queer spaces at the time were segregated for either lesbians or gay men, Vazaleen catered to a mixed crowd of "lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transfolk and genderqueers together under one roof" (Liss 8). The party was also a rare space where folks of different races and classes danced and partied alongside one and other (Liss 8).

This inclusive ethos was a direct response to the homogeny of the white, cis, and male dominated nature of Toronto's Gay Village and mainstream gay culture at large.

Vazaleen featured popular drag acts from out of town such as Lady Bunny and Peaches Christ as well as punk and alternative musical acts including local queer heroes Peaches and Kids on TV (Liss 55). In merging the alternative music scene and queer nightlife, Munro created an anything-goes atmosphere that provided refuge to queers who did not feel at home in the Gay Village. This creation of a vibrant alternative queer scene in the city's West End had a profound impact on the Toronto drag scene. The Beaver, along with the Gladstone Hotel and the now-shuttered Hen House created stages for new types of drag that reach beyond gender illusion in intent, and pose a challenge to the gender binary. In McClelland's view, "the Toronto drag scene at the time was limited, relegated solely to the Village and focused on boring and often misogynist tropes of female impersonation stuck in a rut of old-school pageant queenery" (247). The impact of the early 2000s West Queer West scene can still be felt in the Toronto drag scene today. *CTDR* 2018 featured several artists who perform predominantly in the city's West End and pull their references from horror, contemporary art, and club kid culture. There is some evidence the lines between the two scenes are now starting to blur, but there is still a very active and distinctly alternative community of drag artists in West Queer West who continue to carry Munro's torch.

## 8. Conclusion

In this chapter I established that the Toronto drag scene has been active since the 1940s and was, prior to *RPDR*, a largely grassroots community. As discussed, one of the most important frameworks within this community for cultural creation is the drag competition

format, which is as established as the scene itself. This format is essential to this project, which draws its research participants from the drag competition *CTDR*. I have shown that the drag scene has a diverse history that includes queens, kings, alternative performers, and artists from a variety of backgrounds. Though considerable progress has been made, many of the challenges that drag artists in Toronto have faced throughout the past 70 years, such as racism, misogyny, and homophobia, persist today. While I contend that *RPDR* has had a profound impact on the scene, it is important to note that there is a local precedent for the conversations about gender, race, and commerce put forward in Chapter Six. For example, the scene contended with racism prior to the influx of racist toxicity from the *RPDR* fandom. The scene likewise featured AFAB performers carving out space for themselves prior to *RPDR* re-inforcing the dominance of cisgender male drag queens as the face of drag, and experienced brief moments of commerciality prior to *RPDR*.

These histories inform the way *RPDR*-led global drag culture is received, reinterpreted, and resisted by the local drag scene in Toronto today. There are clear lines of influence between the drag artists of prior generations and today's performers – notably the more recent phenomenon of the West Queer West drag scene – but the Toronto drag scene has also been influenced by other developments in drag and queer culture outside the city and the country. For example, there was a drag boom in the 1990s that included RuPaul's early success as a pop singer and films such as *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (Beeban Kidron, 1995), *Wigstock* (Barry Shils, 1995), and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Stephan Elliott, 1994). This period of increased visibility for drag in international popular culture undoubtedly had influence on drag in Toronto. This mixture of local and international influences set the groundwork for a unique local drag boom in the 2010s following the debut of

*RPDR* that is in conversation with the new global drag scene without being a simple reproduction of it. In Chapter Three I turn to two of the largest influences on the Toronto drag scene today: RuPaul's emergence as a prominent drag artist and the growth of *RPDR* as a cultural phenomenon.

## Chapter Three: Background Information

In order to explain *RPDR*'s impact on Toronto's drag community, it is crucial to provide context on this television show as a popular culture phenomenon. This chapter provides background information on both RuPaul and *RPDR* in order to prepare the reader for my exploration of the Toronto scene's interactions with *RPDR*-led global drag culture in Chapter Five and Chapter Six. I additionally provide background information on a primary site for my ethnography, the drag competition *CTDR*.

### 1. RuPaul

RuPaul Andre Charles, better known as simply "RuPaul," is the world's most famous drag artist. The San Diego-born performer, spokesperson, actor, and television sensation began working as a drag performer in Atlanta in the 1980s before moving to New York City, where they quickly gained notoriety in the Manhattan club scene in the early 1990s. While RuPaul initially blurred gender lines with the genderfuck style of drag, combining both masculine and feminine signifiers, they are best-known for their self-described "glamazon" style of hyper-glamorous, hyper-feminine drag. Shortly after their glamazon rebrand, RuPaul broke into the mainstream cultural consciousness with their hit single "Supermodel (You Better Work)" in 1992. The single and its music video brought RuPaul a level of success that was unprecedented for a drag artist in the music industry. After "Supermodel," RuPaul continued to chart new territory for drag performers with a now-famous M.A.C. cosmetics campaign and their own talk show, *The RuPaul Show*, which ran on VH1 for 100 episodes. RuPaul also appeared in several movies, including *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar* (Beeban Kidron, 1995) and *Wigstock* (Barry Shils, 1995).

RuPaul is often credited with spearheading the aforementioned drag boom of the mid-1990s – another of drag's pre-*RPDR* flirtations with the mainstream. In addition to RuPaul's success, several other drag-related projects received widespread attention in the 1990s – most notably the film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Stephan Elliott, 1994). RuPaul's fame called attention to the New York City drag scene – and perhaps even caused its proliferation; this influence was a precursor to the influence *RPDR* would later have on drag scenes all over the world. The size and vitality of the scene at the time can been seen in Julian Fleisher's *The Drag Queens of New York: An Illustrated Field Guide*, which features RuPaul amongst a diverse set of their peers. While RuPaul's career in the 1990s greatly shaped drag culture in that era, the influence they had at that time pales in comparison to legacy created by the project RuPaul is now best known for, *RPDR*.

2. *RuPaul's Drag Race*

*RPDR* debuted on the queer cable network Logo in February 2009 to little fanfare. Initially, the show was created specifically for a queer audience and produced on a shoestring budget. From its inception, RuPaul was positioned as the matriarch of the show: a resplendent, untouchably glamorous mother figure who mentors a group of drag queen contestants who dream of reaching RuPaul's level of commercial success. Initially *RPDR* spoofed other competition reality shows that were popular at the time, such as *Project Runway* and *America's Next Top Model*. As its audience grew, the show has embraced many of the competition reality tropes it initially parodied and it now sits alongside them one of the most successful reality shows on cable television. The first few seasons of *RPDR* received limited attention outside of queer circles, but the show eventually became a cult favourite and a critical darling. Weekly

viewing parties at queer bars sparked a slow-growing but powerful wave of word-of-mouth marketing that brought droves of new fans to the show each season. By 2017, the audience reached a critical mass; according to a press release from Logo, almost 1,000,000 viewers in the US watched the premiere of the eighth season on conventional television and another 1,500,000 watched via streaming (Logo Press). Quotes from a Logo executive given to the trade publication *The Hollywood Reporter* indicate the show's growing audience at that time precipitated its move to a much larger network, VH1 (Stanhope). This move serves as a marker in the show's ascent to cultural juggernaut and the dawning of drag's first truly mainstream era. To date, more than 150 drag artists have been featured on *RPDR*. There have been 12 seasons of *RPDR*, four seasons of the spin-off *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars*, and three seasons of a makeover themed spin-off starring past *RPDR* contestants, *RuPaul's Drag U*.

Today *RPDR* has a sizable – and constantly growing – global footprint. It is currently broadcast in at least 12 countries and is available via streaming services in many more. There are five official international editions of the show, *Canada's Drag Race*, *RuPaul's Drag Race UK*, *Drag Race Thailand*, *The Switch Drag Race* in Chile, and *Queen of Drags* in Germany; and two forthcoming editions – *Drag Race Australia* and *Drag Race Holland.* The show won its first Emmy Award in 2016 – for RuPaul, as Outstanding Host for a Reality or Reality-Competition Program – and was named the Outstanding Reality-Competition Program at the 2018 Emmy Awards. *RPDR* has also succeeded where similar competition reality shows such as *The Voice* have failed – it has produced a bounty of stars with notable drag careers. In fact, the show has created its very own cultural industry. Former *RPDR* contestants have topped the *Billboard* charts; produced comedy specials, one-person shows, and drag plays; and starred in a myriad of films and television shows like *Hurricane Bianca* (Matt Kugelman, 2016) and *The Trixie and*

*Katya Show* (Randy Barbato and Fenton Bailey, 2017) and cameos in blockbusters like *A Star Is Born* (Bradley Cooper, 2018). The show's contestants constantly perform all around the world, including large-scale tours featuring multiple cast members that take place at increasingly sizeable venues. In 2018, for example, the "Werq The World" tour played Wembley Arena in London – an arena with a capacity of 12,500 normally reserved for global pop stars. *RPDR*'s production company, World of Wonder, also produces annual drag conventions for superfans of the show in New York, Los Angeles, and London.

*RPDR* has caused a ripple effect in drag culture. A number of new drag-themed television shows and streaming series have debuted since *RPDR*'s launch, such as the alternatively-minded *Dragula* (Boulet Brothers, 2016) and New Zealand's answer to *RPDR*, *House of Drag* (Anita Wigl'it and Kita Mean, 2018). In Canada, drag fans can also watch the Toronto-based series *Drag Heals* (Tracey Erin Smith, 2018) and the short form documentary series *Canada's a Drag* (Peter Knegt et al, 2018). The new media landscape in this current drag boom is also filled with independent digital media projects that showcase drag, from the Ontario-based drag documentarian collective Drag Coven to the Winnipeg-based podcast series *Drag in the Peg* (Graeme Houssin, 2018). *RPDR* is still undoubtedly the most dominant force in global drag culture, but with the addition of these new programs the art produced in drag scenes is also being documented and celebrated on a local level. While none of these offerings have reached *RPDR* levels of viewership, the surge of drag content that has followed *RPDR* has led to more numerous and more nuanced and diverse representations of drag in film and television.

The show's participatory fan culture is particularly relevant to this investigation into *RPDR*'s impact on the Toronto drag scene. *RPDR* has inspired thousands of fans – including many in Toronto – to slip on a wig and try out drag for the first time. Drag culture has now

reached the coming-of-age of the first post-*RPDR* generation of drag artists – a fact that has been foregrounded multiple times on the show when younger contestants such as Naomi Smalls and Aquaria have spoken about growing up watching *RPDR*. The majority of the research participants for this thesis come from this group, which has been dubbed the "drag baby boom" (Crookston 62). Given this new pathway to drag, *RPDR* has had an enormous influence on today's drag artists, including many who take part in *CTDR*.

### 3. *Crews and Tangos Drag Race*

Crews and Tangos is a bar in the heart of Toronto's Gay Village that markets itself specifically as a drag bar. Rather than live music or a DJ, drag is the main attraction at Crews and Tangos. The performers do what's known locally as "marathon drag," meaning they perform numbers back to back for the majority of the night, so there are drag performances happening most hours the club is open (typically 8 p.m. to 2 a.m.). Every year the bar is the site of a competition called *Crews and Tangos Drag Race* (abbreviated as *CTDR*) that is produced and hosted by a new pair of established local drag performers who are paid by the bar. Crews and Tangos does not charge cover to patrons who attend the competition, nor does it charge an entry fee for competitors. Instead, the competitors help in the bar's word-of-mouth marketing, filling the bar each Sunday night through the summer months with their friends and fans. Each patron is offered a ticket every time they buy a drink and invited to vote for their favourite performer – an act that can save the contestant from being eliminated from the competition. This clever system incentives contestants to invite potential customers to pay for drinks at the bar.

The research participants in this ethnography all participated in the 2018 edition of *CTDR*, which was the eighth edition of the competition. *CTDR* 2018 took place each Sunday

night between July 22 and September 30. The competition was chosen as a primary site for this research in part because of its similarities to *RPDR*, but *CTDR* actually predates the television show. According to multiple drag performers I spoke to, *CTDR* is the current incarnation of a previous competition called *Drag Idol* (inspired by *American Idol*) that took place at a different, now-closed queer venue, Zelda's, prior to *RPDR*'s debut in 2009. The current version of the competition started shortly after *RPDR* and utilises a similar format to the television show. Like *RPDR*, the competition is hosted by a drag queen – *CTDR* features two queens in the role occupied by RuPaul on *RPDR* – and features a panel of judges. *CTDR* also has a themed "main challenge" and "mini challenge" each week and a lip sync battle between the two bottom contestants, just like *RPDR*. *CTDR* is one of several drag competitions the bar hosts; there is also a competition for more established performers, *Miss Crews and Tangos*, and a weekly competition with a less rigid format, *Star Search*. The number of drag competitions at this one bar alone is a sign of just how many fledgling, eager drag artists there are in Toronto looking for a chance to break into the local scene.

As detailed earlier in this chapter, drag competitions have been an essential part of the Toronto drag scene since the 1940s and serve as a framework for building community-based social bonds. As I explain in "Queens" and "Hyper Queens," drag competitions like *CTDR* also serve a similar function in grassroots drag scenes as *RPDR* does on the global drag scene: they offer artists the chance to reach the next stage of their career. Drag competitions function as a publicity tool for performers: showing off their talent weekly is a way to gain visibility in their local scene, procure new fans, and perform in front of promoters who may book them for future gigs. In addition to a prize pack noted by the 2018 hosts to be worth "thousands" of dollars, the winner of *CTDR* becomes part of the bar's regular stable of performers – the competition is

essentially an elaborate, dramatised job interview. The competition's winners wield considerable social capital in the local drag scene and at Crews and Tangos in particular; for example, the competition itself is typically hosted by former *CTDR* winners.

One main difference between *CTDR* and *RPDR* is the number of drag performers who take on important roles in *CTDR*. On *RPDR*, RuPaul reigns supreme – drag artists are typically only featured on the show as contestants, not judges or celebrity guests. This is likely, at least in part, to retain RuPaul's ubiquity and reinforce their power in the drag marketplace. Within the Toronto drag scene, social capital is much more dispersed and multiple artists within the *CTDR* environment hold positions that connote respect and acclaim. To contextualise each of the roles drag artists take on during *CTDR*, it is useful to look at Steven J. Hopkins' hierarchy of drag performers, which I outline in "Queens": 1) veterans 2) established performers 3) amateurs (139). The research participants in this ethnography are a mix of amateurs and established performers, while the judges and hosts are veterans. The other main difference between *CTDR* and *RPDR* is that the latter has strict rules about gender, while *CTDR* is open to contestants of all genders and features drag queens, drag kings, and artists with non-binary drag personas. I will expand on the role gender plays in both competitions in Chapter Six.

## 5. Conclusion

This chapter detailed the three main cultural phenomena at hand in this thesis: RuPaul, *RPDR*, and *CTDR*. I have now detailed the rise of RuPaul as a drag superstar, the development of *RPDR* as a cultural phenomenon, and the history and social function of the drag competition *CTDR*. Moving forward, I will turn to the theoretical framework this research uses to explain the

relationship between these cultural forces. In Chapter Four, I will detail the methodology and methods I used to explore *RPDR*'s impact on the Toronto drag scene.

