

Hunter Hargraves

“You Better *Work*.” The Commodification of HIV in *RuPaul’s Drag Race*

In a 2010 episode of Comedy Central’s *South Park* in which the residents of South Park combat an army of New Jersey emigrants, a town hall meeting prominently displays a map of the United States in which a majority of the nation east of Colorado has become subsumed into New Jersey’s borders.¹ Through its intertextual references to programs such as MTV’s *Jersey Shore* and Bravo’s *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*, the *South Park* episode, in its typical parodic fashion, exaggerates stereotypical Italian-American culture – from gelled hair and grotesquely tanned skin to constant swearing and a short temperament – while constructing it as a threat to the nation’s cultural purity. One cannot escape, however, the episode’s underlying message: the real contaminant is not New Jersey, but rather the excess of reality TV.

The way in which the *South Park* episode characterizes reality television provides a provocative point of entry into how historical discourses of contamination and disease map onto the rhetorics of reality television, and vice versa. The excess of reality television, typified, for instance, by its capacity for manufacturing interpersonal drama (as in the case of *Jersey Shore*) or its assembling of “real” people from different geographic, ethnic, and ideological backgrounds (as in the case of the *Real Housewives* franchise) appears in one of the earliest examples of the genre, MTV’s *The Real World*. In its third season

(1994), set in San Francisco, these excesses quite literally manifest themselves in the controversy and media coverage of the season’s principle character, Pedro Zamora, who succumbed to HIV-related progressive multifocal leukoencephalitis the day after the season’s final episode aired. Zamora, arguably the first reality TV celebrity, unabashedly used the medium as a platform for educating the public about the experience of living with HIV. Bounded by these themes of excess, celebrity, and stereotype, the unusual confluence between reality television and discourses surrounding the HIV/AIDS epidemic continued into the competitive gamedoc sub-genre of reality programming in the early 2000s. HIV-positive contestants have since appeared on American and European television programs such as *Project Runway*, *Top Design*, and *Big Brother Germany*.

On Logo’s *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, Ongina, one of the program’s first season contestants, disclosed her positive serostatus upon winning the 2009 “MAC/Viva Glam Challenge,” in which the aspiring “dragtestants” shot short promotional screen tests for MAC makeup’s Viva Glam campaign benefitting the MAC HIV/AIDS Fund.² Ongina’s disclosure, which was accompanied by tears and support from her fellow contestants and the judging panel, allowed her to become a *cause célèbre* in the LGBT press; despite her shocking elimination in the following episode, her fifteen minutes of fame

extended into many appearances in online and print publications and media events, including as a “Celebrity Guest” in the 2009 San Francisco Pride Parade and appearances in promotional spots for *Drag Race* and in the program’s 2010 spinoff, *RuPaul’s Drag U*.

As a “campy queen” known for her personality and glamour, Ongina’s admission can be framed as destabilizing historical notions and media representations of the Person With AIDS (PWA). At the same time, however, Ongina’s disclosure on reality television revises how conventional media representations have depicted the PWA through a rationale of commodification. This essay attempts to trouble *Drag Race*’s staging of HIV and situates it in conversation with both its presentation of drag and its position within larger structures of reality television. What does it mean in 2010 to have former reality TV contestants as the celebrity “faces” of HIV in LGBT and HIV/AIDS communities? What implications does Ongina’s disclosure have on the genre of reality television itself and on its (and television’s overall) potential to educate specific (and perhaps marginalized) publics? How does *Drag Race*’s treatment of race inflect how it presents drag culture and the drag queen PWA? And how does the framework of reality television automatically construct and present the HIV-positive subject as simultaneously diseased and healthy, both castrated and constituted as an object of sexual desire?

Becoming-Queen

In an essay on Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener*, Gilles Deleuze revises a psychoanalytic theory of identification premised on Oedipal relationships, formulating a broader definition of identification that hints at a “becoming-community” of group citizenship. Imagining a community no longer governed by the paternal function – following Lacan, the institution of law and the subject’s entry into language and the symbolic – Deleuze calls for preserving individual identity as a requirement for departing from normal or “majoritarian” models of socialized identity. He writes: “If humanity can be saved, and the originals reconciled, it will only be through the dissolution or decomposition of the paternal function... To liberate man from the father

function, to give birth to the new man or the man without particularities, to reunite the original and humanity by constituting a society of brothers as a new universality.”³ As an extension of the processes of “becoming” developed in *A Thousand Plateaus*, this new method of identification appears to hint at an understanding of external subjectivity as key to the citizen; conceiving of an identity alongside his brothers and sisters, the subject moves from the outside of society to part of its normative core.⁴

