

Studies in Costume & Performance  
Volume 1 Number 1

© 2016 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/scp.1.1.59\_1

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# Memoirs of a GAY! Sha: Race and gender performance on *RuPaul's Drag Race*

## ABSTRACT

*The popular American reality television programme RuPaul's Drag Race (2009–) has become well known for its racially diverse cast of contestants; notably, it has featured numerous contestants of Asian descent throughout its first seven seasons. Looking at four of these contestants (namely, Jujubee, Manila Luzon, Raja and Gia Gunn), I ask how Asian American drag queens use costume and other elements of bodily adornment in conjunction with performance in order to construct their drag characters. I explore the ways in which these former contestants embody their intersecting racial, gender and sexual identities through their costuming and performance, both while competing on Drag Race and in their post-Drag Race careers. Ultimately, I argue that Asian American drag queens often engage in an ambivalent rhetoric of race and gender both onstage and on-screen.*

## KEYWORDS

drag queens  
Asian Americans  
*RuPaul's Drag Race*  
race  
gender  
sexuality  
reality television

Since its premiere in February 2009, *RuPaul's Drag Race* (*Drag Race*) has enjoyed considerable success as the first American reality television programme focusing exclusively on drag queens and drag culture. *Drag Race* is particularly well known among its fans for its inclusion of Asian American contestants: as of 2015, every season except the seventh has featured at least one Asian American contestant, several of whom have become fan favourites; moreover,

two have been runners-up and one has been crowned as winner. Contestants of Asian descent include Ongina (Season 1), Jujubee (Season 2), Manila Luzon and Raja (Season 3), Jiggly Caliente and Phi Phi O'Hara (Season 4), Vivienne Pinay (Season 5) and Gia Gunn (Season 6). They represent a wide variety of drag styles, ranging from comedic and campy to high-concept and glamorous.

Looking at a selected sample of these contestants, I question how Asian American drag queens use costume and bodily adornment, along with performance, in order to construct their characters. Many if not all drag queens of colour must navigate their intersecting racial, gendered and sexual identities in constructing their drag characters. In this article, I explore the ways in which Asian American drag queens in particular perform race, gender and sexuality onstage and on-screen. To do so, I consider not only their costuming and performance style, but also the ways in which they talk about themselves and are talked about by others (i.e. by the judges, other contestants). I am careful to acknowledge that Asian American drag queens cannot be homogenized into a single style or aesthetic of drag, and that my sample should not be considered representative of all Asian American drag. Rather, I have selected specific contestants from *Drag Race* who, I argue, utilize certain rhetorical and aesthetic strategies in their performance that have the potential to challenge the representation of queer Asian bodies onstage and on-screen.

In her book *Gender Trouble* (1999), feminist theorist Judith Butler outlines her theory of gender performance, arguing that:

Acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.

(Butler 1999: 173; original emphasis)

According to Butler (1999: 174), gender is not necessarily a biological fact, but rather a socially constructed identity that is fabricated through performative acts, which are then 'inscribed on the surface of bodies'. Though Butler's idea of gender performativity refers to a sort of social performance (i.e. the idea that we perform our gender through social acts), the word 'performance' here is especially salient to my work on drag. Butler (1999: 174) also acknowledges this, pointing to drag as a potentially subversive parody of gender, which 'effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity'. The act of drag is thus a transgression of the gender binary, revealing its inconsistencies and permeability. That men can perform femininity suggests that gender cannot be so easily separated into discrete categories of 'male' and 'female'. In *Bodies That Matter* (2011), Butler is careful to argue against feminist readings of drag as inherently degrading to women, arguing instead that:

[D]rag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes.

(Butler 2011: 85)

Rather than reading drag as rooted in misogyny, Butler suggests that drag queens engage with unstable axes of power, primarily in terms of gender and sexuality, but also in terms of race and class. This idea of ambivalence – which I use to refer to the act of embracing or exaggerating stereotypes in an attempt to challenge prevailing ideologies about race, gender and sexuality – is a central one in my reading of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and of Asian American drag performance.

1. The slang terms 'fishiness' and 'realness' are used synonymously to mean the ability of a drag queen to successfully 'pass' as a (cisgender) woman. I prefer 'fishiness' and only use 'realness' when quoting outside sources.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF DRAG

For the purposes of this article, I define drag queens to refer to primarily gay men (or occasionally transgender women) who usually perform in cabaret acts in costumes that present an exaggerated version of femininity. I differentiate between drag queens whose primary purpose is to entertain and men who cross-dress for fetishistic purposes. I further differentiate drag queens from male actors who perform in female roles in dramatic or theatrical works, as with the examples of Elizabethan theatre, *dan* (旦) roles in Chinese opera and *onnagata* (女方)/*oyama* (女形) roles in Japanese kabuki. In other words, performing or dressing in drag does not necessarily make one a 'drag queen'.