# Chapter Four: Methodology and Methods

Having provided a brief history of the Toronto drag scene and background information on RuPaul, *RPDR*, and *CTDR*, I now turn to methodology and the methods used to conduct this ethnography. The main ethnographic methods I employed for this research are participant observation and interviews. As a participant observer, I attended many drag shows over the course of a year and half. During my time in the field, I acted as both a fan, meaning I participated in accordance with the norms of fans at drag shows (applauding, occasionally tipping etc.), and also an ethnographer taking note of the atmosphere via field notes, photographs, and videos. This participant observation is in-line with my scholar-fan identity, outlined in Chapter One. I outline the methods used in more detail below. Theoretically, as previously stated, I use Will Straw's work to frame *RPDR* as global drag culture's dominant system of articulation. Drawing from Straw's seminal work on international music scenes, I contend, like Straw (Systems 371, 373), that the lines of influence between global and local culture is a two-way dialogue. What this means is that *RPDR* has had great influence on Toronto's drag scene, but what happens in local drag scenes such as Toronto's also influences global drag culture. I expand on this argument in the Methodology section below and additionally situate this thesis as a queer research project. Finally, in the Methodology section I theorise *RPDR* as a cultural phenomenon.

## 1. Methodology

This thesis was designed as a specifically queer research project, following Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash's definition of queer research as "any form of research positioned within conceptual frameworks that highlight the instability of taken-for-granted meanings and resulting

power relations" (4). As a queer research project, my goal is to position the drag artists I interviewed as participants rather than subjects to be analysed as an "other" from an academic distance. Although I am quite literally part of the drag audience, I am also part of my participants' community as a queer person and an active drag fan. Rather than the ethnographer's historical position of an outsider looking in, I conceptualise myself as a scholar-fan looking around. Using my fan knowledge, I now turn to *RPDR* as a cult artifact and cultural phenomenon before laying out its relationship with the Toronto drag scene in theoretical terms.

As I discuss in "Scene," *RPDR* provides what Umberto Eco calls the "completely furnished world" of the cult artifact (68). What this means is that the show is chock full of meta in-jokes, meme-able moments, and oft-quoted catchphrases, all of which offer fans the shared touchstones and language that are vital to developing fan communities. The fan activities surrounding *RPDR* are a potent example of what Henry Jenkins calls "participatory culture" – meaning it's not only the show's producers who determine the cultural meaning of the show and its iconography, but also the fans, who re-interpret and re-write images, clips, and storylines from the show online through memes and social media posts (xxi). Participatory fan activities include live viewing parties, fantasy leagues, blog re-caps, fan-created podcasts, fan art, and social media accounts dedicated to *RPDR* memes. Some fans even dress up as their favourite *RPDR* contestants when they attend conventions, screenings, and other fan events. The most extreme example of *RPDR* fan culture, I argue, is when *RPDR* fans become drag performers themselves, which is the route to drag for the majority of my research participants. The fact many drag performers in Toronto started as (and currently are) *RPDR* fans is one of the main reasons the show has had such a large influence on drag culture in Toronto.

As a reality television text, *RPDR* presents a constructed representation of drag that is reliant on both the labour of producers and editors who craft storylines for entertainment value and the audience's understanding of television archetypes (for example: heroes, underdogs, and villains). Media texts such as reality television shows additionally draw on the audience's pre-existing cultural knowledge (Boyd 262), including stereotypes about race, gender, and class. In *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins argues that fans are able to resist and reinterpret the meaning of television shows through fan activities such as writing fan fiction (62). I contend the same is true for *RDPR* fans, but argue the relationship between *RPDR* and its fans is additionally complex because *RPDR* has come to act as a global representation of drag culture at large. Thus, in this analysis, I group together *RPDR* fan activities that resist *RPD*R's most normative tendencies with drag performances that are not necessarily related to *RPDR*, but still work to resist the normative messages about drag, gender, and race *RPDR* presents.

As a genre, competition reality television typically presents a set of values consistent with neoliberalism, described by Johanna Bockman as an approach to governance that assumes "unhindered markets are best able to generate economic growth and social welfare" (14). In "'Hey, We're from Canada, but We're Diverse, Right?'" Jade Boyd critiques the neoliberal values baked into the television show *So You Think You Can Dance Canada* – a competition reality show that shares many structural similarities with *RPDR*. Dance, Boyd contends, is "commonly associated with freedom, affinity, and authenticity," (associations I argue drag typically shares) but is filtered "through the contradictory context of a popular reality television show that emphasises individualism, hard work, and competitiveness" (260). The same is true of *RPDR*: as a competition reality show, it reflects the typical neoliberal values of the genre at large (see Boyd, Patterson), such as competition, hyper-individualism, and personal

responsibility. These values stand in contrast to drag, which has historically challenged normative, binary thinking about gender and has often transgressed other social boundaries and commonly held societal expectations.

Having grown into a global enterprise, *RPDR* is what is known as "format television" (Moran and Malbon), meaning that elements from the show such as production design, branding, and brand name are sold internationally as a package to broadcasters and streaming services. Such is the case for *Canada's Drag Race*: Bell Media, which owns the streaming network that airs the show, Crave, has licensed the rights to the *Drag Race* name in hopes of drawing in Canadian fans of the the franchise. As Ira Wagman explains, some scholars have argued format television is part of a larger narrative of globalisation that "erodes the potential or local forms of expression" (614). Wagman further posits in Canada specifically there are often concerns with the "Americanisation" of Canadian culture via the import of American popular culture, including television formats that originated in America (613). Wagman argues the Canadian media marketplace actually benefits considerably from format television; I argue the same is true for drag as a cultural industry in Toronto. My ethnography, for example, demonstrates *RPDR* has led to considerable work opportunities for Toronto-based drag artists (see Chapter Six). I do not believe drag culture in Toronto has been Americanised; stating such would be a simplification of the two-way dialogue between Toronto's drag scene and the global drag scene I explore below.

I propose that *RPDR* acts as what scholar Will Straw calls a "system of articulation" in drag culture, within which lines of influence are drawn between *RPDR* – a global, corporate cultural phenomenon – and grassroots local drag scenes, such as the Toronto scene (Systems 369). The term "scene" itself was popularised by Straw in their seminal 1991 essay "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Scenes and Communities in Popular Music." Straw defines a

scene as “All the places and activities which surround and nourish a particular cultural preference” (Systems 249). Using this definition, the Toronto drag scene includes the bars, festivals, coffee shops, stores, libraries, and other venues where drag is performed in Toronto as well as fan activities such as attending shows, tipping performers, and posting about local drag artists on social media. Straw’s definition of the term scene can likewise be applied to the global drag scene, which includes a multitude of venues, media, and fan activities linked to drag on an international level – the most notable being *RPDR* and its associated fan culture.

While Straw was writing specifically about the international electronic dance and alternative rock scenes and their impact on the Montreal music scene in 1991, the idea of a scene has since been used to describe a variety of cultural activities outside the realm of music. In 2015, Straw noted the expansive way in which the concept of a scene has been applied to many theoretical and cultural spaces outside of the study of music (Some Things 476). As I note in “Scene and be seen,” the concept of a scene can be applied to both physical and virtual spaces, which allows it to contain fan activities in the drag scene such as message boards and other forms of social media like Instagram. The terms can also apply to both local and international scenes. As Straw puts it in “Scenes and Sensibilities,” “‘Scene’ will describe unities of highly variable scale and levels of abstraction. ‘Scene’ is used to circumscribe highly local clusters of activity and to give unity to practices dispersed throughout the world” (Scenes 248). There is also a precedent for using Straw’s scene theory framework for the discussion of queer and even drag scenes, including Kerryn Drysdale's exploration of the drag king scene in Sydney, Australia, “Intimate Investments in Drag King Cultures” (Drysdale) and Bobby Benedicto’s book about gay life and the queer scene in Manila, Philippines, “Under Bright Lights: Gay Manila and the Global Scene” (Benedicto), which reference Straw’s influential work.

Straw's concept of a system of articulation is particularly useful in describing the lines of influence between *RPDR*, which has a global footprint, and the Toronto drag scene, which I argue has been greatly impacted by *RPDR*. However, this relationship is more than a simple one-way dialogue; in "Systems of Articulation" Straw concludes that there is a symbiotic relationship between the global music scene and the local music scene in Montreal, so what happens in Montreal impacts the global scene and vice-versa (Systems 371, 373). I argue that the same is true for grassroots drag scenes and *RPDR*: while *RPDR* has popularised and mainstreamed drag, the show's producers are also acutely aware of what's happening in grassroots drag scenes and at times local scenes influence the show's narrative. For example, the show has highlighted the alternative Brooklyn drag scene through scenes with drag queen and violinist Thorgy Thor (season eight, *All Stars* three), utilised Ben DeLaCreme (season six, *All Stars* three) and Jinkx Monsoon (season five) as representatives of Seattle's campy style of drag, and highlighted the spooky, working class local flavour of the Pittsburgh scene via Alaska (season five, *All Stars* two) and Sharon Needles (season four). As I will explore in Chapter Six, local scenes such as Toronto's also work to resist and push back against *RPDR*'s most regressive ideologies.

Some more transgressive drag trends that are popular in local scenes such as Toronto's have been showcased on *RPDR* despite not fitting squarely into *RPDR*'s vision of female illusion. As I point out in "Scene," many performers in Toronto such as Allysin Chaynes, Beardoncé, and Fay Slift show off body hair on their faces, chests, and arms while dressed in feminine garb – a style that is also popular in other drag scenes. One contestant on *RPDR*, Milk, was harshly critiqued for presenting a bearded look in line with this style of drag. However, the next season, *RPDR* created a challenge that called for each contestant to wear facial hair, thereby incorporating this supposed transgression into the show's fabric while simultaneously containing

it (we have yet to see another bearded queen on the American version of *RPDR*). Working in the opposite direction of these lines of influence, *RPDR*'s gender-specific formula focuses almost exclusively on male-to-female drag and works within this system of articulation to invalidate the work of drag artists in local drag scenes who present other forms of gender performance including drag kings, AFAB drag queens, performers with non-binary drag personas, and trans and non-binary performers. The show's gender-specific format and its impact on Toronto drag will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Six.

Finally, the flow of ideas and trends back and forth between global and local drag culture can be theorised as a matter of "circulation," defined by Straw as "the claim that people, things or ideas now 'circulate' rather than remaining fixed within social or physical structures" (Circulation 423). Straw suggests that a study of circulation is a study of the "distance across which cultural forms travel, the rhythms of their movement, and the conditions which make possible various kinds of encounter" (Circulation 428). This thesis tracks the circulation between global drag culture, with *RPDR* as its system of articulation, and the Toronto drag scene. Drag trends and ideas about drag are now in circulation via *RPDR*, which has increased the speed of circulation. In previous eras ideas and trends were circulated within drag culture primarily via grassroots means such as performances on stage in clubs (*RPDR*, it is worth noting, arrived not long after the rise of social media, just one year before Instagram was founded). In most eras of Canadian drag history, as outlined in Chapter Two, drag has been circulated via mass media to a certain extent, but the circulation was not nearly as accessible or widespread as it is in the current *RPDR* era. Prior to the 2010s, drag was circulated in the media in Canada via the gay press, a handful of articles in mainstream publications and episodes of talk shows and a breakthrough

movie once or twice each decade. Never before has drag in Canada been circulated so widely or consistently as it has in the *RPDR* era.

## 2. Methods

Ethnography has long been one of the primary methods used by drag scholars. In fact, according to Gayle Rubin, the very first book-length ethnographic study of a gay community was a study of drag queens – Esther Newton's now-famous ethnography, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Rubin 852). Noted by Marcia Ocha as a "field-defining work" (854), the 1972 publication is now considered a product of its time to the point of being outdated, but its influence still looms large on drag scholarship and queer ethnographies. In the more than 50 years since Newton completed the study, ethnography has remained one of the key methods scholars have used to analyse the drag community (e.g. Berkowitz and Belgrave; Hopkins; Lingel and Golub; Schacht and Underwood; Tewksbury). As I document in "Queens," these ethnographers use interviews and field work to document many aspects of drag, from why people choose it as a line of work (Hopkins, Berkowitz and Belgrave) to how drag artists use social media (Lingel and Golub). With this thesis, it is my intent to continue this long line of drag ethnography by exploring how drag culture has evolved in the current era of mainstream drag and how the introduction of a pervasive, corporate cultural phenomenon – *RPDR* – has influenced this historically grassroots culture on a local level in Toronto.

My approach to field work throughout the research period follows the lead of Hopkins and is consistent with the approach I describe in "Queens." In "Let the Drag Race Begin: The Rewards of Becoming a Queen," Hopkins details their approach to field work in the setting of a drag bar during their ethnography of a venue called The Park in Roanoke, Virginia. This work

constituted "hanging out" and "interacting with the clientele as peers and participating in the same activities as usual patrons (e.g. dancing, drinking, observing, and occasionally tipping performers)" (138). Like Hopkins, I took the route of participant observation and attempted to blend into the crowd rather than standing out as a researcher among subjects. The primary site for this ethnography is the 2018 edition of the drag competition *CTDR*, held at the Toronto drag bar Crews and Tangos. I visited the bar many times during the research period and attended *CTDR* in both 2018 and 2019. I additionally attended another Toronto-based drag competition, *Empire's Ball*, in the spring of 2019, and many other drag events throughout the research period and spent time researching the history of the scene at Toronto's queer archives, The ArQuives. While in the field I took a number of photographs and videos and took notes on site digitally via a mobile phone. The data collected includes more than 40 pages of digital field notes, 122 pages of transcribed interviews, and hundreds of photos and videos.

In 2018, 37 drag artists took part in the *CTDR*'s live audition week but I have chosen to focus on the top 12 contestants – marketed as the *CTDR* "cast" by the bar – for the sake of brevity and the constraints of this study. I made "first contact" (Baltar and Brunet 70) with the cast through social media (Instagram and Facebook) and each of the top 12 contestants were invited to take part in this research; nine ultimately participated in semi-structured interviews. The research participants for this thesis are a group of spirited, self-possessed individuals who generously shared their lived experiences as members of the drag community and spoke candidly about neutral, positive, and negative aspects of the local scene and its relation to *RPDR*. The interviews were designed to answer my research questions: 1) How does *RPDR* influence the Toronto drag scene? 2) What are the prevailing sociocultural concerns at play in the Toronto drag scene? and 3) How do those concerns compare to and interact with sociocultural concerns

seen on screen on *RPDR* and within the *RPDR* fandom? In addition to these research questions, the participant interviews were informed by a digital ethnography detailed below that considered the research participants' public social media posts during the timeframe of the 2018 competition.

The interviews were approximately one hour each and took place between May and September 2019. I approached these semi-structured interviews as conversations, aiming to allow the participants to explore their ideas rather than strictly sticking to an ordered interview guide. This approach is in line with the interview methods of feminist researchers such as Ann Oakley (see "Interviewing Women") which I find useful for interviewing queer research participants. Following these methods, participants were asked roughly the same questions, but with an opportunity to expand on responses with follow-up questions – or to choose not to answer questions for any reason. The research participants gave informed consent prior to the interviews and received full transcripts of our interviews and were given an opportunity to respond to what they had said, the questions they were asked, and the framing of the research project at large. This research was approved by Brock University's Office of Research Ethics.

During the aforementioned digital ethnography I produced for "Queens" in the fall of 2018, I completed a preliminary soak of digital data, defined as a period of time used in content or literary analysis used to define categories and select representative examples which can be more intensively analysed (Hall 15). I additionally analysed the Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram presences of the top 12 competitors of *CTDR* 2018, as well as data from Google Search and several other sites. After analysing each public post published by the contestants on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter during the span of the 2018 competition, I conclude in "Queens" that the four most recurring and significant themes in the social media data collected

are: community, support and encouragement, gender, and *RPDR*. I also note several themes that occurred less frequently but are of interest for academic analysis, such the intersection of race and drag in Toronto. This data informed the list of questions posed to the research participants and my own thinking as I design this research project. Now that I have detailed the theoretical framework of this thesis and the methods I employed in the field, I turn in Chapter Five to the results of my ethnography.

