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We're Born Naked, but the Rest We Become: Drag and the *Becoming Sensation*

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Introduction

“We’re born naked, and the rest is drag” (RuPaul, 1995)

RuPaul Charles is a homosexual, African-American, two-metre tall drag queen, that has commanded the public’s attention from the early nineties while mastering all forms of entertainment. RuPaul became the “queen” of entertainment in the 1990s, being provocative and outspoken, driven and unapologetic she carved territory in the popular culture landscape. In 2009 RuPaul began the search for “the next drag superstar” on the reality TV programme “RuPaul’s Drag Race”. Inspired by the highly influential 1990’s documentary “Paris is Burning”, the show became an instant hit. As an avid fan of drag performance, I focus my research on the subversive meanings and freedoms I witnessed drag performers experiencing and causing others to experience. I turned to queer theory, a body of literature that assisted me in answering questions regarding my own subjectivity in the past, and attempted to understand how the act of drag and its characters were conceptualized. As I shall demonstrate through my literature review, the conceptualization of the drag queen felt insufficient in existing texts, research and theories, which did not capture the fearlessness and ferocity that I felt drag queens exuded on the stage and screen.

Though I find queer theory and its deconstructive aims extremely helpful when regarding my own subjectivity, I knew that in order to do justice to this famed persona, I would have to seek paradigms elsewhere. Coming across Giles Deleuze in my second year, I started exercising my thoughts in an attempt to embark on a post-human project, to go beyond my own conceptualization and understanding of society and look forward to a time where the supremacy of identity had expired and

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the body had lost its organs and organizations. As I shall explore in my method and methodology section, in order to fully utilize Deleuzian philosophy, I found the need to establish my own Deleuzian lexicon with reference to drag performance to better understand drag and its aims. In my main chapter, I conduct an empirical analysis of the reality transformation programme “RuPaul’s Drag U” drawing on Rebecca Coleman’s Deleuzian analyses of this genre, bringing to life the character of the drag queen by offering a Deleuzian reading of the show and its objectives while tackling the following research question head on: what can we gain when conceptualizing drag through a Deleuzian perspective? By marrying Deleuzian theory to the drag queen I intend to understand how drag can be seen as a practice with the potential to liberate the body. Elizabeth Grosz writes: “...the body has and is a history under the procedures of testing, the body itself extends its limits, transforms its capacities, and enters a continuous process of becoming, becoming something other than itself” (2006, pp.192). Through an interrogation of Deleuzian concepts like assemblage, Body without Organs, becoming and sensation, I intend to ask how drag as a practice may assist the body to extend, transform, break gender dichotomies and become something different. In my conclusion I will consider the moves I made to establish drag as an emancipatory tool through a Deleuzian perspective while considering how the project can be expanded beyond the concerns of this dissertation. I hope to demonstrate how a mutual investment in the merging of these two concepts, drag and Deleuzian thought, can help illuminate each other’s original and positive purposes and motives.

Literature review

Drag performance and female impersonation has been an issue discussed within academia for decades, with the disciplines of sociology and queer theory being the main contributors attempting to comprehend and convey the power it holds to subvert secure meanings and dissolve rigid dichotomies. Generally, I would argue, studies made about this phenomenon can be divided into two; the first is ethnographic field research, where sociologists and social theorists have immersed themselves within the world of drag by attending shows and interviewing drag queens, trying to understand the appeal and attraction as well as the hardships and disadvantages that arise when one becomes a drag queen. The second approach is one taken up by queer and critical theorists, attempting to analyse the character of the drag queen and what it may represent as it intersects with the existing structures of gender, sexuality and race. In this literature review I will first introduce one of the important ethnographic projects to do with drag queens, “Mother Camp” (1972), conducted by Esther Newton, considered by many as a seminal text that still holds great relevance to the issue today. Reviewing more recent fieldwork researchers I will present the expanding understandings and approaches to drag and drag queens. In the second half of my review I will focus on the documentary “Paris is Burning” (1990) made by filmmaker Jenny Livingston and its changing reception by critical theorists. Lastly I will indicate what I have found to be a missing perspective that both theoretical and ethnographic approaches have overlooked, creating a basis and aim for this research project.