As might be expected in a heteronormative society, drag has historically been challenged by both homophobic and sexist attitudes. Several laws, such as New York's Statute 780 of the Penal Code and Section 888(7) of the Code of Criminal Procedure, either implicitly or outright banned drag performance or dressing in drag, even into the 1960s (Senelick 2000: 378–79). As such, 'it was crucial for clubs which featured drag to stress the performance element, and in most cases the performers had honed their skills in some other realm of show business, usually carnival, vaudeville, or burlesque' (Senelick 2000: 380). Police harassment and raids of gay establishments into the 1960s were common, and gay clubs and drag queens soon developed warning systems to protect themselves. Gay clubs were also often coerced into heavier cabaret and liquor taxes, as well as other under-the-table payoffs (2000: 384). These actions led to the popularity of lip-syncing in drag performance:

Increased expenses and a gradual loss of clientele compelled the clubs to give up expensive live musicians and replace them with canned music. But if accompaniment could be pre-recorded, why not the voices as well? Suddenly, lip synching [*sic*] became the rage.

(Senelick 2000: 384)

While camp had always been an element of drag, the proliferation of lip-syncing further popularized the use of popular female divas as subject matters to be parodied or satirized.

Esther Newton divides drag performance into two overarching categories: the glamour queen and the comedy queen. In the case of the glamour queen, 'no serious attempt is made to present any female image other than that of a "star" or a female nightclub performer' (Newton 1979: 49); thus, the glamour queen aspires to 'fishiness'<sup>1</sup> and illusion. The comedy queen is then the antithesis of the glamour queen: whereas the glamour queen typically prioritizes looking beautiful, the comedy queen instead prioritizes humour and affect. Newton describes the slapstick queen and the stand-up queen as subsets of the comedy queen. She argues that the slapstick queen

2. For the sake of consistency, I use female pronouns exclusively to refer to drag queens in this article, except when quoting outside sources.

'attempts to make himself *look* as ridiculous as possible' (Newton 1979: 52, original emphasis). She<sup>2</sup> may, for example, wear (intentionally) poorly made costumes and messy wigs, and during lip-sync performances will perform in a way that suggests a (usually sexual) double entendre to the lyrics. The stand-up queen, on the other hand, relies on verbal humour and a quick wit; she is 'the specialized, professionally-performing version of the best-defined role figure in homosexual life, the campy queen' (Newton 1979: 56).

As we see, the development of drag has thus been shaped not only by homophobic attitudes towards gay men, but also by the ways in which gay men navigate their stigmatized experiences. Performing in drag allows gay men to manage their stigma by enacting alternative ways of gender performance. By embracing or parodying feminine beauty, they are afforded a fantastical escape from their lived experiences. However, as Butler argues and as we will see later, the roles that drag queens perform are often ambivalent in their critique of gender norms and gendered identities.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS ON (QUEER) PERFORMANCE (OF COLOUR)**

In his influential work on queer performance of colour, the performance scholar José Esteban Muñoz (1999: 4) defines 'disidentification' as 'descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship'. Muñoz (1999: 31) argues that minority performers utilize disidentification in order to '[scramble] and [reconstruct] 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'. In other words, minority performers often engage with dominant cultural texts in an attempt to reveal and subvert hegemonic narratives. For example, drag queens may disidentify with tragic divas like Marilyn Monroe or Judy Garland, repurposing their mythic public image in order to reveal and deconstruct ideologies about homosexual victimhood (Senelick 2000: 385–89).

While the concept of disidentification and its potential to subvert dominant narratives about minority identities is certainly critical in performance studies, this potential is sometimes ambivalent. In her reading of the 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning*, which follows a group of queer, low-income, primarily black and Latino individuals who participate in New York City's drag ball culture, bell hooks (1992: 148) argues: 'What viewers witness is not black men longing to impersonate or even to become like "real" black women but their obsession with an idealized fetishized vision of femininity that is white'. According to hooks, the impulse to read black drag balls as subversive of gender binaries ignores the consequences of race and class; these drag queens do not aspire to femininity, but to femininity only as it is equated with whiteness and upper socio-economic class status. The disidentification with upper-class white women in this case allows black, working-class drag queens a fantastical escape from the circumstances of their lived experiences, but may not effectively subvert the majoritarian ideologies that continue to oppress them. Rather, their disidentification ultimately works to uphold, rather than dismantle, the power of whiteness and socio-economic status, even while it simultaneously

works to challenge preconceptions about gender identity and sexuality (hooks 1992).

Lisa Lowe (1999: 66–67) stresses ‘heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity in [her] characterization of Asian American culture’. Through these three key terms, Lowe refers to the heterogeneous ‘differences and differential relationships within a bounded category’ (such as national origin, generation, socio-economic status, gender, etc.), the hybrid ‘formation of cultural objects and practices that are produced by the histories of uneven and unsynthetic power relations’ and the multiple ‘ways in which subjects located within social relations are determined by several different axes of power’ (1999: 67). While each of these terms is necessary in order to perform a critical reading of Asian American performance, the concept of hybridity – which ‘does not suggest the assimilation of Asian or immigrant practices to dominant forms but instead marks the history of survival within relationships of unequal power of domination’ (Lowe 1999: 67) – is especially useful in understanding how Asian American performers disidentify with dominant texts about Asianness to negotiate their position within American culture. Muñoz (1999: 31) builds on this conceptualization of the hybrid, writing that queer performance of colour is ‘hybridized insofar as it is cultivated from the dominant culture but meant to expose and critique its conventions’.