## Chapter Five: Influence

In the preceding chapters I have situated this thesis as a queer research project that considers *RPDR*'s relationship with the Toronto drag scene from a scholar-fan perspective. In this chapter, I begin to unpack the results of my ethnography, drawing from my experiences in the field between September 2018 and February 2020. This chapter will reinforce how *RPDR*'s global footprint has brought the art form of drag into the cultural mainstream using my own analysis and examples from the Toronto drag scene provided by the research participants. In this chapter, I explore the lines of influence between global and local drag culture by documenting Toronto's *RPDR*-led drag baby boom and demonstrate how *RPDR* dictates trends in makeup, music, and styles of performance. Finally, I demonstrate how the show's mainstreaming effect has had both positive and negative consequences in Toronto, underscoring how *RPDR*'s market-driven representation of drag has impacted this historically grassroots scene. This analysis leads into the consideration of gender, race, and drag under the system of capitalism laid out in Chapter Six.

Prior to starting this research project, I had assumed it would be easy to observe direct lines of influence between *RPDR* and *CTDR* semiotically once I entered the field. I imagined myself as ethnographer, watching contestants lip sync to songs by *RPDR* contestants, catching judges and hosts making reference to the show, and spotting attendees at *CTDR* wearing merchandise they purchased from *RPDR* stars. While I did observe these types of easily identifiable signifiers, they were less common than I had expected – and the lines of influence were less obvious. What I observed in the field instead is that *RPDR*'s influence on drag in Toronto is omnipresent, but often invisible. *RPDR* has altered the fabric of drag culture on a systemic level. As the results of this study show, *RPDR* has popularised new ideas, reinforced

old ones, and created an infrastructure for a drag economy that impacts drag culture at every level.

In the interest of readability, I have chosen to attribute quotes and information to my research participants rather than using in-text citations. Each interview is listed in the Works Cited for this thesis under the artist's stage name: Barbra Bardot, Miss Fiercalicious, Harmony, Lucinda Miu, Tash Riot, Miss Scotto, Silencia, Porcelain Tylez, and Selena Vyle. There are a handful of instances in which information is not attributed to a particular participant; in such cases the speaker was offered confidentiality when revealing information that could potentially negatively impact them on a personal or professional level.

### 1. The drag baby boom

The participants in this study are a group of young millennials and members of Gen Z, defined by *Generation Z* authors Corey Seemiller and Meghan Grace as those born after 1995 (11). Given *CTDR*'s age demographic, several of the participants were teenagers – or even pre-teens – when *RPDR* made its debut in 2009. On average, they list the show's fifth season, which aired in 2013, as the first season they watched live as it aired, and none report having watched *RPDR* live during its first season. For half of this group, *RPDR* represents their very first introduction to drag culture and all of the participants list *RPDR* as one of the reasons – if not *the* reason – they started doing drag. One of the older participants states they had seen several television shows and movies featuring drag performers prior to watching *RPDR*, but they list a film RuPaul appears in, *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar* (Beeban Kidron, 1995), as their first exposure to drag, further underscoring RuPaul's impact on this group. Given the context of *RPDR*'s explosion into mainstream culture coinciding with their coming of age,

this group is representative of a generation of *RPDR* fans who have now started practicing drag themselves that is often referred to as the drag baby boom (Crookston 62).

At the most rudimentary level, *RPDR* functions as a “gateway drug” for drag culture at large. Such was certainly the case for myself: becoming a *RPDR* fan was my gateway to becoming a fan of Toronto drag and, ultimately, a scholar-fan who studies drag. *RPDR* was also tool of discovery for the research participants on their fan journey from audience member to performer. Within fandom studies, there is a bounty of evidence that suggests taking part in fan activities can be a transformative experience that leads to personal and social gains. In “The Cultural Economy of Fans,” John Fiske posits that fans are able to translate the cultural capital they acquire into the fan world into their daily lives (35). For instance, Fiske points to a study of fans of the 1980s television show *Cagney & Lacey* which demonstrates how taking part in fan activities surrounding the woman-led police procedural enhanced the self-esteem of woman fans and “enabled them to perform more powerfully in their social world” (35). Fiske also nods to a study of Madonna fans that exhibits how teenage fans of the pop icon were able to “take control of the meanings of their own sexuality” via activities such as dressing up in Madonna’s “Like A Virgin”-era garb (35). I argue that *RPDR* fandom offers similarly transformative experiences for fans, especially for those fans who are young, queer, and looking for validation of their identity in the media they consume.

There are certainly toxic elements in the fandom – racism is the most apparent – but many *RPDR* viewers are able to translate their fan activities into confidence, especially confidence in their sexuality and gender identity. The ultimate example of this is the *RPDR* fan who takes up drag themselves and thus begins a journey that allows them to inhabit new modes of masculinity and femininity within a safe environment. Many of the research participants had

previously experienced negative responses to their gender expression through social institutions such as school and the family. By becoming a *RPDR* fan, the participants were exposed to a medium that offers them a chance to express themselves freely. In the case of several cisgender male participants, drag provides an outlet in which they receive praise for performing femininity rather than the scorn they received in adolescence. Some participants additionally assert drag performance has allowed them to more fully understand their own gender identity and has provided them with an arena in which they can experiment with different modes of gender expression outside of the mainstream, heterosexist social world.

One participant, Silencia, describes their progression from *RPDR* fan to drag artist like this: "[*RPDR*] opened my eyes, for someone with very little exposure to the drag scene or the drag community, or even drag performers. It opened my eyes: 'Oh this is a thing. Cool, I can do it too.'" Another participant, Selena Vyle, worked for several years as an actor and comedian before they discovered *RPDR* and began experimenting with drag. Through watching the show, Vyle gained an understanding of the socioeconomic reality of drag as a career path:

> If you had told me before *Drag Race*, or if I had never watched *Drag Race*, that I should be a drag queen I wouldn't have known what it meant, really. I wasn't really going to drag shows…I didn't really know how much work went into it. I didn't know how much money there was to be made. I didn't know what the club life was like. I wouldn't have gotten involved.

Vyle's experience follows a typical pathway towards drag performance for the drag baby boomer and it also shows just how fertile the Toronto drag scene is for fledgling performers. At the time of our interview, less than a year after Vyle competed in *CTDR* – and two years into their drag career – Vyle works as a drag artist several times a week. They are the headline performer at two weekly shows, act as the co-host of a weekly *RPDR* viewing party, and regularly book additional gigs.

This group of research participants is serious about drag as a career: two work full-time as drag artists and of those who do not, more than half say they aspire to a full-time drag career. The feasibility of this aspiration is one of the most profound effects of *RPDR*; in previous eras, only a handful of drag artists in any given urban centre could find enough work to sustain themselves as full-time practitioners, but drag's ubiquity in the era of *RPDR* has led to a bounty of work opportunities. These boom times have been positive for most drag artists in Toronto, but drag's global popularity and mainstream appeal have introduced a commercially-driven structure to this local scene that was not previously as controlled by capital. I will explore the effect of capital on the drag scene in Chapter Six.

2. Direct lines of influence

Many of the research participants cite one particular *RPDR* contestant as having had an acute impact on their craft as a drag artist. In many cases, seeing a particular style of performance receive adulation on *RPDR* validated their own aspirations. This causation illustrates a direct line of influence between *RPDR* and the Toronto drag scene. For example, research participant Harmony, who typically sings live rather than lip syncing, lists *RPDR* contestant Adore (season six, *All Stars* season two), a singer who has successfully branded themselves as a drag musician, as a primary influence. Lucinda Miu, who trained as an actor and produces theatrical, narrative-driven drag shows as part of a troupe called The Diet Ghosts, says the theatrically-minded Jinkx Monsoon (season five) showed them a drag artist can succeed by focusing on performance craft rather than of-the-moment references. Selena Vyle says they were inspired by how Bob The Drag Queen (season eight) spoke on *RPDR* about using drag as a form

of protest, relating the *RPDR* star's involvement in social justice movements to the way they weave politics into their own drag practice.

Though *RPDR* contestants inspire and validate aspiring drag performers, the show's acceleration of drag's trend cycles also creates a pressure cooker for up-and-coming artists still honing their craft. The show's winners often excel at a particular style or aspect of drag – season four winner Sharon Needles is a gothic bimbo, season six winner Bianca Del Rio is an insult comedian, and season seven winner Violet Chachki is an aerialist styled as a high fashion femme fatale. Each winner, in turn, ushers in a season of popularity for their particular style of drag, which spills over into local scenes as audiences crave seeing what they've just witnessed on television live in the clubs. According to Miu, drag audiences in Toronto became especially responsive to dance performance after hometown hero Brooke Lynn Hytes – a trained dancer who studied at the National Ballet School of Canada – was named runner-up during season 11 of *RPDR*.

> I know that a lot of my friends are very insecure right now about the fact they've never taken a dance class in their life because of [Brooke]. When Violet won, I remember feeling very confident about my future. I was like: 'Oh you know what? I make my own looks, I love to corset. My future's fine.' Whereas now it's a very different tune of: 'I don't know how to dance, oh yikes, what am I going to do?' It's interesting how the show informs what you should be good at. And that's not the contestants' fault, that's just the narrative.

One of the easiest ways to see *RPDR*'s influence on drag is via a close look at the faces of the performers in the Toronto drag scene. If one has seen enough *RPDR*, they may recognise eyes, noses, or lips painted on the faces of Toronto performers. Several participants point to the proliferation of make-up trends shepherded into drag culture by particular *RPDR* contestants, from contouring the tip of one's nose in the shape of a heart (Shuga Cain, season 11) to 1960s-

style false bottom eyelashes (Farrah Moan and Valentina, both season nine and *All Stars* season four) and rhinestones glued directly under one's eyelid (Naomi Smalls, season eight and *All Stars* season four). The popularity of drag-based make-up tutorials on YouTube has also increased since *RPDR*'s debut and many of the most-viewed tutorials feature *RPDR* contestants showing fans how to achieve their make-up looks.[1] One research participant, Miss Scotto, even refers to YouTube as their "first drag mom." Like the route to drag itself for drag baby boomers, drag YouTube tutorials are a new phenomenon that runs counter to the community-based way drag make-up was taught prior to the *RPDR* era. Research participant Tash Riot explains that many Toronto artists now resemble *RPDR* stars rather than seasoned members of their own community:

> All the older queens in the community are like: 'We didn't have YouTube tutorials. You used to hope that a girl would think you're pretty enough that she'd let you watch her paint once and you'd lock it in your memory.'… I love talking to the legendary queens in the community that have stories like that. Because, with the *Drag Race* girls, it's like, yeah, I can go online and watch Aquaria do three different makeup tutorials and it's, like, so you can learn how to do exactly her face. And you definitely see some queens who you're like: 'Oh, you learned from this queen and you can see exactly [what they're doing].' It's a really easy way to learn. With local girls, you used to have the thing of, 'Oh, you look like your drag mother,' but now you can look like any 'x' queen from the show.

In addition to visual influence, direct lines of influence between *RPDR* and the Toronto drag scene can also be observed audibly. On each episode of *RPDR*, the two performers deemed weakest face off in a lip sync battle. The songs for these battles range from contemporary top 40 to disco hits that may be foreign to the show's younger audience members. Almost immediately

[1] There are at least 30 make-up tutorial videos featuring RPDR contestants on YouTube with more than one million views. One of the most popular, a collaboration between Trixie Mattell and makeup influencer Jeffree Star, has nearly 10 million views (Star).

after a song is featured in a lip sync battle, DJs at drag bars will add it to their playlists and drag artists will start to perform it. As Lucinda Miu attests:

> I find that if a song appears on the show, you will hear it in clubs. If it's an older song, it gives you a little bit more allowance to do it…Then you kind of have a reference, the audience has a reference. It's kind of introduced into the lexicon of drag fans.

Tash Riot echoes Miu, listing Demi Lovato's 2017 pop hit "Sorry Not Sorry" as one recent example. The song was featured in a high-energy lip sync-off between Brooke Lynn Hytes and Evie Oddly during season 11 of *RPDR*, two years after it was promoted as a single. After that much-discussed lip sync, Riot began performing the song in their act:

> When the 'Sorry Not Sorry' lip sync happened, everyone was like: 'OMG THIS SONG!' So you start doing 'Sorry Not Sorry' at your weekly shows because people want to hear it. It's smart to keep in the loop with stuff like that.

This is a good example of why many research participants feel the need to pay attention to *RPDR*. By including a nod to the show in their act, Riot is acknowledging the shared cultural meaning the song "Sorry Not Sorry" has within the fan world of *RPDR*. Doing so is an act of fan service; local drag shows are typically filled with many *RPDR* fans and engaging with *RPDR* is an easy, clever way to engage with the audience.

### 3. Cosplay, reference, and re-creation

Most research participants say they shy away from overt references to *RPDR*, citing that they want to be recognised for their own art, not their ability to recreate another artist's look or act. Many Toronto drag artists do, however, engage in the fan practice of cosplay. First popularised by Japanese popular culture, cosplay is a form of fan expression written directly on

the body (Gn 583). In "Cosplay Is Serious Business," Suzanne Scott defines the phenomenon as "the practice of constructing costumes or props inspired by fictional characters and embodying those characters in real-world spaces such as a fan conventions" (146). Scott and many other scholars (e.g. Lamerichs 2018) specify that cosplay is the act of recreating fictional characters, but in my view cosplay may also include non-fictional characters such as *RPDR* stars, who exist as characters within a reality television text. Cosplay has been considered by scholars primarily as a mode of identity performance associated with geek culture (Scott 146) – meaning cosplayers most commonly take their visual inspiration from comics, animation, and video games (Gn 583). In the Toronto drag scene, I have witnessed many instances of this traditional style of cosplay – drag artists styling themselves as fictional characters from *Sailor*, *X-Men*, and *Tomb Raider*. I argue that within the drag world there is now a blurring of lines between cosplay, with its roots in comics, animation, video games, and Japanese popular culture, and the long-standing practice of celebrity impersonation by drag performers (as noted in Chapter Four, celebrity impersonation has been part of the fabric of the Toronto drag scene for 50 years or more).

One research participant, Miss Fiercalicious, is known locally for their cosplay-style re-creations of *RPDR* star Naomi Smalls' looks. In January 2019, Smalls competed in a much-discussed lip sync battle on *RPDR* while wearing a cherry red bondage-style leather bikini with an abundance of silver hardware reminiscent of Versace's infamous fall 1992 collection, Miss S&M. Less than one month later, Fiercalicious posted a series of three pictures on Instagram wearing a re-creation of the outfit created by a local costume designer who specialises in cosplay (Fiercalicious). In one post, Fiercalicious even mimics Smalls' extreme back bend dance move from the lip sync. Another caption references the song from the lip sync, RuPaul's "Adrenaline," while the third states: "I don't get why everyone keeps telling me I look like @naomismalls, I'm

not seeing it" – a cheeky in-joke for *RPDR* fans who are likely to instantly recognise that she looks *exactly* like Naomi Smalls.

