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Queer Labor and The Civic Imagination: Examining *Drag Race* as a Transmedia, Global Franchise

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Abstract

Ru Paul's Drag Race serves as parent global media franchise to countless spin-offs in (as of 2023) ten global locales— including Australia, Chile, France, Italy, Netherlands, Philippines, Spain, Sweden and Thailand. Much of the critical discourse around these television shows involves the notion of whether *Drag Race* is art or commodity, how it can be subcultural and/or mainstream, subversive and corporatized, both locally situated and globally aware. Brennan & Gudelunas (2022) have charted the “increasingly global reverberations” (p. 3) of *Drag Race* across cultures, and this work builds on theirs to understand the implications for transmedia television and queer performances of identity. This research uses trans theory in the textual analysis of labor— as performed by both the hosts and the participants, both onscreen and off. The notion of labor occurs across several dimensions including the labor of the contestants (positionality and reflexivity) and the everyday labors that queer people endure. Second, labor is understood through the social processes of management and presentation of the self, of coming out (versus always, already being out), and of educating non-queer people. Thirdly, drag itself is conceived of as a kind of labor and asks non-queer people or allies to empathize, recognize, and shoulder the burden of labor. Finally, using Jenkins, Peters-Lazaro, & Shresthova (2020), this paper also situates *Drag Race* as an exemplar of engagement with the civic imagination on both the dimensions of social connection within a larger community and forging solidarity with others of different experiential backgrounds and audiences across the world.

Keywords: civic imagination, global media, labor, queer identity, trans theory