Building on Julia Kristeva’s theoretical frameworks, Karen Shimakawa reads Asian American performance as abject. Kristeva (1982: 2) defined the abject as neither subject nor object: ‘Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A “something” that I do not recognize as a thing’. Shimakawa (2002: 3; original emphasis) asserts that Asian Americanness is itself an abject state of being, for it reveals the fragility of the American nation’s imaginary borders: ‘Asian Americanness thus occupies a role both necessary to and mutually constitutive of national subject formation – *but it does not result in the formation of an Asian American subject or even an Asian American object*’. In other words, the process by which the American national subject is produced necessitates the ‘simultaneous production’ of an Asian American abject (neither subject nor object), whose Asianness reveals the fragility of the borders of the American state. The abject thus resides in an ambivalent position in the formation of both the object and the subject; it might even be understood as the state of ambivalence itself.

These theoretical concepts of disidentification, hybridity and abjection allow us to better understand the ways in which Asian American drag engages with hegemonic narratives about nationhood, race, gender and sexuality. Like hooks, however, I warn against a facile reading of Asian American drag performance as necessarily subversive; in fact, while many Asian American drag queens certainly engage with majoritarian narratives about Asian bodies in the American imagination, I argue that they do so in an ambivalent way that may not ultimately subvert stereotypes.

## **REALITY TELEVISION AND THE AESTHETICS OF LABOUR/LABOUR OF AESTHETICS**

First premiering on UPN in 2003, *America’s Next Top Model (ANTM)* features a cast of young aspiring models with little or no professional experience (the application dissuades prospective contestants who have appeared in a national advertising campaign within two years of applying). *ANTM*’s accessibility to amateurs may in fact be its key to success: while similar programmes like

3. 'Reading' refers to the act of creatively insulting other drag queens and is an integral part of drag culture. The modifier 'for filth' indicates a particularly insulting or creative read.

*American Idol* (2002–), *Top Chef* (2006–) and *Project Runway* (2004–) require contestants to possess a certain level of skill in order to compete, *ANTM* promises the dream of pursuing a successful modelling career to any young woman regardless of her experience. Laurie Ouellette (2013: 168) argues that, despite the fact that few of *ANTM*'s alumni have become successful models, the show acts as a boot camp of sorts, '[claiming] to help all the contestants by providing vocational training. [...] *ANTM* flourishes as a televised stage for learning to labor in a field that demands a high degree of "to-be-looked-at-ness," performativity, flexibility, and self-enterprise from its aspirants'.

Ouellette's reading of *ANTM* helps us to understand the ways in which *Drag Race* engages in a similar politics of aesthetic labour: while *Project Runway*, *Top Chef* and to some extent *American Idol* all focus on productive labour (i.e. the ability for its contestants to produce a saleable end product – fashion, cuisine, music, respectively), *ANTM* and *Drag Race* both test contestants' ability to sell their own image, effectively branding themselves as the product: 'While *ANTM* exploits the labour of unpaid female contestants who are often lower income and women of color, it also constitutes the young women as the ultimate beneficiaries of their own self-enterprising activities' (Ouellette 2013: 169). Similarly, *Drag Race* exploits the labour of often lower-income queer men of colour – the final challenge in every season is to appear in a music video to promote RuPaul's latest single – while promising them that they, not RuPaul, are the 'ultimate beneficiaries' of their labour.

To that end, *Drag Race* is notable for its apparently satirical use of product placement. Whenever a sponsor is named, or whenever RuPaul plugs one of her own products, the camera zooms in on RuPaul's face as she repeats the name of the sponsor or product with a knowing wink and a 'ding!' sound effect. In the episode 'Scent of a Drag Queen' (Season 5, Episode 8), *Drag Race* asks its contestants to actively engage in this performance of labour and the parody thereof. In the episode's 'She-Mail' – an introduction to each episode apparently inspired by the similar use of 'Tyra Mail' in *ANTM* – RuPaul states: 'Girls, can you smell me? That's the smell of success!' (Murray 2013). For the main challenge of the episode, the contestants are asked to produce advertisements for their own perfumes. Three contestants – Alaska, Detox and Jinx Monsoon – chose to create campy parodies of perfume commercial tropes. In Alaska's commercial for Red for Filth – a play on the drag slang term 'read for filth'<sup>3</sup> – she describes her fragrance as 'Dangerous, flawless, overpriced' (Murray 2013). In Detox's commercial for Heroine, she punctuates each keyword with the word 'Heroine' in a low, masculine growl to contrast with her super sexy image, before advertising that her perfume is 'available at the clinic' (Murray 2013). And finally, in Jinx's commercial for Delusion, which she states is 'for the girl who lives above her means, for the girl who just won't give up, for the girl with a dream', she lounges with two male models before waking up alone and covered in snack mix (Murray 2013). These three commercials were praised by the judges for lampooning perfume commercials and taking a humorous and ironic spin on advertising.