The acronym drag was first introduced by Shakespeare, standing for “Dressed as A Girl”, to describe male actors playing women characters when women

were not allowed on stage. In this contemporary era, drag stands for much more; female impersonation has become an art, more than putting on the garments and makeup or playing a stage character, drag's wide and varied approaches inhabit femininity for many ends, from mimicry to ridicule, adoration to destabilization. "The work [drag] is defined as 'queer' in itself. The assumption upon which both performers and audiences operate is that no one but a 'queer' would want to perform as a woman" (Newton, 1972, pp. 7). In "Mother Camp", Newton travelled cross-country, visiting street fairs and gay bars, engaging in conversation with subjects while extracting important conclusions about their work and life, which helped advance the importance of the cultural interrogation of drag. When reading this work, it is important to keep in mind that Newton conducted this groundbreaking research in the 1960s, with the backdrop of the Vietnam War and the awakening consciousness of feminist and gay liberation. Newton highlights the difficulty of stable employment within the drag community and notes on the stigma constituted by both majoritarian heterosexual society and the homosexual community, as drag queens become ostracized for practicing female impersonation (pp. 59-97). Newton presents to the reader a careful explanation of the gender identity of drag queens, maintaining that although one's appearance might be female, one's 'essence' is still male (pp. 98-104). Writing during an era where homosexuality was considered a disease and conflated with gender inversion, Newton's definition is a crucial explanation of the phenomenon, battling the deviant character assigned to drag queens by heterosexual society.

Newton's legacy persisted, as researchers attempted to better understand the experience of holding a marginal positions within an already marginal community. In "The Absolutely Fabulous but Flawlessly Customary World of Female Impersonators" (2004), Steven P. Sacht and Lisa Underwood present a complex and at times contradictory picture, by "demonstrating that 'being' need not to be an either/or proposition and that there are actual multiple ways that gender can be performed and experienced" (2004, pp.4). Sacht and Underwood deal with the important question of the inherent misogyny of drag; as the act of female impersonation can be read through multiple facets, often it is argued that instead of challenging patriarchal norms, drag perpetuates misogynistic attitudes towards women. The pair successfully argues that drag as an approach cannot be deemed purely misogynistic, yet each performer and performance should be evaluated separately as "many drag queens seem quite successful in questioning and challenging notions of heterosexism, especially straight male privilege, but far less subversive when it comes to other oppressive inequalities, such as sexism, racism and classism" (Sacht & Underwood, 2004, pp. 12).

Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp (2004) began conducting field research with the intent to understand whether the drag performers of Club 801 in Florida, reinforced gender stereotypes and standards of femininity or exposed them as social constructs through their performances and attitude. Through focus on the queens understandings of their own gender the pair concludes, "Whether 'chicks with dicks' or 'men in dresses', drag queens create their own transgender and theatrical identity that forces their audiences to think in a complex way about what

it means to be a woman or what it means to be a man” (Taylor & Rupp, 2004, pp.131). Writing of the tough experience of being a drag queen within the rural periphery, having to face verbal and physical violence, Steven J. Hopkins (2004) elaborates on the rewards available to individuals participating in such activity, while rarely financial, “the relationships forged through this common interest have provided many queens with a stronger sense of community and family, and these close relationships and friendships are often cited as one of the benefits of doing drag” (Hopkins, 2004, pp. 146). Marginalized by heterosexual society, often shunned by their own families, many drag queens insist on establishing and inhabiting a familial structure. Drag therefore not only exposes gender as a construct through performances and impersonations but also deconstructs the sacredness of familial kinship through a recreation of this structure without bloodlines as basis.

Taking into consideration the important light ethnography sheds on the understanding of drag, I wish to move to critical theory’s debate over the issue, which revolves mostly around the ground-breaking 1990 documentary “Paris is Burning” made by white lesbian filmmaker Jenny Livingston. In the movie Livingston follows the Harlem drag ball scene, where Black and Hispanic individuals compete in a variety of drag categories in an attempt to win glory and a trophy while ascending from their class position and sexual and racial marginality, even if just for a moment. Livingston follows the individuals, in and out of drag, painting a reality that is tragic yet somewhat uplifting; on the one hand, these individuals speak of disheartening familial rejection, they risk their lives working as prostitutes, live in poverty and spend the little money they have on a new outfit for an upcoming

ball. On the other hand, these same individuals create, similarly to Hopkins' description, alternative kinship arrangements in the form of drag families and houses, as they care and support each other through thick and thin, offering love and support while achieving success and fame through participation in these drag balls. An instant hit, taking the grand jury prize in the prestigious Sundance Film Festival, the film's reception within academia varied. Through its critiques I will demonstrate the attitudes developed towards drag as a phenomenon.

“Drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (Butler, 1990, pp. 186). In her ground-breaking text, “Gender Trouble”, Judith Butler dedicates a few passages to the issue of drag, taking into consideration its misogynistic tendencies and its ability to ratify gender norms and the objectification of women. Arguing that the mimicry and parodic identities assumed by drag queens expose gender presentation as a repetitive copy with no original, the performative aspect of drag has great power in denaturalizing gender's strict dichotomy. It is important to note that this argument was made in Butler's first publication, and her opinion on the matter has developed and changed, much to the criticism given by black theorist bell hooks in her critical essay “Is Paris Burning?” (1992). Writing of the difficulty she had while watching the documentary, hooks focuses on the racial politics presented in “Paris is Burning”, arguing that it is impossible to actually see the lives and experience of these drag queens because they are queers of colour captured through the white gaze of a white filmmaker: “Unfortunately, Livingston's comments do not convey serious thought about either

the political and aesthetic implications of her choice as a white woman focusing on an aspect of black life and culture or the way racism might shape and inform how she would interpret black experience on the screen” (hooks, 1992, pp. 152). Hooks argues that although the documentary focuses on the hardships of this marginal community, it does it a disservice by perpetuating the power relation between white subjects and black and queer objects of study.

The following year, Butler published “Bodies that Matter” (1993) where she addressed previous criticism of her work on drag queens and hooks’ criticism of “Paris is Burning” in the chapter “Gender is Burning”. I would argue that here Butler presents a sharp and accurate understanding of drag as she proclaims that though drag possesses the ability to denaturalize and to ratify structures of gender it is, at best, an ambivalent act that portrays the difficulty of being subjected to regimes of power that one may oppose (pp.125, 1993). On the issue of “Paris is Burning” she writes: “there is both a sense of defeat and a sense of insurrection to be had from the drag pageantry in *Paris Is Burning*, that the way we see, the drag that is after all framed for us, filmed for us, is one that both appropriates and subverts racist, misogynist, and homophobic norms of oppression. How do we account for this ambivalence? This is not first an appropriation and then subversion. Sometimes it is both at once” (Butler, 1993, pp. 128). I would argue that Butler’s description of this tension is extremely precise, making one question what is gained by deeming an act of drag as either coerced by or subversive of patriarchy. By inspecting and analysing this ambivalent tension and the relationship one develops with it, I believe we might

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be able to find out a great amount about the transformative and sensational potential of drag.

It is Jose Esteban Muñoz's readings of the drag performance of Vaginal Davis in "The White to Be Angry" (1997) that I feel comes closest to addressing the tension while comprehending the necessarily bilateral relationship drag creates with viewers and the nation alike: "Davis's drag, this reconfigured cross-sex, cross-race minstrelsy, can best be understood as *terrorist drag* – terrorist insofar as she is performing the nation's internal terrors around race, gender, and sexuality" (Muñoz, 1997, pp. 91). By focusing on the affects that shaped Davis's drag and the issues that her drag then criticizes and attempts to dismantle, Muñoz deals with the ambivalence pointed out by Butler, and opens up the double-sided relationship that exists between performance and performer, audience and drag queen, nation and subject. In my empirical work I plan on opening up this tension through a reading of the transformation show "RuPaul's Drag U", where women come seeking help with their self-perception and appearance by utilizing the site of drag. Through a focus on the television show and the relationship forged between the women and the drag queens, I will tackle issues raised above as I ask whether it is possible to conceive of drag as a transformational site assisting individuals in achieving what I will call a *becoming sensation*, bringing together Deleuzian concepts I develop in the method and Methodology section to follow.

Method and Methodology

In this section I outline in broader terms the theoretical framework I am interested in utilizing within my research. In an attempt to focus on the philosophy and theory of Gilles Deleuze I shall select, as many of his interlocutors do, specific terms and concepts from his vast canon of writing and apply them in order to illuminate the character and identity of the drag queen in a way I believe has yet to be done within academic studies. Building my own framework of Deleuzian theory will enable me to apply it later as I discuss, research and analyse the reality television program “RuPaul’s Drag U”, a makeover show that creates meeting points between women seeking transformation and drag queen ‘professors’ who work together in order to access to the women’s “inner divas”. I believe that the use of a Deleuzian framework will situate this project as a different interpretation to both self-transformation-make-over programs as well as critical and queer theory’s conceptualization of the drag queen.