*Left: Naomi Smalls on RPDR (photo: World of Wonder / VH1), right: Miss Fiercalicious on Instagram (photo: Quinton Cruickshanks)*

In our interview, Miss Fiercalicious says Smalls is indeed one of their primary influences and that audiences, the majority of whom are already familiar with Smalls, instantly recognise the Smalls references and react very positively to the cosplay act:

> From the moment I started doing drag, I've gotten comparisons to Naomi Smalls. Everywhere I go. We do look really similar and I really do relate to her drag. She's one of the younger queens. I really enjoy her looks and we have really similar body types, so, the looks she does translate really well on me. The back bend she can do, that she did during *All Stars*, I tried it out and I can do it too. I think just because, again, we have the same body type, so it was easy for me to do. I've done her song she released, 'Pose,' and I did her Adrenaline number, I tried to re-create it.

Fiercalicious is using their body as a display for fan identity. But by using a fellow drag performer as their icon, Fiercalicious is engaging in mimetic fan production; they are "seeking to replicate what is seen on screen," not transforming or further queering Smalls' original gender

performance (Scott 146). In my view, this is what Hills calls "performative consumption" – an active form of fan labour in which fans claim agency and ground from which to speak, but do not subvert or radically transform the object of their fandom (123, 124). Put simply, Fiercalicious is paying tribute to Smalls, not commenting on them.

The promotional materials for *RPDR All Stars* season four inspired two distinct homages in Toronto. While not cosplay, I consider these homages to be forms of fan re-creation and reinterpretation that demonstrate *RPDR*'s visual impact on local drag. The advertising campaign for the season launched in November 2018 and features 10 contestants in front of a mauve backdrop in a series of shimmering, lightly coloured outfits. In one campaign video the cast takes turns driving ice picks, hammers, and axes into a square block of ice containing a frozen crown – a metaphor for winning the season (All Hail). One month later, research participant Selena Vyle recreated the photo shoot with their drag house, The House of Lix, and used the photos as the marketing materials for their *RPDR* viewing party (Vyle). In the flyer for the event, Vyle and their drag family wear slick silver outfits that would fit right into the *All Stars 4* shoot. In one photo, Vyle wields an axe towards an ice block containing a half-frozen crown, directly referencing the *RPDR* advertising campaign.

*Left: Latrice Royale on* RPDR *(photo: World of Wonder / VH1), right: Selena Vyle on Instagram (photo: uncredited)*

The icy aesthetic and cool blue, mauve, and translucent colour palette was also recreated in a fashion shoot featuring nine Toronto drag artists by a local photographer, Quinton Cruickshanks (Bel Bel). In this photo, also posted on Instagram in December 2018, the nine queens are positioned horizontally in a clear nod to the typical competition reality television show cast photo. The reference is, once again, immediately recognisable to *RPDR* fans; one prominent drag account even comments on the photo, "so finally drag race canada is happening" (Bobo)[2]. The project is also the source of controversy. When photos from the shoot were initially posted, I observed several comments on since-deleted Instagram posts noting how the artists chosen for the shoot were overwhelmingly white (to my knowledge, only one of these nine artists is a BIPOC). As I explore in detail later in Chapter Six, all but one of the research participants for this study view the Toronto drag scene as more diverse than *RPDR*. This shoot, however, represents one instance in which the scene is presented as homogenous. Those behind the shoot did attempt to correct course; when the photos were ultimately released as a charity calendar in January 2019, two new BIPOC performers were featured dead centre in the promo image.[3]

[2] This is prior to the announcement of *Canada's Drag Race*
[3] It is my assumption that these two performers were digitally added to the photograph.

*Photo: Quinton Cruickshanks (this is the final version of the image; the initial was not archived)*

4. *RPDR*'s mainstreaming powers

The most obvious impact *RPDR* has had on the Toronto drag scene is also the effect most cited by research participants: it has made drag incredibly popular. Since the 1950s, drag has been central to queer nightlife in Toronto (see Chapter Two), but it has achieved a new cultural ubiquity in the 2010s, thanks in large to the popularity of *RPDR*. There were, for example, 14 bars and restaurants that hosted viewing parties at which fans could watch the eleventh season of *RPDR* live in Toronto (Villeneuve). There has also been a growth in non-*RPDR* related drag events, such as drag brunches (Scriver) and Drag Queen Storytime events at libraries (Wisenthal), the latter of which I will address below. In an interview with *The Globe and Mail*, veteran drag performer Sofonda Cox, who has been performing in Toronto for two decades,

attributes the growth of drag as an art form to the mainstream success of *RPDR*, which has brought a new audience – according to Cox, women and heterosexuals – out to drag shows (Iannacci). Given the history outlined in Chapter Four, I believe the number and frequency of drag events in Toronto today represents new heights of popularity for the art form in Toronto. While drag performances were largely confined to the Gay Village in the 1950s through to the 1990s, there are now events held all over Toronto's downtown core on a near-nightly basis.

Drag is also starting to creep out of the confines of nightlife. Over the past decade many libraries in Toronto and elsewhere have launched ongoing "Drag Queen Storytime" (DQS) events in which drag artists read storybooks to children, as discussed in Jamie Campbell Naidoo's "A Rainbow of Creativity: Exploring Drag Queen Storytimes and Gender Creative Programming in Public Libraries." As Naidoo details, DQS events are a way to normalise the experiences of queer families, which they term "rainbow families," and encourage gender creativity (12), a term connoting an allowance for the youthful exploration of gender scripts beyond the binary of masculine and feminine. Many librarians, queer families, and members of the LGBTQ+ community and the wider public alike have praised DQS programs, but they have also been subject to public debate. As drag culture inches out of nightlife spaces, it has potential to clash with the norms associated with social institutions like the nuclear family (see Knox, Larocque, and Shakeri for documentation of protests against DQS events across Canada). There are also those in the drag world who would prefer drag culture maintain a transgressive edge rather attempting to appease corporations and cultural institutions with a newfound interest in drag. Naidoo makes a series of recommendations for librarians organising DQS events, including having drag performers tweak stage names to make them child-friendly, removing "adult humour," and altering outfits to avoid "excessive cleavage" (14). These may well be the type of

suggestions caregivers bringing children to DQS events would appreciate, but they are also indicative of how drag traditions – crass stage names, dirty jokes, and cleavage – are being questioned and tested by those outside the drag world as drag culture meets the cultural mainstream.

Beyond libraries, drag is also being incorporated into numerous other spaces, from restaurants to schools, cinemas, workplaces, and even sports games. Participant Barbra Bardot sees this development as a positive step towards the widespread social acceptance of drag performers:

> I think [*RPDR*] has made drag more accessible to people. More accessible to drag queens who are starting out but also more accessible to a wider audience to see what drag is. I think a lot of people are afraid of drag queens…[*RPDR*] makes it more accessible and less scary to people. It makes it more mainstream, which it has, and I don't see that as a negative thing. It opens up doors and other bars outside of the Village.

Several participants also point out how *RPDR* has made drag accessible to people who live outside of urban centres with large queer populations. The effect, Bardot posits, is twofold: people who would not otherwise have encountered drag in the bar setting are able to learn about it in the comfort of their homes, potentially leading to further acceptance for drag artists; and people in smaller cities and rural areas have been inspired to produce drag shows, fostering drag-based queer communities outside of urban centres. Multiple research participants grew up outside of Toronto in less queer-friendly communities and cite the show as a positive influence on the towns and cities they hail from. One in particular, Porcelain Tylez, says they believe

*RPDR* was the impetus for new drag shows in southwestern Ontario outside of Toronto:

> [*RPDR*] has brought it more mainstream, in the sense you see it a lot more, it's a little more accepted. You see it in places you never would have seen it. I've seen it in little restaurants back in London (Ontario). You'd have never seen that there [before]… Like, the bowling alley back in London has a weekly drag show. You'd never have seen that [before].

Many early drag ethnographers positioned drag performers as socially deviant (Hopkins 135), but recent drag scholarship rejects that stance and instead focuses on the social oppression faced by the drag community, noting that those who participate in drag are more likely to face oppression than others in the queer community. Writing prior to *RPDR* in 2004, ethnographer Steven J. Hopkins highlights the considerable social costs of being a drag performer, including violence and harassment, difficulty finding romantic partners, and a loss of friends and family (137, 147). I argue *RPDR* has lessened the social stigma around drag performers in terms of familial and work relations, as well as relations with potential romantic partners. I have observed this progression towards acceptance both while interviewing this group of research participants and while speaking with other performers at drag events in Toronto.

There are certainly still dangers associated with drag. For example, during my time in the field I have spoken to many drag artists about the danger they feel when they take public transit or walk alone in drag. There is also ample evidence of social acceptance. Many drag artists I spoke with during the research period are in healthy romantic relationships, have positive relationships with their biological families, and are out as queer in their non-drag workplaces. I have witnessed birth parents in the audience cheering on their kids on stage and romantic partners showing up at the end of the night to carry a performer's wig and usher them into a taxi. This is not to say this group is free from persecution, rather that being a drag artist is one of many social factors on a matrix of points of privilege and oppression affecting the research group

and their peers. Historically, the power drag performers have wielded has been constricted to the stage. But as the tide of *RPDR*'s success carries drag performers into new spaces, they are enjoying a wider plane of social power. As the inner lives of drag performers are being broadcast into an increasing number of households via *RPDR*, social stigma towards drag performers is lessening.

## 5. Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated the influence *RPDR* has had on the look and feel of the Toronto drag scene. In addition to *RPDR* dictating trends in makeup, music, and fashion, this chapter has shown how the commercial success of *RPDR* and the resulting cultural phenomenon has increased the size of the scene through the 2010s drag baby boom. At the same time, the show has mainstreamed the art of drag on a global level, which has had a trickle-down effect on local scenes such as Toronto's. In Chapter Five, I turn my attention from influence to impact and investigate how the show has changed the sociocultural fabric of the scene. As I continue to unpack the results of this ethnography, I will explore how the show has impacted the way gender and race are negotiated in the Toronto drag scene and how the introduction of a commercially-driven phenomenon has changed this once-grassroots community.

# Chapter Six: Impact

In the preceding chapter, I demonstrated the visual and sonic influence *RPDR* has had on the Toronto drag scene and detailed the drag baby boom that followed the show's 2009 debut. Having demonstrated this influence, I now turn to the show's impact on the sociocultural fabric of the scene. As previously argued, *RPDR* has ushered in a new era of commerciality in drag culture. The show is the ruling force behind a new economic system of talent managers, club promoters, music producers, brand sponsors, and public relations efforts that has proliferated since the launch of *RPDR*. This new era of commercially-viable drag has drastically changed drag culture on the local level, which I observed in the field in the Toronto drag scene. The research participants in this study unanimously agree *RPDR* has popularised drag in Toronto, to what I argue is a historically unprecedented level of marketability (see Chapter Two). This has led to many positive developments for Toronto drag artists, such as new work opportunities. However, as this chapter demonstrates, there is a great disparity between the economics of local and global drag. In this chapter I also consider the chief problematics of *RPDR* – misogyny and racism – and unpack the role each plays in the Toronto drag scene. I additionally consider the relationship between the way race and gender are negotiated in the Toronto drag scene and how these problematics are represented on screen in *RPDR* and within the *RPDR* fandom. I argue that as drag culture's dominant system of articulation, the show's treatment of race and gender – and racism and misogyny within the fandom – have produced a series of negative effects that will be explored in this chapter.

1. The economics of drag

The Toronto drag scene is inherently tied to the exchange of capital as it exists within the wider social world under the ruling forces of capitalism and neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, which places focus on unhindered markets and the relentless pursuit of capital gains, has become a way of life in North America and many other parts of the world, permeating nearly every facet of life (Bockman 14), including entertainment, the arts, and the culture of drag. Amber Hollibaugh and Margot Weiss argue that "intensified neoliberal economic restructuring has had particularly harsh consequences for LGBT/Q people" (22), who are the predominant creators of drag culture. Hollibaugh and Weiss contend that discrimination has relegated many queer workers to low-wage jobs that, under neoliberal conditions, do not offer benefits such as health insurance or paid sick leave and do not lead to financial security (22). Research dating back to the mid-1990s shows that queer and gender non-conforming people are especially vulnerable to poverty (20).

It is my assertion that the job of drag artist is, in most cases, precarious work. What I mean by this is that drag artists in Toronto typically do not work for a single employer; they are often booked for a single night of work at a time and are paid via a myriad of financial arrangements rather than being on an employer's payroll. Drag artists on the local level typically do not make high wages and the social leverage they gain as popular or well-known performers often does not translate to social or cultural capital outside of niche queer social circles. As I previously stated, only two of my nine research participants work in drag full-time. In spending time embedded in this community, I know that working in drag full-time is an anomaly, but it is not impossible in Toronto. During our interviews, several research participants spoke about working in the service sector in addition to drag, or in other cash economies such as sewing garments for fellow artists. Many drag performers in Toronto make ends meet by performing a

number of different jobs within the world of drag and queer nightlife, from styling wigs to teaching makeup classes, DJing, and working the door at parties. Some also have established careers in professional fields and work as school teachers, media personalities, project managers, and veterinary technicians. When they are at their drag jobs, either at one-off gigs or working more regularly as part of a bar's house stable of performers, the majority of drag performers in Toronto are afforded very few of the protections provided to other workers such as job security, medical insurance, and other benefits like dental coverage. Drag artists typically work in a cash economy and are not part of any union, as are actors or other entertainment industry workers. This type of work is common for queer people according to Hollibaugh and Weiss, who posit that neoliberal economic restructuring has squeezed many queer workers out of the traditional economy altogether, pushing them into cash or other alternative economies (22).

During the research period, I interviewed a group of Toronto-based drag artists, none of whom are part of the research group, about their finances for a series of articles for *Flare* magazine (What's in). These performers disclosed how much they are typically paid for drag and drag-adjacent jobs. On the lower end, they report earning about $50 for DJing and working the door at drag events, jobs they typically dress in drag for. Most list $100 as a baseline fee for performing, though they also acknowledge the free labour they did while working to establish themselves in Toronto, such as performing at open stage events and taking part in competitions such as *CTDR* that do not pay contestants. According to the artists I interviewed, corporate clients pay the most for jobs such as performing at branded Pride events and appearing in advertisements, but those opportunities are few and far between. Every one of the artists I interviewed expresses that it is a struggle to make ends meet as a queer artist in Toronto – even for those who have full-time work in addition to working in drag.

Living in a particularly expensive city is likewise a struggle for my research participants. According to Demographia, the housing market in Toronto is one of the world's least affordable (Cox and Pavletich 23). The research firm characterises the city's housing market as "severely" unaffordable (Cox and Pavletich 23). The overall cost of living in Toronto is likewise very high; the consulting firm Mercer finds that Toronto is the 115th most expensive city in the world and the second most expensive city to live in in Canada, following Vancouver (Cost of living). Given these factors, it is no surprise that the majority of the research participants for this study express some level of frustration in relation to their finances.

In addition to the particular financial challenges of living in Toronto, establishing oneself as a drag performer can be very expensive and comes with its own set of unique financial challenges. Aspiring drag performers, for instance, are often expected to prove themselves with free labour as they establish connections with promoters, bars, and fans via open stages and drag competitions. It should be noted that while there is no entry fee for *CTDR* in particular, there are many associated costs. If a performer is new to drag, it can cost hundreds of dollars to develop a makeup kit of beauty products one needs for a single look. Given the specificity of the weekly *CTDR* themes, many contestants purchase or create new costumes and wigs for each of their weekly performances. There are also many other costs associated with competing, depending on how much a performer is willing or able to spend, from backup dancers to producer fees for audio mixes. Eight months after completing *CTDR*, research participant Selena Vyle says they're still recuperating the funds they spent on the competition:

> I'm going through a big financial strain right now where I spent so much money doing [Crews and Tangos] Drag Race because you're turning out a new look every single week, hiring dancers, booking rental space. It was really nuts. I'm now feeling the effects of that where I'm finally at a place where I'm making money in drag but what I'm actually doing is playing catch up and paying off my credit card, shaving off my debt – or trying to anyways.