And yet, even though these examples appear to be parodies, they are rarely truly subversive, as *Drag Race* does participate wholeheartedly in the same tropes it seemingly mocks. After all, RuPaul needs to promote her sponsors and her own products, even though she does so in a way that makes fun of product placement in mainstream television. Similarly, though Alaska, Detox and Jinx Monsoon are not selling actual perfumes, they are learning how to brand and advertise themselves as products. The winner of *ANTM* 'is

cruelly subjected to others (producers, experts, cultural intermediaries, judges) who profit from her labor, but is also invited to “maximize” herself for her own gain’ (Ouellette 2013: 169). So too are the contestants of *Drag Race* being exploited – emotionally, physically, creatively – for RuPaul’s profit, while simultaneously being ‘invited’ to use the experience of appearing on *Drag Race* to transform this exploitative labour into their own cultural and economic capital.

### **ASIAN AMERICAN CONTESTANTS ON RUPAUL’S DRAG RACE**

In her introduction video, contestant Manila Luzon boasts, ‘I am different from the other contestants because I am the beautiful Asian who’s taller than 5’2’’ (Murray 2010b). One of eight contestants of Asian descent to have appeared on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* as of 2015, Manila’s aesthetic and performance often involves an appropriation of Asian stereotypes into her routine, underscoring her racialized body onstage. While most Asian American contestants to appear on the show have acknowledged their racial identity in some way, such as choosing ethnically identifiable names, I choose to look specifically at four contestants in this article who have more explicitly actualized their race both on *Drag Race* and in their careers outside of the show: namely, Jujubee, Manila Luzon, Raja and Gia Gunn. Although I discuss these contestants as more or less discrete examples, there are several similarities among them in terms of the ways in which they perform race and gender.

In his work on the experiences and representations of gay Asian American men, Chong-suk Han notes that gay Asian American men’s experiences are often fraught with intersecting gendered and racialized meanings. Asian men, at least in the western imagination, have come to be considered less ‘masculine’ and thus more ‘feminine’ than white men. Within Asian American activism, for example, oppositions arise between straight Asian men, who find it damaging for Asian men to be equated with homosexuality, and gay Asian men, who are doubly marginalized: firstly, in the mainstream Asian American community for being gay; and secondly, in the gay community for being Asian (Han 2015: 129). Gay Asian men may choose to manage their stigmatized position by ‘de-emphasizing or hiding the characteristics that lead to their stigmatization’ (2015: 137) – for example, by taking on a hypermasculine appearance by working out excessively and being a ‘top’ (2015: 140–41) – or, alternatively, by ‘actively [embracing] and [highlighting] them in order to trade a more stigmatized status for one less stigmatized’ (2015: 137). Turning to drag may thus be interpreted as a form of stigma management: ‘being in drag provides the opportunity for [them] to feel more attractive, to gain status within the gay community, and to develop greater self-esteem’ (2015: 151).

With this in mind, we may begin to understand the ways in which Asian American contestants on *Drag Race* utilize race and gender performance as forms of stigma management. As Han argues, by embracing femininity, Asian American drag queens manage their gendered stigmatization. I might extend this argument to include the embracing of racial and Orientalist stereotypes as well: ‘Embodying stereotypes of racial/ethnic minorities could help the show’s queens strike comedic gold in the competition’ (Strings and Bui 2014: 829). That *Drag Race’s* contestants of colour – Asian, black, Latino and Native American alike – are often rewarded for incorporating racial stereotypes into their performance suggests that embracing such stereotypes

4. One notable exception is in Episode 7, in which Jujubee dressed in a *cheongsam* for the cover of her imaginary memoir, entitled *Memoirs of a GAY! Sha: Jujubee's Journey - I'm Still Here*.

may act as a form of stigma management, transforming the negative stigma of race into a positive.

## JUJUBEE

A contestant of Lao descent, Jujubee appeared on the second season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and became second runner-up for the title of America's Next Drag Superstar. Unlike the other contestants that I discuss in this article, Jujubee's costuming did not often take inspiration from Asian styles of dress.<sup>4</sup> Rather, I include her in this article for the use of language in her performance of her Asian identity. Though she always made her ethnic background clear on the show, Episode 7 ('Once Upon a Queen') highlighted Jujubee's immigrant family background. Early in the episode, the contestants discussed their experiences growing up gay. Puerto Rican contestant Jessica Wild stated, for example, that her high school classmates used to call her the Spanish term '*malo*'. Jujubee responded: 'You wanna hear it in my language? *Kathoey! Kathoey! Kathoey!* Doesn't that sound dirty? Imagine being called that by your uncle' (Murray 2010a). Libby Anthony (2014: 61) suggests that the inclusion of this scene underscores the universalism of homophobia: 'By calling attention to the "dirty" sound of this word and the negativity that accompanies both of these insults in languages other than English, Jujubee and Jessica show how bullying occurs in all languages'. Following this scene, RuPaul introduced the contestants to their mini-challenge, titled 'Reading Is Fundamental', in which the contestants were challenged to 'read' one another. Both Jujubee and Jessica again spoke in their native languages: Jessica used the insults '*puerca*' and '*gringo*' (Murray 2010a). In response, Jujubee read Jessica in a combination of English and Lao: 'Let me tell you something, *puerca*. You won't understand this anyways'. Then, switching to Lao: 'You have a dog face. Your body is HUGE!' Switching back to English: 'Get my gist? Do you understand?' (Murray 2010a). Jujubee and Jessica's use of their native languages highlights their immigrant backgrounds; that Jujubee referred to Lao as 'my language' rather than by name further emphasizes her connection to her ethnic identity.