Thinking rhizomatically

The most important concept to begin with is Deleuze’s *rhizomatic* approach because it is essentially different in its conception from the usual understanding of power structures within society. “There are no points or positions in a rhizome, as one finds in a structure, tree or root. There are only lines” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, pp.15). In order to apply the concept of the rhizome, one must divorce from the known and dominant concepts of the western school of thought that are conceived in hierarchal thinking and dichotomous binaries (man/woman, us/them, heterosexual/homosexual). Deleuze claims that this known western model can be

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seen as a form of tree, with shoots and roots emerging and creating the well-known familiar hierarchy. “Instead of tree, rhizome. Instead of one, one of many. Not one and its multiple others, but a singular multiplicity” (Sutton & Martin-Jones, 2008). The rhizome, originally a botanical term referring to a subterranean root of a plant, is used in the philosophical project of Deleuze and Guattari to refer to an alternative form of thought, one that is referred to by scholars as post-identity theory or post-human philosophy. It helps establish a nomadic subject, one that is not built within a stable structure of top down, but instead is constructed by the multitude of connections in a continuous process of development and change, never fixed nor static.

Conceiving the body through a rhizomatic understanding is crucial within Deleuzian theory and it also serves as a core foundation within my project. “Instead of a singular unity of a continuous self, the rhizome allows a body to be multiple” (Malins, 2004, pp. 98). It is this multiplicity that Deleuze attempts to set as an advancement of the subject, be it human or non-human. Instead of having a fixed identity, a set way of conceiving oneself or a particular body, we must adopt a way of thinking that is dynamic, one that perceives all bodies within a project of continual development and a site of change and transformation.

Assembling the organ-less body

Deleuze and Guattari argue that a body, human or non-human, must be understood as a *Body without Organs [BwO]*; that is to say, bodies need to be understood not as entities empty of organs but rather “a body that isn’t organized as

an organic subject, as an organism” (Coleman, 2009, pp.33). I believe that the comprehension of this concept is very useful in understanding this post-human project that Deleuze and Guattari are taking on, as they challenge the inherent conceptualization of all bodies as identical structures and suggest that instead a body is to be understood as structure-less, working through the connections it makes with other bodies as well as the affect these connections invite. It is through a series of connections that new developments, identities and conceptions of the body emerge in what is labelled within Deleuzian philosophy as an *assemblage*, “conceiv[ing] bodies not as unified, organic human beings, or subjects” (Coleman, 2009, pp.32), but instead multiply constituting, dynamic coming together of animate and inanimate components. An assemblage becomes one moment located and participating within the rhizome.

I turn to Peta Malins project on the drugged body (2004) as she explains how one might conceive such a BwO within a rhizomatic project as an assemblage. Malins approaches Deleuzian philosophy by using its profound lexicon to argue that conceiving the body as a site of multiplicity, one that possesses the potential to develop and change through its connection to other bodies that possess that same potential, will help the modern thinker form a new conception of self. “And a drugged body is no different; when it connects up to a bicycle, it becomes a cyclist; to a cigarette, a smoker; to LSD, a tripper.” (Malins, 2004, pp.85) That is, through the connections a body makes with other bodies, it develops and adapts, changes and transforms, making it impossible for it to be fixed or still, enabling each connection

it makes to alter what has already been and make it new and different from what it was before as it is re-assembled within a new connection.

“A human being, an animal, and a bacterium, a virus, a molecule, a microorganism. Or in the case of the truffle, a tree, a fly, and a pig. These combinations are neither genetic nor structural; they are interkingdoms, unnatural participations. That is the only way Nature operates – against itself” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 266-7). To better understand the deconstructive aims of the Deleuzian project, and the form of an assemblage, one must apply this notion of assemblage to the entire understanding of bodies, human or non-human.

Eliminating the usual hierarchies found between the human and non-human, arguing that both assemblages have the bilateral ability for cause and effect on one another, therefore enables bodies within an assemblage the ability to develop and connect in infinite manners. Brian Massumi, in his translator’s foreword to Deleuze & Guattari’s “A Thousand Plateaus” offers a great way to understand this unique approach: “Rather than analyzing the world into discrete components, reducing their manyness to the One of identity, and ordering them by rank, it sums up a set of disparate circumstances in a shattering blow. It synthesizes a multiplicity of elements without effacing their heterogeneity or hindering their potential for future rearranging” (Massumi, 1987, pp. XIII) With Massumi’s words the groundwork has been laid to move on and introduce what I find most crucial and compelling within Deleuzian philosophy: the concept of *becoming*. It is used by a multitude of contemporary thinkers and theorists, a concept that will prove pivotal to my own research and analysis of the drag queen.