This emphasis on identification as process, as *relation* can be found within the rich discourses of AIDS activism, as the epidemic placed blame on gay men’s sexual behavior. In demanding that gay men resist calls for reduced promiscuity, Douglas Crimp disputes the abandonment of radical politics for an identification with the larger public’s moralistic rebuke of homosexuality, an identification, he argues, that invokes Freud’s definition of melancholia:

Identification is, of course, identification with an other, which means that identity is never identical to itself. This alienation of identity from the self it constructs, which is a constant replay of a primary psychic self-alienation, does not mean simply that any proclamation of identity will be only partial, that it will be exceeded by other *aspects* of identity, but rather that identity is a relation, never simply a positivity.⁵

Like Deleuze, Crimp foregrounds identity as relational, leading a reformulation of identity politics as dependent upon a network of political, and not familial, identifications. Moreover, identification speaks to a construction of community outside of the dominant public sphere, in this case, those infected with HIV. This act of identification often requires a transformative moment to incite political action; upon being diagnosed with HIV, the subject identifies “with an other,” such as a larger community of HIV-positive individuals, and thus becomes politicized through these relations.

In the “MAC/Viva Glam Challenge,” Ongina’s disclosure represents this transformation from the filial to the fraternal, disrupting the conventional forms of identification present in



Ongina discloses

Drag Race. Prior to her moment of disclosure, Ongina, like her fellow dragtestants, remains in the shadow of drag icon RuPaul, the program's creator, host, and producer. Whether in full drag or in a chic suit, RuPaul curiously functions as both mother and father on the program, mentoring the contestants on how to be a better drag queen and instituting the "law" of the program as head of the judging panel that decides each episode's eliminee. Yet in disclosing her HIV status, Ongina disassociates herself from this parental diva, who although having appeared in numerous HIV and AIDS awareness campaigns has never publicly disclosed her HIV status.⁶ With her disclosure, Ongina can be a spokesperson for HIV awareness campaigns independent of RuPaul; she no longer appropriates RuPaul as a parental image but instead aligns herself with communities comprised of other HIV-positive individuals – her positive brethren, so to speak.

Indeed, in a post-series interview, she tied her future ambitions to "our community:" "I wanted to step out of the HIV closet to create awareness....I hope to continue to be the voice of our community and help in any which way I can."⁷

Disidentifactory Lip-synchs

Although not directly invoking Deleuze, José Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentification also articulates a view of identification present in minoritarian subjects divorced from definitive psychoanalytic readings. The emergence of disidentifactory performances, he argues, "is predicated on their ability to disidentify with

the mass public and instead, through this disidentification, contribute to the function of a counterpublic sphere."⁸ Claiming that psychoanalysis elides ideological prohibitions inherent to society (such as assumptions of and discrimination against subjects of minority ethnicity, social class, gender, and sexual orientation), he views subjects as containing the capacity to articulate multiple points of identity simultaneously, without subsuming one into another for the sake of normative assimilation. Disidentification thus "scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications."⁹ In a chapter on, fittingly, Pedro Zamora, disidentification becomes the means to a performance of queer, Latino, and HIV-positive identity, a performance that transforms Zamora into a "televisual activist," additionally notable for occurring within the corporate ethos of MTV.¹⁰

Of course, there are differences between Zamora and Ongina, the most obvious being that Ongina did not appear on *Drag Race* in order to specifically market a hybridized identity.¹¹ But Muñoz's theory of disidentification can be used to explore how *Drag Race* premises the contemporary American drag queen as *already* disidentified from middle- or upper-class white camp drag culture. "Drag had gone underground, and we are welcoming it back," RuPaul proclaimed in an interview on NBC's *Today Show* on the day of *Drag Race*'s premiere. "For people like Tyler Perry or Eddie Murphy or people who are straight and who dress up in drag, it's perfectly fine. But if you identify as gay, it's sort of been a not-so-open road."¹² The nod to Tyler Perry and Eddie Murphy recasts African Americans into socially normative histories of gender impersonation; RuPaul is "welcoming [drag] back" for audiences representative of and accountable to America's changed racial demographics.¹³ The program's loyalty to hip street culture (as marked, for instance, by a challenge choreographing a routine to a Destiny's Child song; a mini-challenge involving a runway vogue battle; and a challenge in which the final three must create a rap verse for RuPaul's new single) emphasizes what it is not: homage

to the whiter drag queens of yesteryear.¹⁴ Rather than creating “disidentificatory subject[s]” who tactically and simultaneously work on, with, and against a cultural form,” *Drag Race* premises 21st-century drag as inherently minoritarian.¹⁵