Jujubee later appeared on the All Stars season of *Drag Race*, where she participated in a stand-up comedy challenge culminating in an impersonation of her grandmother:

So first thing's first, right? I was born a drag queen, and the afterbirth was glitter. When I came out I had a MAC lip gloss in one hand, the other one was a jazz hand! Everyone do a jazz hand with me, darling! So basically, I pop out, and they name me Airline. I mean, my parents must've been on some good shit! The funniest thing about my name, really, is that my grandma can't say it. Picture this, okay? Old Asian lady, titties down to here. 'Airline! Airline, I come home and all I see – wigs, underwear, panty, RuPaul CD, I don't know! What is going on with you? Are you gay?'

'Well, kind of.'

'Airline, look at my face. You fucking liar! You go out with boy!'

(Murray 2012)

Jujubee's impersonation of her Lao grandmother seems to have been inspired by Korean American comedian Margaret Cho's stand-up, in which she often



impersonates her immigrant mother's accented speech. In particular, this joke is strikingly reminiscent of one of Cho's jokes, aptly titled 'Are you gay?':

Are you gay? Are you gay? Pick up the phone! Mommy think you gay!  
If you don't pick up the phone, then you gay. Only gay screen call. You are gay. Why don't you tell mommy you gay? You don't ... you don't have to hide from mom! You know, you so lucky because mommy know about everything, you know you can talk to mommy about everything because you have cool mommy, your mommy is so cool! And mommy know about gay and lesbian and it's all fine to be gay, you know there is gay all over the world, they have gay all over the ... But not Korea! Not Korea! But everywhere else you know, there is gay and [...].

(Cho 2001)

Though Cho's impersonations of her mother rely on an appropriation of her mother's heavy Korean accent, they often belie a deeper critique of Asian stereotypes within American culture: 'the mother who says "I know all about the gay" appears to contradict the conventional image of Asian American mothers in the popular imagination' (Lee 2013: 433). In addition to adopting an Asian accent, both Jujubee and Margaret Cho further embody their mother/grandmother characters by enacting bodily markers of difference: Jujubee puts on oversized glasses and pulls her breasts down to imitate her grandmother's sagging breasts, while Cho contorts her facial expression when in character. That both Cho and Jujubee '[transform their bodies] into that of an Asian woman entering America [...] and then back into [their] American [selves]' (Lee 2013: 425) suggests that this crossing of Asian and American in their comedy is performed significantly through bodily inscriptions, as Judith Butler might similarly argue.

## MANILA LUZON

Of all the contestants I discuss in this article, Manila Luzon from Season 3 has perhaps performed Asianness the most obviously, especially in terms of her costuming. For example, in Episode 12 of the season ('Jocks in Frocks'), in which the contestants had to make over straight male jocks into their 'drag sisters', Manila created matching Orientalist costumes, combining elements of such disparate garments as the *cheongsam*, kimono and various hair ornaments for her white sister and herself to wear, eliciting comments like 'Geisha to go', 'Murder on the Orient Runway', 'Kill Bill 2 meets To Wong Foo' and 'Memoirs of a Geisha' (Murray 2011f) from the judges. In addition to such costuming choices, however, I am particularly interested in Manila's controversial decision to imitate a heavy, stereotypical Asian accent in the fifth episode, 'QNN News' (Season 3, Episode 5). For this challenge, the contestants teamed up to create news broadcasts. Manila's role in her group was to interview celebrity guest, Kristin Cavallari. During this interview, Manila made the decision to perform in a stereotypical accent, switching her Ls and Rs, speaking in broken English and making Asian jokes such as asking Cavallari to marry her brother for 'Immigration! Lots of money', or incorrectly declaring 1987, Cavallari's birth year, 'Year of the Cock! Oh, I'm sorry, sorry. Rooster' (Murray 2011a).

Although Manila was praised by the judges – guest judge Debbie Matenopoulos said, 'It was so wrong that it was so right' (Murray 2011a) – and ultimately won the challenge, she was heavily criticized by fellow competitor Shangela. In the behind-the-scenes follow-up programme to the main

5. These costumes also likely reference the use of piña, a fibre derived from pineapple leaves, in Filipino costume.
6. The motif that appears on the Philippines' flag consists of a central eight-rayed sun that represents the eight provinces – Manila, Cavita, Bulacan, Pampanga, Nueve Ecija, Rizal, Laguna and Batangas – that rebelled against Spanish colonial rule in 1896, while the three five-pointed stars represent the major islands Luzon, Panay and Mindanao.