Multiple and continuous becomings

“Deleuzian becoming is the affirmation of the positivity of difference, meant as a multiple and constant process of transformation. Both teleological order and fixed identity are relinquished in a favour of a flux of multiple becoming” (Braidotti, 2011, pp.246). So what is *becoming* according to Gilles Deleuze? First and foremost, I find it crucial to emphasize that one can never become, that is to say that the process of becoming is one that is never ending, as a subject finds itself in this everlasting continuous process. Instead of the well-known tree-like structure of society, we adopt the rhizomatic construction, made up of different assemblages. Through their connections new assemblages and formations are created, and it is this process of multiplicities that is deemed the process of becoming; endless possibilities of connection, the never-ending possibilities of becoming through assemblages. “A shift from conceiving the world in terms of being to becoming: that is, from conceiving the world in terms of fixed, transcendent, autonomous entities to inter-connected processes. For Deleuze, whereas ‘beings’ are conceived in terms of their static identity, as becoming, bodies are processes of transformation, ‘never ceasing to become’” (Coleman, 2011, pp.150).

Rebecca Coleman’s project responds to a feminist approach towards the genre of makeover television shows, one that argues that these programs situate women in front of a representational model that offers an aspirational and supposedly better self, and attempts to make the subject become as close as possible to this representation. Within this strand of feminist critique, these kinds of television programs are considered extremely harmful and damaging, creating a

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standard, at times one that is unattainable, for femininity and the female body. Coleman, utilizing a Deleuzian approach, manages to reconceptualize these televisions programs' aims within a process of becoming, arguing that "popular cultural images are not an ideological imposition but rather a set of relations that... materialize, or not, a particular set of impulses or inclinations" (Coleman, 2011, pp.156-7). Coleman's argument embraces the lack of hierarchy within the Deleuzian rhizomatic model, asserting that an image does not possess the power to represent and cultivate a subject. Instead, the focused is pinned on the relationship between the subject and the image, the cause and effect the two have on one another as their coming together creates yet another assemblage. Consideration is also given to understanding this relationship as a part of the process of becoming: there is no final outcome, no finished product, but a continual process of becoming and becomings, a multiplicity of bilateral causes and affects. "Any being is subject to categorization and we live surrounded by categories; focusing on the process rather than the product leads us to the depths of becomings and not to a definition of what that figure is, supposedly an ultimate truth regarding this person and which is embodied in her" (Lopes & Uziel, 2014, pp.324).

The sensation

The last term I would like to add to my own developed canon of Deleuzian philosophy is Deleuze's use of the concept of *sensation*: "aesthetic figures, and the style that creates them, have nothing to do with rhetoric. They are sensations" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, pp.177). I believe that the term sensation is extremely

intriguing, especially when thinking of the character of the drag queen. To become a sensation, again, is not a final outcome, not an end of a process, but rather a moment of symbiosis, where the body and the image meet and co-exist, each in the other, while still existing as separate beings. It is a moment that is hard to grasp, one that is difficult to conceptualize, used by Deleuze mainly in his writing about art, as he explains: “Sensation fills out the plane of composition and is filled with itself by filling itself with what it contemplates: it is ‘enjoyment’ and ‘self-enjoyment’” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, pp.212). This bilateral transference, simultaneously becoming the image while still apprehending the image is a fascinating moment of existence that Deleuzian philosophy manages to pinpoint as a moment of true sensation.

In the next section, I intend to bring this Deleuzian language I have established and create a meeting point with the character of the drag queen. Taking the literature review together with this developed lexicon, I intend to suture the two concepts together. I will demonstrate how, with a rhizomatic approach, drag embodies the process of becoming as an endless and dynamic assemblage of inanimate and animate components; how it positions the subject between, and therefore beyond, the dichotomy of female and male; how it entices others to become, while cultivating enjoyment and self-enjoyment through sensation. As such, I hope to demonstrate through my research and analysis that the drag queen, a fascinating specimen of the nomadic subject, is a prime example of the Deleuzian project of deconstruction, a representative posthuman, one that assembles itself and creates assemblages with others, while becoming sensation.