Crews and Tangos does not charge a cover for *CTDR*, but the bar is a commodified space predicated on the sale of alcohol at a steep markup and even the thriftiest contestants spend a considerable amount of money on makeup, clothing, and materials for props. The consumption of drag in Toronto – and elsewhere – happens almost exclusively in commercial spaces. As Alan Sears points out, the same is true for most forms of public socialising in the queer world; "Open lesbian and gay life has thrived primarily in commodified forms: bars, restaurants, store, coffee shops, commercial publications, certain styles of dress and personal grooming, [and] commercialised Pride Day celebrations with corporate sponsorship" (104). Further, spaces like Crews and Tangos are "sustained by the labour of relatively low-wage service workers," some of whom may be LGBTQ+ workers who are willing to work for less money if it means working in an environment that is safe for queers (106).

Local drag communities such as the Toronto drag scene can be thought of as what John Fiske calls a fan culture "shadow economy" (45). There are a number of economic activities that link to *RPDR* to the Toronto drag scene, drawing parallels between the "official" global culture – in this case *RPDR* – and the local culture, which takes on a subordinate position (Fiske 45). For example, Toronto drag performers are given the opportunity to perform at large venues, but only when opening for *RPDR* contestants. Likewise, until the launch of *Canada's Drag Race*, Toronto drag performers were relegated to labouring as host and commentator at *RPDR* viewing parties, serving as commentator rather than contestant. Toronto drag artists participate in the visual

culture of drag, but their looks and performances are often read as derivative of *RPDR* by audiences, even when they are originating looks or borrowing from other source material.

*RPDR* has also heightened audience expectations for how glossy – and expensive – drag should be. Season nine winner Sasha Velour, for example, disclosed they spent $4,000 (USD) on costumes to wear on *RPDR* (Oltuski) and Miz Cracker (season 10) has spoken about taking out a bank loan to buy things for the show. These performers are splurging on outfits, wigs, and shoes with the understanding the exposure they will receive from *RPDR* will lead to future financial gains, but artists in the Toronto scene have no such safety net. Given the relatively low fees drag performers in Toronto receive, they simply do not have the funds to compete with the luxe visuality of *RPDR*, but audiences are not necessarily attuned to this financial disparity. When *RPDR* fans attend a local show, Vyle says they expect to see expensive garments – and when they don't, they're quick to critique:

> People think that what they see on TV needs to translate to what you see in the club. They'll read you for your looks, they'll read you for your performances. And they'll compare you to a queen they saw on TV whose doing it with a lot more money behind them. That's the only negative drawback I would say. We now have to keep up with what's happening on TV.

This is a point of contention for many of the research participants. *RPDR* fans who have found their way to local drag shows have a specific framing for drag; the drag they are familiar is within the context of reality television. It is perfectly lit, shot in HD, colour corrected, and professionally edited. The contestants have been cast and edited to appear as appealing (or perfectly villainous) characters and the expensive wigs and garments showcased are out of reach for most Toronto-based performers.

The corporate infrastructure *RPDR* has built is specifically designed to support the show and put money in the hands of its creators, not in the pockets of local performers. Many fan

events such as live tours and fan conventions are produced by the same production company behind *RPDR*, World of Wonder. As a result of this, many of the financial opportunities of this new era of commercially-viable drag are available almost exclusively to *RPDR* alumnae. There is without a doubt a commercial trickle-down effect for drag artists in local scenes such as Toronto's – gigs opening for performers featured on *RPDR* and hosting *RPDR* viewing parties are obvious examples – but several research participants expressed frustration with the disparity between the economics of *RPDR* and the global drag scene and the economics of local drag in Toronto. Lucinda Miu, who produces events with their drag family and is thus dependent on revenue from ticket sales, explains: "personal friends of mine won't shell out a $5 or $10 cover fee [at a local event] but they will go see a Ru Girl for $100 to $250."

The perceived value of a drag artist who has basked in the glow of television fame became particularly apparent when Toronto's own Brooke Lynn Hytes appeared on *RPDR*. For several years in the early 2010s, Hytes performed regularly at bars in Toronto's Gay Village, but never, to my knowledge, drew a crowd quite like the one that showed up at Woody's in Toronto following their *RPDR* debut in February 2019. When Hytes hosted a viewing party for the first episode of *RPDR* they appeared in, the line curled out the bar doors and around the block; one Woody's staff member later claimed the bar welcomed more patrons that night than during the 2018 Pride festival. Research participant Porcelain Tylez expresses frustration that these *RPDR* fans hadn't supported Hytes in their pre-TV career:

> The lineup was down the street. That's the impact [*RPDR*] has on the culture. You'd never see that at a regular night. But she's famous…That's disgusting. They're there for their hometown girl, but they never saw her before she was on the show.

Tylez is using hyperbolic speech when they call the crowd "disgusting"; I understood this statement to be said partially in jest, but the disparity between the fanfare *RPDR* receives and the

fan support for the local scene is a real frustration for Tylez. This sentiment is shared by several other research participants as well as other performers I have spoken to in Toronto. I have observed Toronto's drag scene to be vibrant, active, and even commercially viable, with at least a handful of small-scale shows every night, but the official fan activities for *RPDR* operate at a much larger scale. For example, live tours featuring *RPDR* stars fill out the Danforth Music Hall, a venue with a capacity of 1427 according to its website (General Info), while a full house for *CTDR* on the main floor of Crews & Tangos is, according to my own estimates and observations, about 100 people. The audience at many drag shows I attend is still much smaller – some shows are in venues that hold 75 people or less.

There is also a great disparity between what drag performers in Toronto earn and the potential for income if a performer has appeared on *RPDR*. It has been reported that fees for *RPDR* alumnae are often in the thousands (Chapman). Season six performer Laganja Estranja told *Vulture* their booking fee is $1,500 (USD) per show, adding that performers showcased on the show since it moved to from Logo to VH1 in 2017 – thus reaching a much wider audience – charge as much as $5,000 (USD) per show (The Most Powerful). Such is certainly the case for Estranja's fellow season six (and *All Stars* season two) contestant Adore Delano. In 2017 Delano sued their management company over alleged financial mismanagement and the proceedings revealed that the star made $2,500,000 over the course of three years; according to court documents posted online, much of this income came from their $5,000 per night booking fee (Tracer, Daniel Noriega vs Producer Entertainment). By contrast, booking fees for Toronto performers are a small fraction of the fees RPDR stars command (as mentioned, $100 is the typical baseline booking fee) (What's In).

One night at Crews and Tangos, the drag performer Allysin Chaynes offered a useful analogy: if *RPDR* is the massive chain store, they are the farmer's market of drag. While Chaynes was making a joke as part of their act, this is actually a useful way of thinking about global versus local drag; like any McDonald's, H&M or Walmart, *RPDR* is part of a stable of business endeavors owned by a large corporation with international reach (RPDR is a VH1 property, under the NBCUniversal umbrella, which is part of ComCast). Using Straw's lines of influence, it can be understood that the trends in an independently owned clothing store may eventually end up in H&M, but what's available at H&M also influences the local boutique as it signifies what is currently happening in mainstream fashion and offers shoppers an easily accessible competing product (Systems 369). The same is true for *RPDR*; as I have previously argued, what happens in local drag scenes influences what is later seen on RPDR, but what is seen on RPDR also influences – and often competes with – what happens in the local scene.

2. The scene strikes back

While the research participants unanimously list *RPDR* as a primary influence, this is not to suggest *RPDR* has completely replaced the traditional pathway to drag: discovering drag at the local level, then apprenticing in one's local scene under the guidance of one or more seasoned performers. In drag culture, the widespread practice of choosing one's own non-biological family as a queer person has been semi-formalised as the longstanding tradition of having a drag "family" of non-biological drag parents, siblings, aunts, etc. that help new drag artists learn the craft. As Cameron Crookston establishes in "Passing the torch song: Mothers, daughters, and chosen families in the Canadian drag community," drag families have been an important part of drag culture for decades and are still vital for many new drag artists (55). Several participants in

this study, for example, have a "drag mother" who assists them in their drag career. Drag families are also part of the lexicon of *RPDR*; many contestants speak about their drag families on the show, which has featured multiple members from particular drag families, such as the Haus of Haunt (Sharon Needles, Alaska) and the House of Edwards (Shangela, Alyssa Edwards, Laganja Estranja). Crookston argues that "in taking a drag daughter under her wing, a drag mother connects their daughter to cultural artifacts from the art form's history" (58). I add that in this current era of mainstream drag, drag families serve as connective tissue in the drag scene, passing down localisms and strengthening the local scene's cultural persistence in the face of the global, corporate influence of *RPDR*. Further, these grassroots, localised traditions are now interwoven with the cultural forces of *RPDR*, creating the two-way dialogue between related cultures that Straw calls lines of influence between the local and the global (Systems 369).

Participant Lucinda Miu explains that being a fan of *RPDR* often leads people to discover the performers in their local scene. Miu, now a drag mother themselves, says *RPDR* is what led them to attend a drag show at Crews and Tangos, which was one of their first steps in becoming immersed in the drag scene:

> I would say that I started as a *Drag Race* fan before I became a drag fan. I remember the first time I was at Crews and Tangos…I remember thinking, 'Oh my God, this is the best thing I've ever seen, what is going on? This is incredible.' I remember [drag performer and 2019 *CTDR* co-host] Ivory Towers was there, she took off her coat, and had a little crystal bikini on underneath and we all just lost our minds. I don't think I would have gone to Crew and Tangos if it wasn't for *Drag Race*. And what I saw I definitely fell in love with.

The reasons for forming a drag family Miu lists are in line with Crookston's findings. Crookston notes that for the majority of the twentieth century, to come out of the closet as queer meant severing ties with one's birth family – and for many queer youth today this is still true (55). This

rejection from one's family necessitated new quasi-familial networks of love and support in the form of queer chosen families. However, like the drag artists Crookston interviewed for "Passing The Torch Song" (64), Miu and the majority of my other research participants sought out drag family despite having strong, healthy bonds with their birth families. Lucinda, for instance, explains the members of their drag troupe The Diet Ghosts have supportive birth families, but bonded over the passing of a friend, fellow performer, and collaborator, Swampwater Bitch.

Selena Vyle reports their drag mother, Vicki Lix, helped them with the necessities of drag as a new performer, such as lending or gifting clothes and wigs and telling them where to shop for inexpensive drag items. While Vyle's drag family rarely socialises outside of their drag work, they do rely on each other for emotional support – one of the key tenets of drag families from previous eras. There are additional practical benefits of having a drag family even in this modern era in which drag and queerness are, generally, more widely accepted. For example, being part of a drag family helps generate performance opportunities. Barbra Bardot says her drag mother was one of the reasons she was first offered a booking at the gay bar Woody's, an institution in Toronto's Gay Village. Selena's family, the House of Lix, also produces shows together as a group, as does Lucinda's family. For these practical reasons, as well as others such as emotional support, I argue, as does Crookston (65), that the emotional and cultural function of drag families is as vital as ever in the Toronto drag scene. And in addition to personal benefits, I argue drag families serve to reinforce and strengthen localisms and the traditions of the grassroots drag community in Toronto as it evolves under the influence of *RPDR*.

One weekly theme during the 2019 edition of *CTDR* in particular demonstrates the Toronto drag scene's capacity to produce its own culture rather than simply borrowing from *RPDR*. During this week, contestants were challenged to impersonate an artist from the local

drag scene for a challenge dubbed the "Night of 1,000 Toronto Performers." Rather than looking outwards at drag happening within the highly commercial parameters of *RPDR*, the event organisers asked the contestants to look to their own community for inspiration. Many of the 2019 contestants elected to emulate drag artists who had competed in *CTDR* during previous years, demonstrating the insular world the competition has created. One contestant in particular, Miss Steak, paid tribute to their drag mother, Ivory Towers, who was one of the 2019 *CTDR* co-hosts, by mimicking Towers' makeup and performance style. To fully understand these performances requires a great deal of intertextual information. One has to not only have previously seen an additional local performer's act, they also have to recognise it as being part of said local performer's brand as a performer, and, at times, know how the two artists relate within the social fabric of the drag scene. Are they drag family? Collaborators? Enemies or rivals? Being able to fully read the politics or concept of the act requires insider knowledge on the part of the audience member. Whether intentional or not, this insularity acts as a cultural buffer to casual fans – especially those of whom are conversant in *RPDR*, but not familiar with the local scene – and can be read as a strategy of resistance towards *RPDR* as the governing force of drag culture.

It is true that the Toronto drag scene exists under the shadow of *RPDR* as a cultural phenomenon but, as Will Straw argues, local scenes also "occupy positions of centrality as sites for the reworking and transformation of styles originating elsewhere" (Systems 381). As I have demonstrated, *RPDR* has a direct influence on the Toronto drag scene in a number of ways. However, Toronto's drag artists also rework, transform, and, I argue, directly oppose what happens on *RPDR*. Straw proposes that "the manner in which musical scenes tie themselves to processes of historical change occurring within a larger international music culture will also be a

significant basis on the way in which such forms are positioned within that scene at the local level" (Systems 373). I argue the same is true for drag scenes: the more labour and investment local drag artists put into building community and fostering local drag culture beyond fan activities associated with *RPDR*, the less they are dependent on global drag culture's ever-shifting landscape. The scene cannot simply ignore global culture; to remain relevant they must engage with it, whether that means opposing it or reimagining it in a new context. It is undeniable that *RPDR* led to a drag boom in Toronto, but the way in which the local scene has responded to it and continued to shift and reimagine itself has depended on local factors. It is my observation that the local culture has built its own infrastructure, such as local competitions, styles, recurring parties, and performance spaces. In doing so, it remains in conversation with *RPDR* and global drag culture rather than simply receiving and reproducing it.

In "Systems," Straw borrows a term I deem useful to the discussion of contemporary drag culture – "affective alliance" (374) – from Lawrence Grossberg's "Another Boring Day in Paradise: Rock and Roll and the Empowerment of Everyday Life." Grossberg suggests the genre of rock and roll provides "strategies of survival and pleasure" for its fans, and that the set of practices known as rock and roll are "empowered by and empower particular audiences in particular contexts" (227). I argue the same is true for drag fans, especially in the previously discussed context of queer fans who feel empowered by watching drag performance to explore and express their gender and sexual identity. Grossberg defines the term affective alliance as "an organisation of concrete material practices and events, cultural forms and social experience which both opens up and structures the space of our affective investments in the world" (227). In the case of drag culture in the local context, this term can apply to the organisation of venues (bars, libraries, restaurants etc.) in Toronto where drag performance take places, the drag houses

and other groups that produce drag shows, and the local performers whose style of performance, dress, and makeup have inspired localised traditions.

For these affective alliances to be effective, these different elements of the scene must work together as they do in the Night of 1,000 Toronto Performers: the venue is supporting and promoting a competition, its organisers are drawing from Toronto drag culture, and its participants are successfully drawing on local visuality in creating recognisable cosplay-style re-creations of locally-known drag artists. In this context, I am applying the term affective alliance specifically to the practices and events that exist outside, beyond, or adjacent to *RPDR*-led global culture. Within the context of the Toronto drag scene and its relation to global drag culture – with *RPDR* as the dominant system of articulation – I argue Toronto is indeed the breeding ground for many affective alliances that resist *RPDR*'s most normative ideologies. While *RPDR* remains a dominant cultural force, many other local cultural forces are also at work on the grassroots level within this system of articulation.