episode, *Untucked*, Raja defended Manila by saying that 'It's only offensive if someone non-Asian does it', to which Shangela responded, 'To be fair, she's not Chinese, she's Filipino' (Murray 2011b). In the next episode ('The Snatch Game'; Season 3, Episode 6), Shangela continued: 'She was making fun of a culture that she looks to be a part of, but she's not' (Murray 2011d), suggesting that because Manila is of Filipino descent, she is not allowed to use an ostensibly Chinese accent. Manila replied that she was inspired by Margaret Cho, and that 'It's really no different than you doing black southern lady'. Shangela's response: 'But I'm black and I'm from the South' (Murray 2011d). Here we see Manila's authenticity being called into question for not being the 'right' kind of Asian to use an Asian accent. Shangela's suggestion that this accent is actually a Chinese one effectively misunderstands the ways in which Asian stereotypes actually elide differences among Asian ethnicities: the accent Manila used features traits that are neither accurate of nor specific to Chinese accented English, but are rather an imaginary amalgamation of various East Asian accents. (Note, for example, that the conflation of L and R sounds is more accurate of Japanese speech than Chinese.) Manila ultimately refused to address the implications of this appropriation of Asian stereotypes, walking away from the conversation and complaining that 'They're just making it all like a race thing and it's not!' (Murray 2011d).

In the following challenge, a celebrity impersonation challenge called 'The Snatch Game', Manila chose to respond to Shangela's criticisms of her inauthenticity by impersonating Imelda Marcos, former first lady of the Philippines, dressing in Marcos's trademark *terno* gown and bouffant hairstyle. (She later reprised this impersonation in the video for her musical single 'Hot Couture'; see Figure 1.) Though most of Manila's jokes which aired in the main episode revolved around Marcos' famously extensive collection of shoes, she did greet the audience with the Tagalog phrase '*Mabuhay! Mabuhay!*' (Murray 2011d), and deleted scenes later posted online included jokes about chicken adobo, the national dish of the Philippines, and the use of the phrase '*magtrabaho ka*' – the Tagalog translation of RuPaul's catchphrase, 'You better work' (Murray 2011c). Furthermore, the costumes Manila wore on the main stage in both 'QNN News' and 'The Snatch Game' made reference to her Filipino heritage. In 'QNN News', Manila wore a pineapple costume, a reference to Filipina beauty queens Carla Balingit and Lara Quigaman, both of whom have worn similar costumes.<sup>5</sup> In 'The Snatch Game' (Murray 2011d), Manila more explicitly wore her Filipino pride on the runway, dressing in a Filipino flag dress. The dress, a sequined sheath dress with butterfly sleeves typical of the *terno*, featured the red and blue stripes, gold sun and star motifs of the Philippines flag.<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, I argue that Manila often straddles an ambivalent divide between an inauthentic, generic Asianness and an authentic Filipinoness. In his study of gay Filipino men, Martin Manalansan notes this tension between the Filipino community and the ethnic identifier 'Asian', describing the New York-based Filipino queer organization Kambal sa Lusog, which was founded in opposition to other LGBTQ Asian American organizations like Gay Asian Pacific Islander Men of New York (GAPIMNY). According to Manalansan (2003: 128; original emphasis), one of Kambal sa Lusog's founders 'suggested that many Filipinos did not relate to other Asians or to an Asian identity. [...] They perceived *Asian* to mean East Asians – Japanese, Korean, and Chinese'. In addition, Filipino drag queens often use place names when naming themselves, as is the case with Manila Luzon (referencing



Figure 1: Stills from 'Hot Couture' (2011). Performed and directed by Manila Luzon. Copyright Karl Westerberg.

the capital city, Manila, and the largest island of the Philippines, Luzon): 'these men are able to evoke memories of people and events from another time and space' (2003: 138). Thus drag itself becomes a site of nostalgia for Filipino American drag queens. For an American-born drag queen of Filipino descent, Manila Luzon's use of such a nostalgic name, in combination with her Orientalist mode of costume and performance, suggests an uneasy and ambivalent relationship to questions of racial and ethnic identity.

## RAJA

The winner of Season 3 of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Raja became well known on the show for her high-concept costumes, often taking inspiration from high fashion, art history, subcultural styles and world dress. A departure from queens like Jujubee and Manila, Raja's style of drag focused less on comedy and a larger-than-life personality, but at the same time did not aspire to a fishiness that many other drag queens embrace. Rather, her style was lauded for its conceptual and often androgynous nature. Raja also did not often emphasize her Asianness on *Drag Race*, although she did perform racial otherness in two

looks heavily praised by the judges: a look inspired by African tribal dress and a look that incorporated a Native American war bonnet. In Episode 9, 'Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Style', in which the queens were challenged to create patriotic messages proclaiming their American pride, Raja proclaimed: 'I'm Raja, and I'm proud to be an American. Growing up in Indonesia, my parents taught me that I could be whatever I wanted to be. America: where the son of immigrants can wear her freedom proudly' (Murray 2011e). This rhetoric of immigration and pride speaks to Raja's global sense of style: a conflation occurs between being American, being global and being free to wear whatever one wishes – regardless of the (in-)appropriateness of dressing in a Native American war bonnet for a patriotic American challenge.