Empirical Research

“Deep in the Lake Titicaca valley, a school was formed by drag queens to help biological women unleash their inner diva and let the world have it! We here at Drag U are in the business of putting drag queen heads on women’s shoulders” (Drag U opening sequence, Logo TV, 2010)

“At one and the same time I *become* in the sensation and something *happens* through the sensation, one through the other, one in the other. And at the limit, it is the same body which, being both subject and object, gives and receives the sensation”
(Deleuze, 1981, pp.35)

I will now suture academia’s theorization of the drag queen and a Deleuzian lexicon through an empirical study of the television programme “RuPaul’s Drag U”, a show intended to improve women’s lives through an introduction to the transformational potential of drag. This section follows the structure of the TV show. First, however, I will present the on going debate around transformation shows, arguing for their general importance and of “RuPaul’s Drag U” in particular. A Deleuzian reading of this format differs from traditional feminist readings of makeover programmes. Discussing the moment that the women competing on the show enter the workroom, I will explore the multiple ways drag can be perceived as an assemblage as a process of transformation ensues. Through the introduction of the Dragulator, “a highly sophisticated piece of technology, [that] will give you your drag name and give you a glimpse at your potential” (RuPaul, RuPaul’s Drag U,

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2010), I will argue that the show assists individuals in *becoming sensation*, helping the women to blur harshly dichotomized gender lines and use drag as an emancipatory practice. Lastly, I will end with the women's presentation as they perform and assume their drag personas and consider the positive and lasting effect of this experience. This marriage of Deleuzian theory and drag performance focuses on the relations between bodies and images and how they hold the potential to extend one's becomings.

"Are you ready to become the best bitch in school?"

From the mid 1990s, television programming went through a 'reality' transformation, as scheduled programming saw a surge of reality television and transformation shows that involved an altering of attitudes, homes and especially bodies, engendering, as Rebecca Coleman remarks, "a good deal of academic attention, mainly from feminist theory that critiques the representation of appropriate feminine embodiment that they perpetuate" (2013, pp.73). The rise of programmes which utilized bourgeois understandings of the body to induce change, transformation and improvement of women bodies, often lower or working class women, was seen by many feminists as neither positive nor liberating. The critiques and approaches of the genre are immense and exceed the focus of this project. Rather, I would like to take up the approach utilized by Coleman who attempts to infuse a feminist approach with a Deleuzian framework, breaking away from the representational model, arguing that what is "significant about makeover programmes is their suggestion of the potentiality that bodies might become better.

Potential in this sense refers to the ways in which ‘becomings’ are involved in the making of something new, open or different, where this ‘new’ is not necessarily disconnected from the ‘old’ or the past” (Coleman, 2013, pp.90). Coleman’s approach takes the feminist critique to heart and attempts to resolve it. By looking at the transformation process taken up by women participating on these shows, Coleman argues that an expansion of their becoming occurs. Coleman argues that the dynamic relationships forged with their selves, past and present, and others, gives these women greater agency.

Before I delve into the critical reception of “RuPaul’s Drag U”, it is important to expand on RuPaul’s significant life work. Arguably the most famous drag queen to burst into mainstream media, the self proclaimed “supermodel of the world” was ubiquitous in 1990s cultural consciousness. Through important contributions to music, literature and television, RuPaul established herself as a powerful and inspirational success story, while elaborately walking the line between complicity and subversion. Elizabeth Schewe writes: “RuPaul would make an easy target for feminist criticisms of such unattainable ideals of femininity and the dangerous lengths to which women often go to achieve them. On the other hand, because these over-the-top representations of femininity are performed by an outspokenly gay black man, it would be equally easy to praise RuPaul for his subversions of gender, race, and sexual norms” (2009, pp.672). I would argue that RuPaul is highly aware of the controversial position they hold within American media and culture, and it is this awareness that enables them to push boundaries and subvert heterosexual conventions, as with the transformation show, “RuPaul’s Drag U”. In his criticism of

“Drag U”, Josh Morrison, echoing Judith Butler’s early drag criticism, argues that the programme not only creates caricatured copies without originals but also perpetuates drag’s tendency to misogyny. Morrison writes: “In the bizarre *Victor Victoria* meets *Dr.Phil* universe of *Drag U*, men who act like women tell women how to act like men who act like women to become better women through embracing ‘the miracle of drag,’ all while chastising women for not embodying ‘proper’ femininity” (Morrison, 2014, pp.126). While I respect Morrison’s criticism, it completely disregards the experience of the contestants and the strong bond developed between the contestants and their drag mentors on the programme, as well as the valuable tools the women are equipped with through their participation on the show. Through use of these tools, I would argue, the women go beyond static and dichotomized understandings of identity and the self, embracing a process of becoming: “A line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure not arrival, origin not destination...A line of becoming has only a middle” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp.231).

“Everything one needs to become a drag queen!”