One performance I observed in the field, which I will detail shortly, stands out as resisting the ideologies of queerness and gender presented on *RDPR*. As previously noted, *RPDR* has a gender-specific format. The show almost exclusively presents drag as the domain of cisgender gay men presenting femininity. Contestants are regularly criticised for any quality deemed masculine by the judges. By contrast to what is typically showcased on *RPDR*, there are many performers in the Toronto drag scene who revel in presenting both feminine and masculine signifiers – especially drag queens who feature male-presenting body hair alongside classically feminine hair, makeup, and dress. One performer in particular, Allysin Chaynes, is known for their hairy chest. In a 2017 interview for *Feel Your Fantasy*, Chaynes, who participated in *CTDR* in 2014, told me their intention is to subvert the idea that hair on particular body part should be

associated with a specific gender (Chaynes). This subversion was taken an additional step further by 2019 *CTDR* contestant Akira, who chose to impersonate Chaynes during the Night of 1,000 Toronto Drag Performers.

Akira, who is an AFAB performer, painted their chest to mimic Chaynes' rich thicket of dark, curly chest hair. Akira's performance of gender is exceptionally layered; an AFAB artist is presenting a masculine signifier (chest hair) as part of their impersonation of a AMAB artist's (mostly) feminine drag. The interplay between these two artists is classic genderfu**c**k, defined by June L. Reich as the deconstruction of the "psychoanalytic concept of difference without subscribing to any heterosexist or anatomical truths about the relations of sex to gender" (255). What genderfucking does, contends Meredith Heller, is upend "the essentialism built into group divisions by deploying identities in contradictory, multiple, and new ways" (5). This is exactly what is at play in Akira's performance as they mimic Chaynes: the boundaries between man and woman are blurred beyond the point of legibility. It seems unlikely that a casual drag fan in the audience would be able to read the multiple gender performances layered on Akira's body. Akira also furthers Chaynes' artistic intent; by bringing their AFAB identity and associated drag practice to the stage underneath Chaynes' trademark look, they subvert the idea chest hair belongs to a particularly gendered body. Rather than the naturalised idea that men have chest hair, the masculine-signifier of chest hair becomes part of a bricolage of gender performances written on Akira's body. In creating these layers of gender and meaning, Akira blurs together fandom and locality, masculinity and femininity, and cosplay and community, creating a performance that is distinctly of their own scene.

Beyond a commentary on gender, the performance also demonstrates that despite the availability of *RPDR* episodes, YouTube tutorials, and the like, the exchange of technique,

knowledge, and support is alive and well in the Toronto drag scene. On Instagram, Akira later revealed that Chaynes not only lent them the wig they wore during the performance in order to perfect their look, Chaynes also taught them how to perform one of their signature numbers. Though *RPDR* may have inspired contestants in *CTDR* to start doing drag, it is the support and ingenuity of their community that allows them to succeed on the stage. However, when Chaynes competed in *CTDR* in 2014, Akira would have been barred from the competition – a ruling I explore in detail below.

3. The gender-specific format

Each annual edition of *CTDR* is overseen by a different drag artist – typically a seasoned and well-respected former contestant who is now part of Crews and Tangos' regular stable of performers. In 2017, the competition was overseen by Xtacy Love, who won *CTDR* in 2013. *CTDR*'s host makes a number of executive decisions about the competition, from choosing weekly themes to dictating guidelines about who can enter. When Xtacy took the reins, they made a controversial decision: opening the competition up to all types of drag performers and people of all genders. The move allowed AFAB queens to compete in *CTDR* for the first time. As I document in "Hyper Queens," a paper that has greatly informed this section of research, prior to 2017 *CTDR* had turned AFAB performers away – as *RPDR* still does (Willard). While many in the community praised Love's inclusivity, the performer also received considerable backlash over their efforts to progress beyond so-called traditional drag. Reflecting on the decision in a 2019 Facebook post, Love writes:

> The amount of HATE messages I got when I opened up #CrewsAndTangosDragRace to all forms of drag with the support of #CrewsAndTangos was staggering and overwhelming and it continued the entire season that I ran it. I had many breakdowns over it to be entirely honest (Love)

As I document at length in "Hyper Queens," the view that cis gay male drag queens originated drag in the absence of women is ahistorical. Beyond serving as muse, women have actively participated in cultivating drag culture from the inside for nearly 150 years. The burlesque troupe The British Blondes, formed in the 1860s, for example, performed in both masculine and feminine garb (Dodds 77). Beyond similarities in style and a symbiotic relationship of influence, some woman burlesque performers even consider themselves "female drag queens" (Lynn 16). Cisgender women have been part of drag culture in drag's contemporary era too, both as drag queens and kings, but their contributions to drag culture have often been pushed to the sidelines.

The sub-category of performer I am referring to specifically as AFAB queens, who self-define as drag queens and work primarily in queer venues, have a more modern history. In *Mother Camp*, Esther Newton documents how an AFAB drag queen, Joan Van Ness, won a prominent drag competition in New York State in the 1960s, though they note many in the community did not think Van Ness should be classified as a drag queen due to their gender identity (172). *Mother Camp* was, of course, written prior to the explosion of language used to describe cisgender women in drag (in "Hyper Queens," I discuss 12 different terms for this category of drag performer) and no term was used to describe Van Ness' specific identity as a woman drag queen. As I note in "Hyper Queens," most AFAB queens would prefer to be referred to as simply "drag queens" like their cis male peers. I am using specific terminology here to highlight the particular challenges AFAB queens face in the Toronto scene. It should additionally be noted the term AFAB is often used to describe drag kings and other gender

performers as well, but in this instance I am specifically considering the AFAB queen. AFAB queens began claiming space in drag culture in new ways in the 1990s, most notably in San Francisco and New York. In San Francisco, a group of performers created a pageant specifically for AFAB queens "to promote inclusivity for cis female performers in their community" (Coull 67). To my knowledge, AFAB performers who self-define as drag queens did not make up a sizable portion of the Toronto drag scenes until the 2010s, though more historical research is needed on the topic. No Canadian AFAB queens were mentioned in the scholarship I read on the topic (Coull; Devitt; Heller; Kumbier; Rupp et al.; Taylor), nor did searches yield any relevant results in the digital archive of Toronto's queer press *The Body Politic*. While there may be a history of Canadian AFAB queens beyond the reach of this current research, my time in the field has demonstrated that the role of AFAB drag performers in the community – both AFAB queens and kings – is one of the prevailing sociocultural debates within the Toronto drag scene.

Only one of the research participants I interviewed for this thesis disclosed their identity as an AFAB person and it is my understanding the other participants are AMAB (assigned male at birth). At least three other AFAB queens have been featured as part of the cast of *CTDR* in the past three years. Each research participant for this study is well-versed in the arguments for and against the inclusion of AFAB queens in the local drag community; it is clearly a topic they have all previously discussed at length. Outside of the research group, I have additionally observed the topic be hotly debated within queer circles on social media, in person at drag shows, and in both the queer and mainstream popular press.

The research participants uniformly agree no 2018 *CTDR* contestants expressed any concerns with AFAB queens participating in the competition. The one AFAB queen who participated in this study, Tash Riot, says they felt supported by their fellow contestants: "No one

else in the competition that I was competing against had an issue with [my gender]. They've had my back." Riot adds they were welcomed by Crews and Tangos' management and the performer in charge of the 2018 competition, Carlotta Carlisle. Riot has also been hired to perform at Crews and Tangos following the competition. While Riot identifies their *CTDR* experience as positive, the majority of participants state they believe AFAB contestants in *CTDR* face additional challenges cis-male contestants do not face.

For example, while performers of all genders are embraced by *CTDR*, the audience is not always as welcoming. Several participants report having had to educate friends and audience members about AFAB drag artistry. Participant Selena Vyle explains: "We'd hear whispers, when we were standing in the audience, like, 'Why is she in the competition? She's a real woman. It's not fair.'" Such is a common criticism leveled against AFAB queens: since they are raised as women, the thinking goes, it requires less effort to transform into a drag queen. I disagree with this characterisation; to quote Simone de Beauvoir, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (301). This applies to socialisation, but also the physical presentation of femininity. To be a drag queen is to present an exaggeration of day-to-day femininity: to crystallise feminine social codes of body, style, and dress, and hold them up via performance for celebration, commentary, or ridicule. In the tenth anniversary edition of *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler clarifies their famous argument about drag and artifice of gender, writing:

> If one thinks that one sees a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then one takes the first term of each of those perceptions as the 'reality' of gender: the gender that is introduced through the simile lacks 'reality,' and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance. (24)

Butler is using drag here to show that gender is a social construct that is naturalised via a series of cultural inferences about masculinity and femininity. I argue that AFAB drag offers the same

revelation, albeit from a different vantage point. At a drag show, audience members understand what's happening on stage to be exaggeration or artifice and expect, by and large, for the drag queens they see to be men presenting femininity. When an AFAB queen uses the same signifiers, the audience may assume they are a man dressed up as a woman. That they are not, I argue, is further evidence that gender is a social construct; the AFAB queen is defined as a woman not by the costume they put on to perform, but by the identity they claim off stage. Participant Barbra Bardot explains the issue in another way:

> I've heard people say: 'Oh, it's easier for [AFAB queens]. They've been doing makeup their whole lives, their bodies are the shape of their bodies.' But none of that is true. They haven't been doing *drag* makeup their whole lives…I don't think that they're at an advantage and I think they're fighting more barriers than [cis gay male drag queens] to get places. I welcome them being in a competition because being on stage gives them the exposure and it helps open up a conversation.

Riot is vocal about the treatment of AFAB queens on social media and in our interview, but they have also developed a thick skin and an ability to disengage with non-productive conversations about gender and drag. Riot offers this anecdote as an example of a performance at which an audience member took issue with their gender:

> I was on stage, I was paid, I had a great night, I had a really good audience response, it was busy, it was awesome. The next day I found out…there was a guy making comments at the back of the bar. My friends overheard and confronted him about it. That's the reality – most of the time I actually don't know. I forget, because I very much come from a place where I'm doing the thing, I have my space and I'm claiming it and rock on…The fact my gender comes into it is a fucked thing but people are always going to talk. You put yourself on stage, you put yourself up there, of course people are going to do that. I'm at a place where I'm choosing to be like: 'Well, I'll brush that off.'

Riot articulates how the treatment of AFAB queens is part of the wider, systemic problem of cis male dominance within many queer spaces:

> I think the Village in Toronto is very male-centric. I can only speak from my experience. I think being one of a small number of AFAB queens – but also just being out of drag, going into that [environment] as a female, I think that's a difficult thing.

To understand the gendered politics of the Toronto drag scene, it is crucial to consider that over the past 10 years, Toronto has seen a steep decline in public spaces catering to queer women. A documentary short released by *Xtra* in 2018 notes how economic conditions in Toronto created a gendered divide in queer nightlife; as a result of socioeconomic factors such as the gender pay gap, queer women have less disposable income than their male peers, are less likely to own commercial properties, and are more likely to be squeezed out of spaces by gentrification (Wei). The most popular venues for drag in the Village cater to and are most commonly frequented by gay men. By quota alone, this audience has a disproportionately high level of male privilege, which can create a toxic environment for women and AFAB people. As Riot explains:

> A lot of queens in the scene, we want to make it more inclusive, but…it's a difficult thing to try to change because, how do you get those people to come back out when they think the Village is a cis male-centric place? Why would they want to go there if they don't have a place there? One of my biggest goals is definitely to come in there and try reclaiming space for more people within the gay community, because it's not just about them. I know a lot of other queens who are very passionate about that. It's a difficult thing to change.

Beyond the local scene, there is also the influence of global drag culture, as dictated by *RPDR*. I argue that *RPDR*'s exclusion of AFAB drag artists works to invalidate the contributions of AFAB performers in local drag scenes and drag culture at large. This is opinion shared by some

of my research participants, one of whom specifically states they believe *CTDR*'s prior gender-specific format was a direct result of *RPDR*. As drag's dominant system articulation, *RPDR* has a large influence on the public's view of what drag is and, more specifically, has reinforced the idea that drag is one thing – a cisgender male performing femininity.

Over the past 10 years, *RPDR* has showcased the talents of more than 150 drag artists, but has not given a spotlight to a single AFAB performer. RuPaul has also made controversial statements about how the impact of drag is lessened when it is done by anyone who is not a man. Speaking to the *Guardian* in March 2018, the *RPDR* host says, "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" (Aitkenhead). In this instance, RuPaul is missing what's clear to many observers of drag: feminine drag done by women is a big f-you to male-dominated *drag* culture. This type of commentary from RuPaul, paired with the exclusion of AFAB queens from *RPDR*, reifies pre-existing beliefs that drag is the sole domain of cisgender men performing femininity and works against the efforts of artists like Riot who are pushing for inclusivity in local scenes such as Toronto's.

As I have noted briefly, gender-specific formats in drag competitions (televised or otherwise) frequently exclude several other categories of performers beyond AFAB queens. Drag kings, trans queens, and other drag performers whose identities and personas do not neatly fit into the category of cis gay men performing femininity are likewise sidelined by the gender format favoured by *RPDR*. The series has featured many trans and non-binary performers, but prior to 2018, they were presented as men on the show when out of drag. RuPaul faced severe backlash for comments about not featuring pre-operative trans women during the aforementioned *Guardian* interview. Following that scandal, the show changed course and showcased trans

alumnae Sonique and Gia Gunn in the *RuPaul's Drag Race Holi-slay Spectacular* and *RPDR All Stars* in 2018.

In my research, I spoke about gender at length with each participant, but did not ask them specifically about their gender identity. Some participants offered information about their identity and in each of those cases, the participant stated they are cisgender. I am unaware of any 2018 *CTDR* cast member that identifies as transgender. Due to the gender makeup of this group (cis male and cis female drag queens), I have chosen to focus on the impact the gender-specific format has on AFAB queens rather than drag kings or trans queens. As cisgender people, there are obvious limitations to how this group can speak about the trans experience. At the same time, they express a range of opinions on how the Toronto drag scene treats trans performers in their interviews. While some participants note many of the pillars of the community are trans drag queens, others also state they have observed instances of outright transphobia and believe it is harder to find work as a trans performer than as a cis performer. On the topic of *RPDR*'s treatment of trans queens, the group is unanimous in their disapproval. Silencia in particular sets RuPaul's comments into the context of *RPDR* as a global system of articulation:

> On a certain level, it's like: it's only disappointing because *Drag Race* is apparently, like, the ambassador to the rest of the world on behalf of drag. If it were a bar, we'd just be like: 'You know what? Fuck you and your bar. You don't want to allow trans contestants? Fine, we'll take our business somewhere else.' It's frustrating because it's the ubiquitous ambassador on behalf of drag.

I have likewise only briefly discussed drag kings because only one king auditioned for *CTDR* in 2018 and they did not progress to the top 12 and were thus not considered as part of the research group. In 2019, multiple kings auditioned and one, Alexandher Brandy, was included as part of the cast. As noted in Chapter Four, there has been an influx of drag kings in the Toronto drag

scene in recent years and I believe this is a topic worthy of its own unique scholarship, which is one direction my research may take in the future.