However, I discuss Raja here for the ways in which she has decided to perform her Asianness in her post-*Drag Race* career. While Manila appropriated mostly East Asian styles of dress, Raja has instead incorporated South and South East Asian styles into much of her post-competition costuming. Note, for example, that Raja's name is derived from the pan-South Asian term *raja*, meaning 'king', that appears in or has cognates in multiple Indian, Pakistani and Sri Lankan languages, as well as in Malay, Cambodian and Indonesian. Raja has appeared, for example, on the Season 5 finale show's red carpet painted blue – a reference to Hindu deities – and wearing a kaftan, headdress, metallic fingernail extensions and bindi, which all call to mind a mishmash of Thai, Cambodian, Middle Eastern and Indian styles of dress. In a performance at Mickey's West Hollywood, Raja remixed Kylie Minogue's song 'In My Arms' with a Bollywood intro and performed wearing a South East Asian-inspired headdress, a costume reminiscent of the Indian *lehenga choli* and multiple fake arms – a visual pun that again references Hindu deities – while incorporating hand gestures from South East Asian dance into her performance.

Most notably, in 2014, Raja debuted the music video for her single, 'Zubi Zubi Zubi'. The description for the video describes it as 'an erotic exotic tale swirled in rock and hindu [*sic*] themes' (Emmanuelle 2014). Indeed, the costuming in the video exemplifies this self-Orientalist mode of dress: Raja wearing a blue bodysuit with red embroidered paisley designs and multiple fake arms (as in her 'In Your Arms' performance); Raja in a jewelled and feathered headdress with South East Asian fingernail extensions and surrounded by white male dancers in turbans (an interesting gender reversal of the colonial, Orientalist image of the harem); and Raja wearing a jewelled turban, saris, an elephant mask (in reference to the Hindu god Ganesh) and chained fingernail extensions, while lounging like an odalisque atop paisley-patterned pillows and smoking from a hookah. The album cover for the single similarly features Raja's face painted blue and wearing a bindi, inside of a curvilinear border with a paisley-patterned background, and the name 'Raja' written in a font resembling stylized Devanagari script. The lyrics make reference to ambiguous gender identities – 'Neither he, neither she, so let's Zubi Zubi Zubi' – and to Buddhism and Hinduism – '*Shanti, shanti, shanti* / Everybody wants me', 'On the path to nirvana' and 'Turn it out like Shiva' (Emmanuelle 2014).

Raja's cultural appropriations thus appear to be inextricably tied to her gender-blending style of drag: 'Raja, in short, effects not only a genderfuck, but also a "racial-fuck" of sorts' (Strings and Bui 2014: 830). Indeed, Raja's aesthetic sensibilities speak to a glamorous, global androgyny. Note, for example, that the name Raja itself refers to male rulers; that the war bonnet is a garment worn by male members of Plains Indian tribes; and that the deity



Figure 2: Stills from 'Zubi Zubi Zubi' (2014). Performed by Raja. Directed by Sequoia Emmanuelle. Copyright Sequoia Emmanuelle.

Ganesh is male, even while Raja herself performs as a drag queen. Her immigrant narrative – the idea of 'wearing her freedom' – thus signals a blending of cultural styles, a global and mythical aesthetic of drag, as well as a blurring of gender identities.

### GIA GUNN

Finally, I look to Gia Gunn of Season 6. Like Manila and Raja, Gia has at times incorporated Orientalist costuming into her drag, such as in her costume for the Season 6 finale: a golden gown featuring a golden East Asian dragon design, exaggerating Gia's Japanese heritage. In addition, she has openly acknowledged her background in *kabuki* theatre, which since the seventeenth century has almost exclusively cast male actors in both male and female roles. In the episode 'Shade: The Rusical' (Season 6, Episode 4), for example, Gia showed photos of herself as a child in both 'boy roles' and 'fish roles' to her competitors (Murray 2014c). Although this early experience with theatrical cross-dressing has certainly helped to shape the kind of drag Gia does now – she occasionally incorporates *kabuki* costuming and dance into

her live performances – she is quick to differentiate between *kabuki* and drag per se: ‘In Japan, *kabuki* theatre is all men. But we wouldn’t, like, get tucked and put on boobs and stuff like that. [In a talking head:] In my culture, it’s not a gay thing, so even straight men do it. It’s an art’ (Murray 2014c). That she considers *kabuki* ‘not a gay thing’ recalls Margaret Cho’s joke in which her mother claims that gays exist everywhere – ‘But not Korea!’: ‘Rendering Korea an exclusively heterosexual place [...] the answering-machine message gives the audience a place to project otherness while Korea is absent from sight’ (Lee 2013: 433). In much the same way, I might argue that Gia’s strategy of differentiating between her *kabuki* past and her drag present similarly works to distance herself from her Japanese background, while paradoxically acknowledging the importance of her cultural heritage in defining her drag character.