In many respects, this minoritarian position of *Drag Race* is what makes it so different from other LGBT programming; to quote a second season contestant, Pandora Boxx, “I think *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is amazing in the fact that there is a complete blend of races on the show.”¹⁶ This is, incidentally, not unique to the genre of reality television. As many television scholars have noted, following the 1992 Los Angeles race riots, network programming became more and more segregated, partly due to niche marketing from expanded cable channels and partly due to lingering racial tensions.¹⁷ Ron Becker, for example, maintains that the inclusion of gay and lesbian characters and storylines in prime-time programs such as *Will & Grace*, *Ellen*, *Friends*, and many others represents a strategy of narrowcasting on behalf of television executives, who streamlined gay and lesbian content into programs in an attempt to attract an “upscale, well-educated target demographic... ‘sophisticated’ and ‘hip’ with an ‘edgy’ sensibility.”¹⁸ Against network programming, however, reality television is curiously exempt from this pattern, with the racial diversity of each program’s cast generating interpersonal conflicts and moments of education about the experiences of people of color in late 20th-century America. In contrast to programs such as *Will & Grace*, *Queer as Folk*, and *The L Word*, *Drag Race’s* emphasis on casting drag queens of color, as well as its use of non-white cultural markers, signals a desire to reach new audiences, or at the very least rejects a narrowcasted demographic of white, affluent gay and lesbian audiences.

Despite this update, the program itself often views race through more conventional problematics. The racial identity of the first season’s eventual winner, Bebe Zahara Benet, lends itself to fetishization in the “MAC/Viva Glam Challenge.” The judges describe Bebe, a native of Cameroon living in Minneapolis, as having the “regal” presence of a Nubian (Drag) Queen. Instead of disidentifying with this characterization, however, Bebe strategically plays it up, donning a traditional



Bebe’s screentest

African costume for her screen test, which in Bebe’s words, “is how the women from where I come from would dress to celebrate.” Her screen test introduces HIV as a foreign epidemic, distanced from the healthy “First World,” including the United States: “I come from a faraway place, a place where HIV/AIDS is very rampant. That place, my home, is called Africa. Let us lend a helping hand. MAC/Viva Glam is doing it, I am doing it, can you do it?” Performing an ambassadorial role equally global as it is commercial, Bebe recalls Cindy Patton’s claim that “Western science today is slowly consolidating around a particular construction of ‘African AIDS,’ which elaborates on the colonialist mystifications of the past century.”¹⁹ The common assertion within the media, that AIDS became an African problem once anti-retroviral drugs were introduced to American PWAs in the mid-1990s, paints Africa not only as a singular, homogenized continent but also plays off of stereotypes and myths about African social norms.

Drag Race uses Bebe – and Bebe uses *Drag Race*, in the same way perhaps that Zamora uses *The Real World* – to educate, but also to delegitimize the American PWA through its distancing of HIV/AIDS from the United States. Bebe’s “Africanness,” played up through costume and notions of origin, makes her relationship to HIV appear more authentic and unrivaled by that of her fellow contestants, at least until Ongina’s disclosure at the end of the episode. As Gordon Espinet, MAC’s Vice President of Makeup Artistry and one of the episode’s guest judges, remarks during deliberation, “[Bebe’s] screen test was great...the fact that she’s African, she can speak from the heart, of living it,

YOU BETTER WORK

seeing it, being it.” Anchoring her nationality and ethnicity to an identity impacted by HIV, *Drag Race* constructs Bebe as a proxy for the PWA. In this context, *Drag Race* thus creates the paradoxical appearance of a PWA without HIV, collapsing the act of witnessing into the act of “living it” or “being it.”

Serving Commodity

If *Drag Race* puts forward a complicated subjectivity for the PWA, it does so under the structure of a competitive reality television program, which has its own logics of spectatorship and thematics of labor and surveillance. The term “work,” itself a prominent example of drag vernacular, captures one such rhetoric; in this sense, “work” occurs when a queen actively steals attention and acclaim from her visual presentation, performance, or attitude.²⁰ Nonetheless, the term can be thought of in relation to the general structure of gamedocs. Gamedocs such as *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, *Project Runway*, and *Top Chef* all rely on the talents of aspiring artistic professionals, from the wannabe designer to the wannabe chef. The viewer takes delight in watching these contestants attempt impossible feats of artistry in compressed amounts of time: creating a red-carpet gown in twelve hours, catering a meal for two hundred in four hours, and applying makeup in thirty minutes. These feats must be seen as both commodifiable (and so relevant to a wide public) and yet also personal (and so expressive of an individual).