Finally, it worth noting the gender politics discussed above are not unique to either *CTDR* or *RPDR*. Rather, they are part of a wider drag landscape with a long history. Drag competitions in many eras and locales have strictly policed gender (see, for example, Schacht 2002) and though *CTDR* has opened its doors to performers of all genders, not all Toronto drag competitions have followed suit. During my digital ethnography in 2018, I discovered the annual *Queen of Halloween* drag competition at the Toronto gay bar Woody's had barred AFAB queens. One participant noted the stance also applies to another Woody's competition for comedy queens. While some in the community have vocally opposed the policy, it was upheld in 2019. AFAB performers and their allies in the scene have channeled their frustrations with Woody's into art and action. In 2018, a rival Halloween competition, *Night of The Living Femmes*, was launched. In 2019, the competition, which is open to all drag artists, was rebranded *Night of The Living Queers*. During the week of *Queen of Halloween* 2019, a local performer also staged a protest performance just down the street from Woody's at another drag venue, The Drink. During the performance, they held up a paper that said "Queen of Halloween application" then ripped it in half, all while lip syncing to a pointed song choice, No Doubt's 1995 feminist pop hit "Just a Girl." This highly visible, vocal reaction to gender exclusion in the scene is indicative of the progress the local drag community has made in its attempts to open drag stages and spaces up to performers of all genders. While there is certainly still misogyny in the community, I assert gender inclusivity is one area in which the Toronto scene is pushing drag culture forward at a time in which the *RPDR*-led global culture remains stuck in a fictive past in which drag is solely the domain of AMAB artists performing femininity.

4. Race and ethnicity

During the aforementioned digital ethnography of *CTDR* 2018, I found ethnicity, race, and racism to be among the most-discussed topics in social media posts published by the 2018 *CTDR* cast – the majority of whom would later become the participant group for this study. It was clear to me at that time that the intersection of race and drag was top of mind for Toronto drag performers. However, in conversation with the research participants, I found race and, more specifically, racism to be one of the most difficult topics to broach. Several of the contestants reported they do not see racism as a pervasive problem in the Toronto drag scene, and none of the contestants volunteered anecdotes about instances of overt racism during *CTDR* or within the Toronto drag scene at large. It should be noted here that while I did not ask participants specifically about their race or ethnicity, during the interviews several participants spoke candidly about their experiences, so I did glean some information about the racial makeup of this group. According to one research participant, *CTDR*'s 2018 cast is one-third BIPOC and two-thirds white. From my interviews and time in the field at *CTDR*, I believe this to be accurate.

There are a number of reasons participants may shy away from speaking about racism in the local scene, but it is certainly not my conclusion that the local drag scene is a post-racist utopia. My highly visible identity as a white settler may contribute to reluctance amongst the participants to discuss racism – especially BIPOC participants. Racism is also a highly contentious topic and speaking out about it could have a material impact on the participants. While drag is very popular in Toronto, there are still a limited number of promoters. Identifying a particular venue, promoter, or performer as racist could potentially result in losing work. More than one of the white participants also declined to speak to the topics of race and racism, stating

they would rather allow BIPOC performers speak to their experiences.

On a much wider scale, there is significant research demonstrating racism is prevalent in queer communities across Canada, reflecting the broad culture of systemic racism in mainstream Canadian culture (Giwa and Greensmith 150, 151). There is also ample scholarly evidence that racism is a part of daily life for BIPOC queers in Toronto (e.g. Giwa and Greensmith; Patel; Logie and Rwigema). Carmen H. Logie and Marie-Jolie Rwigema's study of perceptions of white privilege among lesbian, bisexual, and queer (LBQ) women of color in Toronto, for example, finds that LBQ women "experienced intersectional stigma on a daily basis" (178) and that the racism they face often presents more challenges than their experiences with homophobia (179). Sonali Patel's study of queer south asian women in Toronto's LGBTQ+ community likewise finds ample evidence of racism, particularly within queer nightlife:

> All the participants expressed dissatisfaction with the hegemonic Whiteness ingrained in Toronto's LGBTQ community…these feelings of disconnect were widely experienced by participants. Toronto's Gay Village, gay bars, and Pride Toronto events were highly criticized for being dominated by White cisgender men. (410)

One participant in Patel's study even names Crews and Tangos specifically as a place in which they felt uncomfortable as a south asian person (418).

On the topic of race and racism in Toronto's drag scene, it is also necessary to consider the community history produced by Aemilius "Milo" Ramirez's chapter in the book *Marvellous Grounds: Queer of Colour Histories of Toronto*. In the chapter, Ramirez recounts their years working as a drag king in Toronto's Gay Village in the mid-2000s. Ramirez characterises the drag scene as incredibly white at the time, writing, "If you were not white and you were performing on Church Street, chances were high that you were catering to the mainstream gay, predominantly white audience looking for a laugh" (71). Ramirez adds that many shows at the

time contained messages of racism, misogyny, transphobia, ableism, and classism (71). They further contend blackface was a prominent and regular part of drag shows in Toronto in the 2000s and even into the early 2010s (72). Ramirez was a once a regular performer at Crews and Tangos in particular and in the chapter they recount the club's ban on hip-hop, reggae, soca, and reggaeton in 2005. Ramirez recounts that "Upper management had stated that these music genres had been bringing in the 'wrong clientele'" (73). This led to Ramirez leading a walk-out in protest of the policy:

> At the end of the night I got on the mic and I told the crowd exactly what enacting this new policy meant, banning genres of music that are connected to BIPOC communities is racist, pushing out clientele based on their income or lack thereof is classist, and we were not going to put up with it. At one point the staff shut off my mic, so I raised my voice to reach the whole room full of people, I jumped off the stage and led everyone out of the venue. There must have been about fifty to sixty of us; we all left with high energy. (74)

The policy was immediately dropped following the protest (76). I have witnessed Crews and Tangos to have a strong relationship with many BIPOC performers in recent years and the BIPOC research participants reported no negative experiences with *CTDR*, but this chapter in the venue's history is vital to consider in attempting to understand the racial politics of Crews and Tangos and the Toronto drag scene at large.

One topic related to racism the participants do not shy away from is the toxicity of the *RPDR* fandom. The participants unanimously agree the *RPDR* fandom has a major racism problem. Racism in the *RPDR* fan base has been a perennial topic on fan message boards and in the media over the past few years. Season eight winner Bob the Drag Queen, for instance, has pointed out that the most popular *RPDR* contestants on social media share two qualities: they are white and thin (Henry). At the time they made this observation, six *RPDR* queens had garnered

more than one million followers on Instagram and each of them was white. The only BIPOC queen to reach more than one million followers on Instagram at that point was RuPaul themselves. Research participant Harmony links drag audiences' frequent preference for thin, white performers to wider Western ideals, which are reinforced by the beauty pageant-style format shared by *RPDR* and *CTDR*. Harmony argues that drag is multicultural on the grassroots level, which leads to diverse casting on *RPDR*, but once the contestants arrive, they are filtered through the lens of reality television and the Western tradition of the beauty pageant.

> It's one of those interesting things where the show is innately multicultural because drag is multicultural and also so much of drag comes from POC communities. Then it's also, like, when you're putting so much of the show into a beauty pageant format, obviously our Westernized ideals of beauty are going to come into play and they're going to favour the white girls. They're going to favour the skinny people.

Participant Silencia also links racial problems in the drag world with class, noting that white aspiring drag artists often have more access to capital than their BIPOC peers:

> It's interesting when we talk about privilege, especially regarding generational wealth and generational privilege with regards to white people and POC across the board. When you look at whether [POC] have money to spend on costumes, on being a drag artist. You don't make money right off the bat. You need a certain amount of privilege to decide, 'I'm going to be a drag artist.'…With black queens, look at [*RPDR* contestant] Monique Heart making all of her costumes day after day and struggling because of it because she didn't have the money and the resources. You have to ask: Is that a generational wealth issue? Is that a privilege issue?

Many *RPDR* alumnae, such Bebe Zahara Benet and Asia O'Hara, have been vocal about the racist vitriol they have received from fans on social media. O'Hara is one of several BIPOC *RPDR* contestants to receive death threats and Benet, the black winner of *RPDR* season one, has noted users flooded their social feeds with monkey emojis and racial slurs following their

appearance on *RPDR All Stars* season three (Monét X Change). Research participant Lucinda Miu asserts this is something they have frequently observed on social media:

> There are a lot of contestants, particularly black queens, from *RuPaul's Drag Race*, who experience a lot of awful comments on their Instagrams. Their successes are lesser than their white counterparts and their failures are even worse. I think that we all know how bad racism is in our day and age, but I feel like sometimes we have a misconception that as part of the LGBT+ community that we understand what it feels like to be oppressed and what it feels like to be harmed and unsafe so you would think that we wouldn't contribute to that but sadly we really, really do.

Miu's comments echo Patel's article on racism in Toronto's queer community, in which they point out the most privileged ranks of the community's failure to link their own struggles with oppression to the hardships faced by multi-oppressed subgroups under the LGBTQ+ umbrella:

> It may seem terribly ironic that members of the LGBTQ community, who of all people should know the evils of oppression, could perpetuate it against members of other opposed groups. Yet, based on the stories that were told and revealed in this article, such is the nature of racism that runs through the mainstream LGBTQ community in Toronto (177).

Though many of *RPDR*'s BIPOC contestants – and their white ally cast members – have spoken out about this toxicity, RuPaul has remained silent on the problem of racism within the *RPDR* fandom (Phillip). As the show's executive producer, RuPaul also dodged a question about inclusivity behind the camera on *RPDR* at the 2019 Emmy Awards. At the award show, *Essence* magazine challenged RuPaul on the lack of diversity on the senior staff of *RPDR* (Young). As RuPaul and their team celebrated their Outstanding Competition Reality Show win in the Emmys press room, the uniformity of the show's executive ranks could be seen clearly; RuPaul stood out

amongst a sea of white faces. Instead of addressing the question directly, RuPaul made a bizarre joke comparing the LGBT acronym to BLT sandwiches. As *Essence* reports:

> RuPaul responded—first, by interrupting, then, by cracking a cringe-worthy 'BLT' joke. 'I love myself some bacon, lettuce, tomato,' the icon said with a giggle. He then reiterated that he is a Black, gay man who is also a drag queen. 'Check, check and check,' he said as if checking off boxes on a diversity and inclusion survey. RuPaul then looked around the stage at the people who stood with him—as they looked around at each other, seemingly confused by the question—and proclaimed that there were 'lots of different types of people.' He then finished by glossing over his own struggles of reaching success and flopped an infamous quote from Miss Sophia (Oprah Winfrey) in *The Color Purple*: 'All my life I had to fight.' (Young)

RuPaul's failure to acknowledge the glaring whiteness of their production staff is indicative of their approach to the politics of race as a television creator. As I have previously written on the topic, "*Drag Race* is one of the most diverse shows on TV, but it rarely tackles how diversity functions within the four walls of its own workroom" (Monét X Change).

During a 2018 interview, *RPDR All Stars* winner Monét X Change offered this to me as a starting point for any conversation about race and *RPDR*:

> It's important to recognize that *RuPaul's Drag Race* is one of the most ethnically diverse competition reality shows ever. In season 10, eight of us were of colour. You have the five Black girls, Kalorie Karbdashion, Vanessa Mateo and Yuhua [Hamasaki]. You don't see that on *The Real World: Battle of the Seasons* (Monét X Change).

X Change is certainly correct on this point. It is also critical to note that *RPDR* has made stars out of many BIPOC drag artists, X Change included, and that the fact they have not been as well received by fans as their white peers is, in part, a product of wider systemic racism. X Change frames the issue of racism as one of wider visibility, noting that *RPDR* fans are not used to seeing people of colour on TV in general, positing the fan base for *RPDR* is different from, for

example, shows like *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* that feature predominantly black casts (X Change). *RPDR* has also had its share of BIPOC winners, including X Change, Zahara Benet, Bob the Drag Queen, Bianca Del Rio, Raja, Tyra Sanchez, and Yvie Oddly. By comparison, *Big Brother* has been on the air in the U.S. since 2001 and it was not until the second season of its celebrity edition in 2019 that a black contestant, reality TV veteran Tamar Braxton, won its grand prize. *RPDR* is more progressive than many of its counterparts in terms of celebrating BIPOC excellence on screen, but the show's treatment of race also raises some concerns.

*RPDR*'s framing of race cannot be separated from the way race is depicted on reality television at large. As Jay Clarkson argues, "the reality TV apparatus bears great responsibility for re-essentialising race" (2005). Elaborating on this point, Grace Wang explains that as a genre reality television "adheres to and authenticates racialised narratives and stereotyping by embodying them in the characters of 'real' people" (405). In other words, the framing of reality television suggests to its viewers that characters are in fact not characters at all, but real people, and any racialised narratives or stereotypes are in fact, not television tropes but authentic parts of a cast member's personality. Many other reality shows, including *RPDR* predecessor *America's Next Top Model*, have also been accused of employing racialised stereotypes and re-essentialising race (Bui and Strings 824).

In terms of *RPDR* specifically, a number of scholars (Bui and Strings; Hodes and Sandoval; McIntyre and Riggs; Zhang) have demonstrated how the show plays up racial stereotypes. Eric Zhang attests that, "*Drag Race*'s contestants of colour – Asian, Black, Latino and Native American alike – are often rewarded for incorporating racial stereotypes into their performance" (65). Zhang cites season three contestant Manila Luzon, a Filipino-American drag artist whose name pays homage to their mother's heritage, in particular for "appropriating Asian

stereotypes into her routine, underscoring her racialised body on stage" (65). Manila's presentation of race on the show, which includes switching Ls and Rs to create a stereotypical pan-Asian accent, is also called out by Hodes and Sandoval, who attest Manila "embodies a series of racist stereotypes that are presented as scenes of comedic relief" (158). McIntyre and Riggs likewise call out *RPDR*'s linguicism (61), defined by Robert Phillipson as "ideologies and structures where language is the means for affecting or maintaining an unequal allocation of power and resources" (514). McIntyre and Riggs contend there is an over-emphasis on the English language capabilities of Puerto Rican contestants, writing that, "the show's evocation of both linguistic imperialism and stereotypes based on assumptions about Puerto Rican culture perpetuate the exclusion of those from the global south" (61).

In Toronto, many of the most popular and respected drag performers are BIPOC, a point participant Harmony makes during our interview. Harmony underscores the impact racism within the *RPDR* fandom has had on drag audiences in Toronto, while also asserting that the influence is not strong enough to have kept Toronto's BIPOC performers from succeeding in the local scene:

> It has a larger impact on the audience. In Toronto, the thought leaders in the drag community are 90% POC. When you name the top five people who work regularly that come to your mind in Toronto drag, it's Sofonda Cox, Jada Hudson, Priyanka, Tynomi Banks and Baby Bel-Bel. [Baby Bel-Bel] is the only white queen out of all of them. I don't think that people who are doing drag are being negatively affected by the race issues on the show but I think the audiences are.

This was a topic that was hotly debated on social media during *CTDR* 2019. During the competition, one of the top three 2019 contestants, Halal Bae, presented a series of politically charged performances commenting on race, culture, and racial inequality. One week, for example, Bae wore a burka during their performance. Another week, they lip synced to the My

Chemical Romance song "Welcome To The Black Parade" after playing an audio news clip about Black Lives Matter's demonstration during the 2016 Toronto Pride parade. Then, just before the grand finale, one of Bae's posts on Instagram was the impetus for a debate about race, drag, and Toronto's Gay Village. Bae posted a grid of nine photos, eight of which featured a headshot of one of the *CTDR*'s previous winners, and a question mark in the bottom right corner of the grid (Bae). As users could see, all but one of the previous winners were white (or at least white presenting – I did not confirm each previous winner's ethnicity). In the caption, Bae wrote about what it would mean from them to *CTDR* as a BIPOC performer.