While Gia does certainly perform race in a self-Orientalist mode similar to Manila and Raja’s drag, her tenure on *Drag Race* speaks to a different way in which Asian American drag queens engage with stereotypes of race and gender. As Newton notes, drag has long been divided into fishy and non-fishy drag. While queens like Detox and Alaska have straddled this line, the divide between fishy/glamorous and conceptual/campy drag has been a mainstay of later seasons of *Drag Race* (for example, see Season 4’s feud between Phi Phi O’Hara and Sharon Needles and Season 5’s feud between Roxxxy Andrews and Jinkx Monsoon). Gia Gunn became involved in Season 6’s iteration of this ongoing debate when she came head-to-head with fellow contestant Milk. Despite Gia’s claim in her introduction video – ‘You know, what I really hope to learn while I’m here on the show is just how to really expand my horizons, really understand other types of drag’ (Murray 2014a) – she became contemptuous of Milk’s unconventional, club kid style. In Episode 5 (‘Snatch Game’), the queens were asked to pay homage to RuPaul’s own style on the runway. Milk made the controversial decision to dress as male RuPaul by wearing a blue tuxedo and a bald cap. Although Milk was criticized for this decision, Gia was ultimately sent home for her overall weak performance on the show. As she left the runway, she quipped, ‘You guys are all still dudes’ (Murray 2014d). Back in the workroom, Gia ranted, ‘I’m still upset that there’s other cross-dressers still in there that fucking came to a drag show dressed as boys. I mean, if you look up “drag,” drag means dressing up as girls, not re-enhancing what you already are, which is a fucking big man’ (Murray 2014d).

As Han (2015: 147–48; original emphasis) argues, Asian American drag queens may utilize the feminization of Asian men as a form of stigma management: ‘Because gay Asian men are perceived in the gay community to be more feminine than gay white men, Asian American drag queens are better able to convince judges and audience members that they have achieved *realness*’. They are in fact keenly aware that ‘their ability to trade one stigmatized status for another, and to maximize the utility of that switch, requires a believable feminine performance’ (2015: 148). The act of dressing in drag, and dressing in particularly fishy drag (which I noted earlier has traditionally been upheld as the pinnacle of drag), thus becomes a way for gay Asian American men to become celebrated in a community that stigmatizes their racial identity. For Gia, it is clear that performing masculinity has no place in proper drag; as such, emphasizing a feminine presentation may be read as a strategy for managing her stigmatized racial position in the gay community. In the first episode of the season (‘RuPaul’s Big Opening’), Gia introduced herself as having ‘Just got off the boat. You know, a little trip from Asia. Just landed like

fresh tilapia' (Murray 2014b). This combination of the slang terms 'fishiness' and 'fresh off the boat' (a slang term referring to newly arrived immigrants) further cements the relationship between race and gender performance in Gia's own drag.

## CONCLUSION

These four contestants' performances and costumes both on and off *Drag Race* reveal the multiple ways in which Asian American drag queens perform race and gender, as well as the variations of drag even in a small subset of drag queens. Of course, these examples are largely manufactured and mediated through the reality television apparatus, as we are only able to see what the producers want us to see. As such, how we experience *Drag Race* is necessarily driven by the commodification of drag culture; after all, what is the purpose of the show if not to profit from the exploitation of these contestants? Even Raja's 'Zubi Zubi Zubi', ostensibly a means of artistic self-expression, is ultimately commercial in nature, given that it is an attempt to sell a single.

Judith Butler (2011: 87–88) warns that '[drag] is not first an appropriation and then a subversion. Sometimes it is both at once; sometimes it remains caught in an irresolvable tension, and sometimes a fatally unsubversive appropriation takes place'. This understanding of ambivalence as a complicated interplay between appropriation and subversion is critical in my analysis of Asian American contestants on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. This ambivalence may be manifested, for example, in Manila Luzon's vacillation between performing 'authentic' Filipinoness versus 'inauthentic' Asian stereotypes, or even more broadly in the ways in which *Drag Race's* attempts to parody the cultural economy of reality television ultimately work to reify tropes like product placement. Ultimately, I argue that a close reading of the ways in which these contestants embody race, gender and sexuality on-screen must take into consideration a contextual and intersectional understanding of gay Asian American men's marginalization in racist and heteronormative society and the ways in which these experiences are mediated on-screen for a relatively mainstream viewing audience. That these drag queens embody both racist stereotypes as well as their personal identities through costuming and performance suggests the complex ways in which they choose to identify or disidentify with their own lived experiences onstage and on-screen.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An earlier version of this article was presented at the Critical Costume 2015 conference and at the 14th Annual Richard Martin Visual Culture Symposium in 2015. I sincerely thank Nancy Deihl (New York University) for her invaluable mentorship and guidance throughout the research process, as well as Dr. Chong-suk Han (Middlebury College) for his advice on theoretical foundations. Thanks go also to the anonymous reviewers for their feedback.

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### SUGGESTED CITATION

Zhang, E. (2016), ‘Memoirs of a GAY! Sha: Race and gender performance on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*’, *Studies in Costume & Performance*, 1: 1, pp. 59–75, doi: 10.1386/scp.1.1.59\_1

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ISSN 2040-5669 | Online ISSN 2042-5677  
1 issues per volume | Volume 4, 2013



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