Because the challenges on *Drag Race* are perhaps more diverse, the program ultimately produces the marketable commodity of the drag queen, with the potential for media proliferation. Perhaps reality television’s greatest contribution to popular culture is its transformation of the commonplace person into celebrity, famous for appearing on a program that glorifies his or her ordinary nature. As Laurie Ouellette and Susan Murray contend, this “celebrification of ‘average’ folk further complicates the contours of television fame and the way that its star personas have been constructed as existing in a space between the ordinary and the extraordinary.”²¹ *Drag Race* already plays off of this notion of celebrity; in a choice bit of televisual intertextuality, *Project*

Runway alumnus (and second season villain) Santino Rice sits on the judging panel, introduced by RuPaul as a “shameless and outspoken designer who’s no stranger to the runway.” Invoking Mark Andrejevic’s description of reality television as “literally and physically manufactur[ing] celebrity-grade humans,” the judging panel of *Drag Race* already recognizes its debt to the productive capacity of television.²² The goal of *Drag Race*, then, is to mold “America’s next drag superstar” as not merely a lip-synching performer, but as a personality constructed for the media as much as by the media. During the finale of the second season of *Drag Race*, for example, the top contestants of season one appeared in commercials for Absolut, relating personal anecdotes to a cocktail that embodies their personality. (Absolut, not coincidentally, is *Drag Race*’s preeminent sponsor, giving each season’s winner \$25,000).²³ Likewise, several contestants from *Drag Race* have been featured in music videos, which in and of themselves demonstrate the necessity of self-branding for performance; the spectacle of the music video is mapped onto the artist as a drag performance, a lip-synch of self-promotion.

Ongina’s own appearance in the Black Eyed Peas’s music video for 2009’s “I Gotta Feeling” circulates within this self-referential (and self-promoting) discourse, revealing the drag queen’s dependency on media commodities.²⁴ The video itself opens with members of the Black Eyed Peas getting ready to hit the town, with group star Fergie prancing around in lingerie and fishnets and applying makeup in front of a vanity table (not surprisingly, one can discern a MAC logo on the makeup, reinforcing intertextual commodity culture). The video features cameo appearances by several well-known celebrities, many of whom have either reality television or queer ties; while perhaps not earning the spotlight, the reality television celebrity makes for good background dancing. At one point in the music video, Ongina does a runway walk alongside a swimming pool, demonstrating her potential for *work*; just as she walks the runway in *Drag Race* before each judging panel, her value lies in her ability to merge the editorial culture of high-fashion with the drag queen’s function as party-starting performer.

While certainly *Drag Race* meshes the celebrity of the drag queen with numerous corporate sponsors, what is especially notable in the “MAC/Viva Glam Challenge” is how commodification extends throughout the episode to include HIV itself. Rather than reiterating perhaps expected commentaries on the commodification of AIDS that emerge in discussions of anti-retroviral medication and the role of major pharmaceutical corporations in research and development, *Drag Race* can be read as hollowing out HIV, erasing its claims to bodily violence and instead repackaging the epidemic as corporate goodwill.

Such connections between commodity culture and television are nothing new, even when theorizing the history of queer subjects on television. As Lynne Joyrich points out, “the logic of the commodity is already related to the logic of the closet,” and thus relations of consumer culture already inscribe queer disclosure.²⁵ Joyrich, using the example of how Ellen Morgan’s coming out on *Ellen* paralleled the media event of Ellen DeGeneres’s own coming out, maps the dual form of the commodity (its internal value mediated with the external social world) onto DeGeneres’s performative act of disclosing her queerness. Fusing Marx’s theories of the commodity form with Sedgwick’s “epistemology of the closet,” Joyrich identifies how television programs, responsible to their advertisers, manifest disclosure as a media event with spectacular value. In her own words, “Ellen too necessarily becomes through this process ‘a thing which transcends sensuousness,’ her homosexuality now an objectified and consumable – rather than simply erotic – form.”²⁶ Joyrich’s quote emphasizes television’s negation of the erotic; although sex does sell, gay sex (at least, in our current climate) does not, and so Ellen’s identity as lesbian must be renegotiated through a vocabulary of consumption.²⁷

Similarly, *Drag Race* negates the possibility of the drag queen being perceived as an erotic object. RuPaul teaches her contestants to be pretty and sexy, but not necessarily to “pass” as real biological women, as many transgender individuals elect (or feel compelled) to do. Instead, “passing” in *Drag Race* refers to passing as a performer, embracing the excess and extravagance as ideal forms of the art. The “Pit Crew” in *Drag Race* demonstrates

this shifting displacement of desire, as the often-shirtless hunks pose with the drag queens as objects of desire for the gay male spectator. The spectator can then lust (even if in different ways) after all parties involved, viewing the Pit Crew as *sexual* objects of desire and the drag queen as a *stylized* object of desire.

Case in point: at the beginning of the “MAC/Viva Glam Challenge,” RuPaul tells the contestants they will have “the chance to do one another,” provoking laughter and confusion from the worried contestants. “Now, I’m not talking ki-ki,” RuPaul explains, “you’re going to do each other’s makeup.” To emphasize the point, a handy graphic appears on the screen explaining this inside joke of drag: ki-ki is “when two drag queens have sex.” Thus *Drag Race* already forecloses the potential for romance, or even just sexual intercourse, between contestants, even though the contestants live with each other during taping. Unlike other competitive reality programs where sexual relations between contestants have a productive value in adding drama to the series, *Drag Race* castrates the drag queen of her sexual desire.