“Drag U” follows a strict format, as each episode begins with the introduction of the episode’s three contestants and the reasons that they seek change in their lives, varying from tomboyish women seeking to get in touch with a more conventionally feminine side to mothers searching for a different balance of femininity, in and out of maternal roles. The women walk onto an empty stage, the same stage that they will perform on in full drag to an audience of friends and family

by the end of the episode, and are welcomed to this new world by RuPaul, out of drag (or rather in his male drag). RuPaul reassures the women that their inner diva is just waiting to emerge. To help her break through, each woman will be assigned a drag professor as a mentor. A Deleuzian reading of “Drag U” demonstrates how this intermediate state that Deleuze and Guattari praise as the location of every body’s becoming can be perceived as a goal that transformation television manages to achieve. As Meredith Jones argues in her ontology of cosmetic surgery, “makeover culture is a state where *becoming* is more desirable than *being*. It valorizes the process of development rather than the point of completion” (2008, pp.12). As RuPaul’s introduction comes to an end, he announces that just like the real world, this is also a competition and the women will be judged on their “DPA”: Drag transformation, Performance and Attitude adjustment. A winner will be selected as the women assume their new drag personas, walk down the runway, answer judges’ questions and deliver a choreographed lip-sync performance. “Walk this way”, RuPaul announces and starts strutting into what he masterfully deems the ‘Drag Lab’. “No, actually walk *this* way” (RuPaul, RuPaul’s Drag U, 2010), making it clear to the women that class is in session, and transformation will ensue from head to heels.

The women entering the Drag Lab find not only their drag professor mentors but additionally, as Reyna, a contestant on the first episode “Tomboy meets girl” puts it, “its like a drag queen blew up in there” (RuPaul’s Drag U, 2010). It is this explosion that I want to reconstruct and ask, what makes a drag queen? How does one reassemble the drag queen and dare to become one? Lopes and Uziel, in their writing on the becoming of a drag queen, try to comprehend what assemblage is

needed for a drag queen to become, stating: “A drag queen will not exist in this form if there is no audience, even if it is composed of only one person – together with whom she will construct her becoming” (2014, pp.323). I would argue that Lopes and Uziel are correct: an audience can be an essential part of one’s assemblage, especially that of a performer. I take issue with their understanding of drag as simply a performance, rather than a strong and intimate addition to one’s assemblage, whether on or off stage. “The ultimate aim is to achieve not a sex-specific identity, but rather a dissolution of identity into an impersonal multiple mechanic subject” (Braidotti, 2011, pp.254). In my view, the aim of drag in general, and more specifically the aim of “Drag U”, is to dissolve these strict gender dichotomies by deconstructing identity and the body into a BwO, one that isn’t assembled in a specific, hierarchized way, but rather in movement and change, allowing itself to form new relations and connections through its assemblages.

The assemblages I notice occurring on the programme, and the different becomings I observe the women going through when using drag as a practice, make it essential that I differentiate between an internal and external assemblage. The latter, closer to Lopes and Uziel’s understanding I believe, is what is also called a machinic assemblage, meaning the connection of different bodies, again, with an emphasis on a connection that is established between human bodies and external technological non-human machines. Brian Mussami (1992) explains Deleuze and Guattari claim that any body, be it human, social, formed by nature or chemicals, has no interior truth or meaning; it is by the connections that it makes that meaning is made (pp.112). Within drag, this would mean the connection a body will make with

make-up, high heeled shoes, a gown, a wig, fake nails and bra and pantyhose stuffing, just to name a few, will create a new assemblage that is not focused on the substance of the assemblage but rather on the specific affects it enables when these components form the becoming of a drag queen. When different bodies come in contact, when they all assemble together, they create a new expansion of the self, a movement from static understandings of gender or sexuality, to a multiplicity and expansion of these restrictive categories, one that Peta Malins deems ethical, life-enhancing assemblages which “increase a body’s power to form creative, productive relations and which increase its capacity for life” (Malins, 2004, pp. 98). Drag, I would argue, is exactly this ethical, creativity-inducing assemblage, as the dragged body is promoted to form more connections with other bodies through its performance and presentation. This is a note worthy internal assemblage because one breaks free of the constraints of identity and is given access to new internal feelings and understandings of the self. Contestant Reyna discloses that she feels weakened when putting on a dress and that her quest on “Drag U” is to develop a new relationship with this garment she finds debilitating. Her drag professor and personal mentor Jujubee concludes, “Reyna needs to learn how to feel sexy and safe in a dress, and there is no one better than a drag queen to show her that” (RuPaul’s Drag U, 2010).