In the comment section of the now-deleted post, former *CTDR* contestant Priyanka took issue with the framing of Toronto's Gay Village as a scene that gives preferential treatment to white performers. Commenting in response to another social media user who suggests those who do not conform to a white aesthetic are thrust out of the Village, Priyanka writes, "I have two weekly shows at Crews and various weekly bookings at Woody's and I haven't be thrust out…You're calling my aesthetic white. You see how that can be seen right?" (Bae). The comment continues with a list of BIPOC performers who work regularly in the Village:

> I do agree that there needs to be more stages for booked performers of all kinds of drag entertainment but that's slowly getting better. But white queens booked more in Toronto over POC queens isn't necessarily true. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays at Crews and Tangos are hosted by colored queens and across the streets at Woodys Tuesdays, Thursdays, Friday, Saturday and Sundays are also hosted by colored queens. The audiences are dominated by 'white' people yes and LGBT PoC community members need to be celebrated more and included more but when it comes to performers with Jada Devine Sofonda Tynomi Me Vitality there is representation on the stages I mentioned above. (Bae)

Clearly BIPOC artists in Toronto have varying opinions about race and racism in the local scene. In the field, I have observed the same thing as Priyanka and Harmony: there are

many BIPOC performers working regularly and succeeding on a local level. However, performances like Halal Bae's "Black Parade" number that use drag to overtly comment on racial inequality are also, in my experience, not common in the local scene. It will be interesting to see how this conversation about race and representation develops once *Canada's Drag Race* hits the airwaves. There are some thematic similarities between the conversations about race and racism in *RPDR* and its fandom and in the Toronto drag scene, but they are two very distinct conversations.

As demonstrated in this chapter, BIPOC queers have reported varied experiences in the Toronto drag scene, ranging from feeling outcast and discriminated against to being embraced and celebrated. I have also shown there is very clear evidence of racism in the *RPDR* fandom and ample scholarly evidence demonstrating how racial stereotypes are deployed on the show. In comparison to gender, I have observed fewer lines of influence between *RPDR* and the Toronto drag scene on the axis points of race, ethnicity, and racism. This may the result of strong networks of BIPOC performers on the local level, other local cultural factors, or the racial makeup of the city itself – according to the most recent published census, more than half of Torontonians identify as visible minorities (Whalen). It also may be due to the fact that racial tension on the show is often more covert than the very obvious lack, for example, of drag kings and AFAB performers on *RPDR*. Whatever the combination of factors, it is clear, as I have demonstrated, that the problems relating to race and racism facing the local scene differ to those facing *RPDR* and its fandom. While *RPDR* has great powers of influence on drag fashion, makeup, and performance, there are limitations to its influence on other sociocultural axis points, especially in the case of Toronto, the axis points of ethnicity, race, and racism.

## 5. Looking forward

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that *RPDR* has had a great impact on the Toronto drag scene in terms of commerciality and the scene's social culture. *RPDR*-driven global drag culture has introduced a new economic system for drag culture, such as the introduction of talent managers and large-scale public relations efforts. This commercially-minded system for global drag culture has had a trickle-down effect on local drag scenes such as Toronto, as this chapter establishes, producing both positive and negative effects. This chapter additionally demonstrated *RPDR* has impacted the way gender and race are negotiated in the Toronto drag scene. While *RPDR* is a powerful force in drag culture, this chapter also entails the ways in which local scenes such as Toronto's can respond to and resist global drag culture. This is a two-way dialogue between global and local cultures in which ideas and trends travel along lines of influence and the two cultures ultimately influence one and other to varying degrees. In the concluding chapter I note the limitations of this thesis, state possible routes for future research on both the Toronto drag scene and the relationship between the scene and *RPDR*.

## Chapter Seven: Conclusion

In this ethnographic study of the Toronto drag scene, I set out to answer three research questions: 1) How does *RPDR* influence the Toronto drag scene? 2) What are the prevailing sociocultural concerns at play in the Toronto drag scene? and 3) How do those concerns compare to and interact with sociocultural concerns seen on screen on *RPDR* and within the *RPDR* fandom? In the preceding chapters, I have answered each of these questions in detail, drawing from interviews with nine research participants and my experiences during a year and a half in the field as an ethnographer. As stated in Chapter One, the analysis in this thesis has also been informed by my perspective as a scholar-fan and by my fan experiences in the *RPDR* fandom and wider drag world. I drew on fan knowledge at many points during the research process, including during my interviews.

This thesis demonstrates *RPDR*'s profound impact on the Toronto drag scene in a number of ways. The most apparent impact the show has had is that it has ushered in a new era of heightened visibility and marketability for the art form of drag. This increase in popularity in Toronto specifically has been illustrated in several ways in the preceding chapters, including the number of *RPDR* viewing parties drag artists host in Toronto and the new types of spaces that drag artists are being invited into, such as public libraries, a phenomenon I explore in Chapter Five. The research participants unanimously agree *RPDR* has drastically increased the popularity of drag in Toronto and cite a variety of examples drawn from their experiences as professionals working in the scene as evidence, such as the rise of drag shows in smaller cities and rural areas.

The show's impact on the scene can been observed both visually through trends in makeup and style of dress and sonically as songs showcased on the show make their way into the repertoire of local drag performers, phenomena explored at length in Chapter Five. The show's

most powerful influence on grassroots drag scenes such as Toronto's and, I argue, what is likely to be its lasting legacy, is the generation of fans it has inspired to become drag artists themselves; a group referred to in this thesis as the drag baby boom (Crookston 62). As previously asserted, this development can be read as an extreme example of the show's participatory fan culture.

Though I have demonstrated evidence of *RPDR*'s links to the drag baby boom, this thesis has also shown that the path to becoming a drag artist is not linear and *RPDR* is not the only influence along the way. *RPDR* was the entry point to drag culture for almost all of the research participants, but each participant's artistic practice was also informed by their local scene. In some instances, participants learned the ropes and local traditions from a drag mother, a community-based method of sharing knowledge that has been part of drag culture for decades (Crookston 55). *RPDR* is an omnipresent force at *CTDR* and within the wider drag scene – it is always a part of audience chatter and, as I have argued, informs how *RPDR* fans in the audience understand the cultural meaning of performances within their local scene, including performances during *CTDR*. The show's influence is not, however, a one-way dialogue. Instead, trends, performance styles, and ideas travel back and forth between local drag culture – in this case, Toronto – and global drag culture – which is, in this case, dominated by *RPDR*. As I outline in Chapter Four, this conversation can be understood using Will Straw' theorisation on scenes. In this thesis, I have posited that there is a symbiotic relationship between local drag culture in Toronto and *RPDR*-led global drag culture that is comparable to the relationship exposed in "Systems" between the local music scene in Montreal in the late early 1990s and the international music scene at the time. This local-global relationship in drag culture can be seen on an aesthetic level through makeup trends, as previously noted. I have also demonstrated the capacity for local scenes to respond to, resist, and even inform the ideologies of *RPDR*.

The second research question I set out to answer in this thesis addresses the prevailing sociocultural concerns at play in the Toronto drag scene. The consideration of each of these sociocultural themes prompts a more complex discussion of the relationship between *RPDR* and the Toronto drag scene – my third research question, how the sociocultural concerns in the Toronto drag scene relate to and interact with the sociocultural concerns seen on *RPDR* and within the *RPDR* fandom. In unpacking the sociocultural concerns at hand in the Toronto drag scene, it is vital, I argue, that we consider the role of *RPDR* in defining the parameters of what drag is, what it looks like, and who is welcome in drag communities. As a system of articulation, *RPDR* has influenced how audiences view each of these concerns, but in the case of drag under capitalism and neoliberalism, it has also altered the fabric of drag culture by creating a capital-driven infrastructure within the drag world.

The matter of how race is depicted on *RPDR* – and how race plays into the politics of the Toronto drag scene – is perhaps the most complicated of the sociocultural topics I tackle in this thesis. Of all the subjects raised with the research participants, it is the one they are most reluctant to discuss (as I suggest in Chapter Six, this may be in part due to my whiteness). This group generally agrees on most of the topics raised in our interviews, but the subject of race divides them. Some participants acknowledge that white privilege comes into play in the Toronto drag scene, but others do not think racism is a problem in the scene – and cite the success of a list of successful BIPOC drag performers in Toronto, who indeed dominate the local market, as proof.

The one race-related question all of the participants agree on is about *RPDR* fans; they all contend there is racism in the *RPDR* fandom. This presents an interesting question not fully answered by this research: If 1) *RPDR* has such a strong influence in the Toronto drag scene

(which I argue it does) and 2) There is a great deal of racism in the *RPDR* fandom (which the participants argue there is), how have so many BIPOC performers come to dominate the local scene in Toronto? Answering this question would require additional research and, perhaps, a different researcher. While I pushed myself to contend with problems relating to race and racism in this thesis, I also wonder how the research participants might have responded to the same questions posed by a BIPOC researcher (or if, perhaps, a BIPOC researcher would have asked different questions). This is not to say the participants were deceiving me in any way, simply that some – especially those who are BIPOC – may have felt more comfortable talking about racism with a non-white interviewer. I am also curious what things a BIPOC researcher in my role may have seen that I missed. In Chapter Six I cite a number of BIPOC scholars who have contended with racism and linguicism on *RPDR*. I would be interested what BIPOC scholars might say about the Toronto scene – or other grassroots scenes – if they considered it using the framework I have applied in this thesis. This is one of several research routes I could potentially pursue in the future given the right collaborator.

I believe this thesis has contributed to scholarship on drag and to fandom studies in a number of ways. As noted in Chapter One, there is a growing body of scholarship on *RDPR*, but very little research into how the show has influenced and impacted local drag scenes. I believe this to be the first academic study to specifically consider the relationship between *RPDR* and the Toronto drag scene. There is likewise a lot of academic work on *RPDR*, but very little on the show's massive fan culture and in that regard, this thesis contributes to fandom studies. Finally, this thesis represents a queer contribution to the study of Canadian popular culture and more specifically to the history and culture of Toronto's queer community.

There are a number of limitations to the findings of this thesis. The first is the hyper-locality of the ethnography, both in that it is limited to Toronto and it is focused on *CTDR*. An ethnography focused on a different drag competition in Toronto – say, the pageant-style *Miss El Convento Rico Pageant* or *Empire's Ball*, which is focused on inclusivity – might have produced drastically different results. I believe that some of my findings about the lines of influence between *RPDR* and the Toronto drag scene would be similar to the relationship between *RPDR* and other scenes. For example, when researching AFAB queening for the paper "Hyper Queens," I learned there were similarities between the role of AFAB queens in Toronto and other their role in the scenes of other cities such as San Francisco and New York. However, it cannot be assumed that the findings are necessarily indicative of what's happening in scenes in other cities. In this thesis, I have explored the unique history of Toronto's drag scene; each city's scene has its own unique history and thus will interact with *RPDR*-led global drag culture in its own ways. I am especially curious about how *RPDR* has impacted drag scenes in America; many cities are home to a handful or more performers from *RPDR* and their presence has no doubt changed the local drag culture.

In designing this research project, I allowed the research participants to guide the route of my ethnography. Thus, while I believe the sociocultural concerns are representative of larger conversations happening in Toronto's drag scene, the degree to which I focus on them is the result of the identities and concerns of this group. For example, I focused on AFAB queens in part because their role in the scene was a heavily debated topic I was aware of going into this project, but without Tash Riot's contributions as a research participant, I would not have been able to explore the topic in detail or consider it from the perspective of Riot's lived experience.

This approach has meant other topics worthy of discussion and their own unique scholarship were only considered in brief. I did not, for instance, have much data relating to the experience of transgender artists (my participants are, to my knowledge, an entirely cisgender group) in Toronto and therefore was limited in how I could approach it under the constraints of this project as outlined in Chapter One. Another limitation of the research group is age; this group is primarily Gen Z and Toronto-based drag artists of other ages, such older performers who were part of the scene prior to *RDPR*, would likely have a different perspective on the topics broached by this thesis. I was similarly limited by the experience level of the research group as *CTDR* attracts newer performers. The lived experiences examined in this thesis are those of performers who have been practicing the art form of drag for just a few years and those with more experience in the field would have different insights; indeed, this group would likely even have different experiences to share now, one year after my first interviews with them.

One of the areas covered briefly in this thesis that is especially worthy of its own unique scholarship is the role of drag kings and gender performers in the Toronto scene. The latter term is one I have observed to be popular in Toronto, though not unique to the city, used to describe drag performers whose gender performance is not necessarily primarily masculine or primarily feminine (Lime). As stated in Chapter Four, there has been a growth of new performers in the drag king community. In compiling a literature review for this thesis, I found a great deal of scholarship about drag queens, but comparatively little about drag kings. The same was true in Canada's queer archives; I found many documents outlining the history of drag queens in the city, but comparatively few documents focused on drag kings. The drag king community in Toronto is also, in my experience, made up of far more AFAB people than the drag queen community, which raises interesting and pressing questions about privilege and occupying space

in the drag and overall queer community. It has been my observation that a handful of kings have been working to take up more space in Toronto's Gay Village and I see a need for documentation and analysis of their work.

Finally, the Toronto drag scene will transform once again very soon, when *Canada's Drag Race* makes its debut. In June 2019, the Canadian media company Bell Media (a subsidiary of the telecommunications company Bell Canada Enterprises) announced that it had acquired the rights to produce a Canadian iteration of *Drag Race* that will be aired on OutTV and available via the streaming service Crave (Queens of the North). Canada's Drag Race was announced, cast, and filmed during the research period. In this thesis, I am considering *RPDR* as a predominantly external force in the Toronto scene, but it will soon be a much more local influence as well. The final draft of this thesis was completed one month prior to the show's debut in early July 2020. In the lead up to *Canada's Drag Race*, I spoke to my research participants about how the show will change the Toronto drag scene and given the topic considerable thought. Any suggestion is purely speculative at this point, but there is some evidence in this thesis that may be predictive. It is likely, in my view, that the show will continue to push drag into Canada's cultural mainstream. *RPDR* has a large media footprint, but having Canadian contestants backed by Bell Media's PR team will give additional media visibility to the art form – and especially to Canadian drag talent.

There will likely also be an audience appetite for *Canada's Drag Race* contestants to perform live in cities across the country.[4] As previously detailed, *RPDR* stars command large booking fees; I am curious whether *Canada's Drag Race* alumnae will pull in similar earnings for live performances. It has not been announced whether the show will air in other countries yet,

[4] At this time, Toronto drag shows are mainly happening online due to COVID-19. It remains unclear when drag shows in bars and other venues will return.

so there may be a locality to the fame and opportunities afforded to the contestants. It is my prediction that the stars of *Canada's Drag Race* will instantly earn an increase in social capital in their home drag scenes, including the Toronto drag scene. This is, in my view, both positive and negative. It is positive for the *Canada's Drag Race* contestants, but I see a potentially negative impact for drag performers who do not fit into the *RPDR* vision of drag. Could the fact the first cast of *Canada's Drag Race* is entirely made up of drag queens work against the work being done in the scene to foster and celebrate drag king talent? I argue it certainly could, and similar arguments could be made in respect to other aspects of identity seen through the show's framing, such as class and race. What is certain is that *Canada's Drag Race* will provide drag fans with plenty to devour, deconstruct, and discuss. The Toronto drag scene, as this thesis shows, is a diverse landscape of talented, fascinating artists and practices with a long, rich history. As drag continues its sashay into mainstream culture in Canada, the scene and its array of artists are standing centre stage, ready for their close-up.

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