Fighting HIV with Glam Lashes

A closer examination of the scene of Ongina’s disclosure exposes how the episode both reinforces and dissects historical representations of the HIV-positive subject as an “AIDS carrier.” The revelation of Ongina’s serostatus “outs” her as a drag queen, a man in a dress with a sexual history. Indeed, in post-series interviews (but, crucially, not on the episode itself), she linked her HIV-positive status to safe sex: “I’m not assuming that he lied to me, but it’s either that or he didn’t know at all, but he did tell me he was HIV-negative...I wish I could go back and say, ‘No, we’re going to have protected sex.’”²⁸ As Emilie Netzhammer and Scott Shamp note, televised representations of HIV often typically categorize the PWA as either the innocent victim (usually a heterosexual child or woman) or the gay AIDS carrier (usually a gay or bisexual man with a voracious sexual appetite).²⁹ Following this logic, Ongina cannot be an innocent victim because she acquired HIV through unprotected sex with another man. But she also cannot be an AIDS carrier in the way that the media have typically

YOU BETTER WORK

represented them because she lacks an insatiable sex drive. Furthermore, she expresses regret at her decision to have unprotected sex, rejecting the characterization of the AIDS carrier as sexually irresponsible.

Updating Netzhammer and Shamp's history of HIV on television, Ongina's screen test in the "MAC/Viva Glam Challenge" reveals HIV to be a kind of absent presence. "I went for the route of celebrating life and making sure that you always think positively no matter what life throws at you," a self-confident Ongina proclaims during judging. "I mean it's a really big deal, but you can't let that be a downer in your life." At the panel, the guest judge Espinet echoes this message: "You know, at the end of the day, yes, it's a serious issue, but we have to always try and look at the brighter side of life, and I think you did a great job of it." This message, that HIV must not distract an individual from fulfilling his or her dreams or celebrating life, appears to be aimed at the HIV-positive individual. As the judges deliberate, however, they gloss over this message of empowerment in favor of discussing Ongina's capacity to be a Viva Glam spokesmodel; her value lies not in encouraging HIV-positive individuals to educate others about HIV transmission and prevention, but instead in her ability to "represent Viva Glam and answer questions," as RuPaul proclaims. To "represent Viva Glam" is to redesignate selling makeup as corporate philanthropy, and, as a Viva Glam spokesmodel, Ongina uses her own serostatus as an opportunity, as she says in her screen test, to "educate, donate, and celebrate."



Ongina's screentest

In an interview, Ongina says she stepped "out of the HIV closet to create awareness and further inspire people that life with HIV is as glamorous as life without." To twist Joyrich's words, the logic of the commodity is already related to the logic of the HIV closet. Ongina's disclosure comes when offered, as the winner of the challenge, the opportunity to be a real MAC Viva Glam spokesmodel.³⁰ Furthermore, this commodification works in multiple ways, not just with respect to makeup, but also through long-term medical treatments for HIV-positive individuals. In an interview for *HIV+ Magazine*, Ongina's disclosure and appearance on *Drag Race* also documents the benefits of anti-retroviral medication: "[Disclosing Ongina's status] helped create the support network he needed to manage those early times, navigate several changes in medication – from a six-pill-a-day Kaletra-based regimen to a three-pill-a-day Reyataz combination...to once-a-day Atripla – and generally feel his way through the most difficult patches."³¹ Presumably, HIV-positive readers not on medication would be able to discern from Ongina's interview such benefits, including the ease of taking "once-a-day Atripla."³²

Echoing the cultural construction of HIV as accessible to both HIV-negative and positive audiences, RuPaul universalizes the experience of living with HIV during judging. Regaining emotional control of the revelatory fallout, she sneaks in one last mention of Viva Glam's brand: "You are all sisters. We are all family, and if one of us is in pain, we are all in pain. We are all in trouble. So...let's be joyous, so we can all be joyous. That's what Viva Glam is really all about." In what is almost a carbon copy of a 2005 corporate advertising campaign claiming "We All Have AIDS...If One Of Us Does," RuPaul unhinges lived experience from the PWA, turning pain into joy in a rather unsettling unscripted moment of reality television.³³ This abstracting of HIV from its diseased connotations can be found within the goal of the screen test itself; the screen test does not educate a (presumably gay male) audience about HIV prevention (for example, using condoms, asking a partner's serostatus, or getting tested), but instead educates a (presumably straight) audience about how they can donate money to charity. Moreover, the fact that *Drag Race* prioritizes drag

as inclusive of multiple ethnicities underscores this abstraction of HIV, as queer men of color represent a demographic with high incidence rates of HIV infection. HIV itself thus becomes a signifier for philanthropic causes, rather than for a disease that real people must grapple with and navigate.

The “MAC/Viva Glam Challenge” thus reframes HIV not as a communicable disease, but rather as an unfortunate, though not life-ending, experience; it ostensibly raises awareness of HIV and AIDS without educating its audience about how HIV can be prevented. Its commodification of HIV parallels how *Drag Race* itself presents the drag queen not as a passing impersonator but instead as a commodified brand, a versatile performer dependant on excess without sexual desire.³⁴ Indeed, Ongina herself makes this point in an interview: “I learned a lot about myself [on *Drag Race*] and I learned a lot about my persona. I helped elevate my persona.”³⁵ Of course, *Drag Race* makes for good entertainment, and thus this logic of commodification extends to reality television’s structure and form, in which contestants, through televisual intertextuality and celebrity culture, become “household names and characters with the familiar feel of our own families.”³⁶ Televisual episode, series, and genre all demonstrate the perverse labor that goes into constructing an image of the self: a “becoming” or disidentificatory process of *work*. *Drag Race* does not narrativize the struggle of the HIV-positive individual, but instead inscribes that struggle within corporate-speak branding, replacing politics with symptom, a whimper of the activism of the 1980s and early 1990s in favor of generalized pronouncements of shared empathy mediated through buying makeup. Castrated as both an object of sexual desire and as a radically political subject, the HIV-positive drag queen builds her brand one dramatic moment at a time.

Postscript: “Make it Work”

A year and a half after Ongina’s disclosure on *Drag Race*, another moment of revelation occurred on a similar program, Bravo’s *Project Runway*. In the episode “There’s a Pattern Here,” the contestants created a textile design based on a moment from their own lives.³⁷ During judging, Mondo Guerra,



Mondo’s winning design

the eventual runner-up of *Runway*’s eighth season, was praised for his clever print (a pattern of plus signs in pink, yellow, and black); responding to its inspiration, Mondo hesitantly and tearfully explained that “the symbolism in the pants are these pluses [that] are positive signs and I’ve been HIV positive for ten years....I wanted to pull from the past but also give something back of who I am now.”

To be sure, Mondo’s moment of disclosure differs from Ongina’s: “There’s a Pattern Here” is not structured around HIV awareness, and although a fashion designer’s brand is vital to his or her financial success, Mondo produces actual clothes through his labor, resulting in a tangible commodity – though one often reliant upon an aesthetics of excess, as Heather Hendershot notes about *Runway*.³⁸ That the challenge requires prints to be inspired by a significant personal moment already invites dramatic revelations such as Mondo’s; one could thus read a certain kind of affective labor in deciding to make such a bold pattern symbolic of his HIV status.

Yet just as in *Drag Race*, “There’s a Pattern Here” refuses to signify HIV as an experienced

YOU BETTER WORK

disease, instead subsuming it into other identities. This emerges most potently not in the episode itself, but rather in the public reaction to Mondo's disclosure. The episode aired in late September 2010, a period in which, following several teenage queer youth suicides, author Dan Savage started the "It Gets Better Project" on YouTube as a way to send LGBT youth hopeful messages.³⁹ After Mondo's disclosure, several blogs emphasized how the moment spoke specifically to queer youth, including one authored by *Runway* season three finalist Laura Bennett on Lifetime's website.⁴⁰ Whereas Ongina directed messages of hope to HIV-positive audiences, encouraging them to own their status, Mondo's disclosure resonates only as a hopeful coming out story aimed at a different audience.

But as Muñoz reminds us, disidentification is not just hopeful but extraordinarily political, representing "a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable

by the dominant culture."⁴¹ Reality television has unquestionably changed since Pedro Zamora used the platform of *The Real World* to educate others about the lived experience of being of color, HIV-positive, and queer. One could similarly argue that as the popularity of identity politics waned at the turn of the millennium, reality television deemphasized substantive discussions about identity, instead repackaging its characters as celebrities that can speak to the widest number of viewers.⁴² Although *Drag Race* and *Runway* specifically market themselves to queer audiences, perhaps diluting the potential for its characters to speak to the dominant public culture, their treatment of HIV remains indebted to their status as reality programs, allowing both to resignify HIV within the boundaries of commodity and mainstream LGBT culture. Down the runway, out of the television, and into our homes, the new faces of HIV disclose their status under the gaze of an industry's camera, transforming red ribbons into ruby red lipstick.

Hunter Hargraves is a 3rd year candidate in the Ph.D. program of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University and a former San Francisco drag queen. His work focuses on viscerally uncomfortable media (television, digital media, and film) and, specifically, how taboo subjects become represented (and re-presented) in popular culture, raising questions surrounding the discursive constructions and limitations of embodiment, identity, temporality, technology, citizenship, and cultural memory. More broadly, he traverses multiple disciplines to constantly unsettle what we know as "popular culture," drawing out the complexities between the popular and the perverse, between public performances and private identities, and between non-relational and political acts.

End Notes

1 "It's a Jersey Thing," *South Park*. Episode no. 204, first broadcast October 13, 2010 by Comedy Central.

2 "MAC Viva Glam Challenge," *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Episode 104, first broadcast February 23, 2009 by Logo.

3 Gilles Deleuze, "Bartleby; or, the Formula," *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 84.

4 While Deleuze's language in "Bartleby" is inherently masculine, it is important to mention that other formulations of "becoming" emphasize its importance to "minor" identities. See, for example, the process of "becoming-woman" found in Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 106.

5 Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 186-7.

6 RuPaul's own HIV status has been a topic of mystery, particularly after RuPaul appeared in a 2008 episode of the fifth season of *Project Runway* as the guest judge for an episode in which the contestants had to make an outfit for a drag queen. Following the episode's airing, a number of blogs publicly questioned RuPaul's own serostatus, often based on demographic assumptions about RuPaul's own ethnicity and sexual orientation. See Joyfalula, "RuPaul is Looking Terrible These Days!" *The Why File*, April 24, 2008, <http://thewhyfile.blogspot.com/2008/04/rupaul-is-looking-terrible-these-days.html> (accessed November 20, 2010) and Yahoo's Q&A Forums, "Is RuPaul HIV-Positive?" <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080820195023AAAdyhdr> (accessed November 20, 2010).

- 7 Paul Lee Cannon, "The Ongina Dialogues," *SFGAM.com*, March 2009, http://www.sfgam.com/index.php?option=com_myblog&show=The-Ongina-Dialogues.html&Itemid=195 (accessed November 20, 2010).
- 8 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 7. Both Crimp and Muñoz draw on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's seminal *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990) in their theories of identification and disidentification.
- 9 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 31.
- 10 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 145 and 152.
- 11 Furthermore, Ongina's media interviews rarely implicate a relationship between her Filipino identity and her living with HIV, saying only that while growing up in the Philippines she had little exposure to HIV prevention campaigns. See Paul E. Pratt, "Super (Role) Model," *HIV/Plus* 70, May/June 2009, <http://www.hivplusmag.com/Story.asp?ID=1806&categoryid=1> (accessed November 20, 2010).
- 12 *The Today Show*, interview with RuPaul Charles by Hoda Kodb and Kathie Lee Gifford, February 2, 2009, <http://tv.popcrunch.com/rupaul-today-show-drag-race-interview-february-2-video/> (accessed 20 November 2010).
- 13 In some respects, RuPaul perhaps subverts traditional expectations that the queer audiences who watch Logo are primarily white in presenting a drag culture comprised mostly of queens of color. Conversely, a less progressive reading of this would be to see this as exploiting the queens of color, with their overstated ties to queer youth street cultures as providing entertainment to white audiences.
- 14 The lone first season contestant to imitate such culture, Tammie Brown, confused the judges in her short tenure on the program; her Bette Davis look is deemed "wacky style" and she is eliminated in the second episode for "giving up" in refusing to lip-synch to Michelle Williams' "We Break the Dawn," sending the message that in order to be a successful drag queen, you must demonstrate an ability to lip-synch to contemporary American R&B songs.
- 15 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 12.
- 16 "TPR Interviews Pandora Boxx," *Think Pink Radio*, May 11, 2010, <http://thinkpinkradio.com/2010/05/11/tpr-interviews-pandora-boxx/> (accessed January 10, 2011).
- 17 See, for example, the essays contained in *Living Color: Race and Television in the United States*, ed. Sasha Torres (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), and Bradley S. Greenberg, Dana Mastro, and Jeffrey E. Brand, "Minorities in the Mass Media: Television Into the 21st Century," in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, 2nd ed., ed. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann, 333-352 (New York: Routledge, 2002).
- 18 Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 95.
- 19 Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 77.
- 20 I am indebted to San Francisco drag queen Landa Lakes for this definition of "work."
- 21 Laurie Ouellette and Susan Murray, "Introduction," in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, 2nd ed. Ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, 11 (New York: NYU Press, 2009). The term "celebrification" is coined by Chris Rojek, in *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 186-187.
- 22 Mark Andrejevic, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 9-10. Curiously, this instance is also exemplified in reverse: fashion journalist Merle Ginsburg, the other permanent judge on *Drag Race*, appeared as a contestant in the first season of Bravo's *Launch My Line*, a program where successful professionals vie for the opportunity to, naturally, launch their own fashion line.
- 23 In addition to being *Drag Race*'s primary sponsor, Absolut Vodka has a long relationship with the LGBT press, advertising in queer publications since 1981. See Dan Baker, "A History in Ads: The Growth of the Lesbian and Gay Market," in *Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life*, ed. Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed, 11-20 (New York: Routledge, 1997); and Katherine Sender, *Business, not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), especially 32-37.
- 24 Black Eyed Peas, "I Gotta Feeling," *The E.N.D.* (Interscope, 2009). Music Video directed by Ben Mor, June 16, 2009.
- 25 Lynne Joyrich, "Epistemology of the Console," *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 3 (Spring 2001), 462.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Katherine Sender likewise contends that "the closeting of gay sexuality thus produces an interesting paradox: a market that is constituted as distinct through the nondominant sexuality of its constituency could be brought into being only through the effacement of that sexuality," in *Business, not Politics*, 201.
- 28 Pratt, "Super (Role) Model."
- 29 Emile C. Netzhammer and Scott A. Shamp, "Guilt by Association: Homosexuality and AIDS on Prime-Time Television," in *Queer Words, Queer Images: Communication and the Construction of Homosexuality*, ed. R. Jeffrey Ringer, 91-106 (New York: NYU Press, 1994). Also see "AIDS Narratives on Television: Whose Story?" Chapter 6 in Paula Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).
- 30 Ongina told SFGAM.com that she originally planned on keeping her status a secret, but that the shock and thrill of winning the challenge changed her mind. See Lee Cannon, "The Ongina Dialogues."
- 31 Pratt, "Super (Role) Model."
- 32 For example, the episode's original broadcast did not include any advertisements for HIV medication, nor did it include any public service announcements (PSAs) about HIV prevention. Online, however, Logo presented the episode with both short PSAs and banner ads marketing different drug regimens.

YOU BETTER WORK

33 “Kenneth Cole Creates and Launches ‘We All Have AIDS,’” news release, December 1, 2005, <http://www.kff.org/hiv/aids/hip120105nra.cfm> (accessed November 20, 2010).

34 In both seasons of *Drag Race* a fashionable African American drag queen with good bone structure triumphed as the winner, leading some bloggers to comment that “you could sit [Season 2 winner Tyra Sanchez] and last year’s winner Bebe down with Ru’s makeup artist and in an hour you’d have two exact Ru doubles without even having to think about it that much.” In producing two winners with the potential to become “two exact Ru doubles,” the program (which is, after all, called *RuPaul’s Drag Race*) thus reinforces and extends the RuPaul brand. See Tom and Lorenzo, “RPDR S2 Finale/Reunion,” *Tom & Lorenzo*, April 2010, <http://tomandlorenzo2.blogspot.com/2010/04/rpdr-s2-finalereunion.html> (accessed November 20, 2010).

35 Michael Jensen, “Ongina Sashays Her Own Way,” *AfterElton.com*, March 3, 2009, <http://www.afterelton.com/people/2009/3/dragrace-ongina> (accessed November 20, 2010).

36 Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), 144.

37 “There’s a Pattern Here,” *Project Runway*. Episode no. 810, first broadcast September 30, 2010 by Bravo.

38 See Heather Hendershot, “Belabored Reality: Making it Work on *The Simple Life* and *Project Runway*,” in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, 2nd ed. ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 251.

39 One of the more notable entries has been that of *Runway*’s own mentor Tim Gunn, who emotionally recounts his own flirtations with suicide as a young gay teen.

40 Laura Bennett, “Mondo Wins it All,” *MyLifetime.com*, October 1, 2010, <http://www.mylifetime.com/shows/project-runway/blogs/laura-bennett-blog/episode-10-recap> (accessed November 20, 2010); see also Hanh Nguyen, “Project Runway’s Mondo: a Positive Revelation,” *Zap2It*, October 1, 2010, <http://blog.zap2it.com/frominsidethebox/2010/10/project-runways-mondo-a-positive-revelation.html> (accessed November 20, 2010); Tom and Lorenzo, “PR: Congratulations!” *Tom & Lorenzo*, October 2010, <http://tomandlorenzo2.blogspot.com/2010/10/pr-congratulations.html> (accessed November 20, 2010); and Rechelle, “For Mondo,” *RechelleUnplugged*, October 2, 2010, <http://www.rechelleunplugged.com/2010/10/for-mondo/> (accessed November 20, 2010).

41 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 31.

42 Laurie Ouellette and James Hay’s *Better Living Through Reality TV Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008) makes a similar connection between reality television and the state’s use of neoliberal philosophies in setting policy, though their analysis doesn’t necessarily take into account historical trajectories of reality sub-genre and identity.