Physical connections and machinic assemblages also create an internal change within subjects, one noticeable through the emotional journey the women on the show experience. “While bodies are themselves drawn to these reassuring modes of (organ)isation, they also simultaneously repel them. Cracks appear in the

strata. For no identity category is ever entirely stable; no subject totally unified and constant” (Malins, 2004, pp.87). Identity is dissolved in favour of the BwO. There is no one neat way a body or bodies will come together, and instead of deeming this terrifying or daunting, one can embrace the multiplicity and opportunities for self-knowledge it encourages. For this reason I find drag to be an extremely useful tool when attempting to achieve a multiple self, a self that is reorganized and reenergized through a knocking down of gender binaries and stereotypes. The act of becoming something other than your self is constantly noted as a worthy task by RuPaul. On the second episode of the show, for example, he congratulates one of the contestants by saying, “What you have done is change your perception of your self, and that is a miracle” (RuPaul’s Drag U, 2010).

“Can you see yourself in there? Absolutely!”

The next section on the show is one I find most interesting. The women, together with their drag professors, gather around a computer screen, one that RuPaul cynically introduces as a highly sophisticated piece of technology. RuPaul takes a tongue-in-cheek approach to this transformation format, unlike the rest of the programmes in the genre, which take themselves extremely seriously, assuming that their own critical approach to women’s appearance, clothing and bodies is important and absolute. RuPaul’s approach to the “Dragulator” reveals that he is aware of the usual intensity this televised moment receives and that he is able to remain external to the women’s endeavours, as he is just one body within this emerging assemblage. The potential for change is up to the women, the possibility of

breaking from the static position of identity will be theirs to assume and make the most out of. As the women gather around the “Dragulator”, one by one they are presented with an image of themselves as a projected phantasmal drag queen, as RuPaul remarks, “This is your potential, lets see what you can become!” (RuPaul’s Drag U, 2010).

Here, I would like to focus on the women’s meeting and reaction to their dragged images. I deem this convergence as creating a becoming sensation, as it embodies Deleuze’s following definition, “Sensation has one face turned toward the subject...and one face turned towards the object...or rather it has no faces at all, it is both things indissolubly, it is Being-in-the-World” (Deleuze, 1981, pp.34). The meeting point that RuPaul orchestrates between the women and their imagined images becomes a fusion between subject and object, between a self that is attempting to transcend its static position and an image that represents the immense potential such a ground-breaking move could entail. Once the woman and her image of becoming have fused, a becoming sensation is in progress. I turn to the work of Barbara M. Kennedy in “Deleuze and cinema” (2002), who attempts to utilize an understanding of sensation to break the worn framework of spectatorship theory, which limits the agency of the subject aspiring to the image, through the introduction of a Deleuzian perspective. Kennedy writes of a neo-aesthetic that “will be used in a differently framed political sense in that through an encouragement of the neo-aesthetic, new affectivities, new intensities between people might provide a mutant sensibility which could prove more significant in changing people’s experiences of themselves and the world” (Kennedy, 2002, pp.13). I find Kennedy’s

focus on the aesthetics of sensation particularly helpful, as she reviews Deleuze's writing on the work of painter Francis Bacon, whose work Deleuze defined as sensation (1981). Kennedy writes: "Images that might be deemed representational are in fact 'movement-images'. They do not exist as static forms in themselves, but are experienced as images-in-movement, in process, in sensation" (2002, pp.117-8)

When breaking down the dichotomy between the human and the non-human, Deleuze challenges the age-old the relationship of the imagery and human, complicating the simplistic notion of effect as being one sided and absolute, by suggesting that there is a dual and mutual affect. Rebecca Coleman in "The Becoming of Bodies" (2008) takes on Deleuze's challenge by investigating young girls body image issues through their relations to past images of themselves. Coleman argues successfully that the relationship between the images and the girls changes and evolves over time, making their positions non-static as well as constantly growing, shifting and becoming. "Bodies and images are not separate (body/image) but, instead, bodies become through images (body-image)" (Coleman, 2008, pp.175). On "Drag U", I would argue, the viewer witnesses this process first hand, as the women, seeing an image of a transformed self start relating and reacting to the images, and instead of understanding the images as constituting their understanding of self, a relationship is formed, one that Coleman argues needs not to be put in terms of 'good' or 'bad, but rather understood as either expanding or limiting one's becoming (2008, pp.174). Indeed, the women's reactions are varied and change throughout the programme, as each experience the process of becoming through this sensational imagery in a unique and different way, but no matter the

reaction, this sparks a motion from identity's static position into a process of becoming sensation. For example, in the second episode, "Dateless Divas", we encounter two polar reactions; while Lenae sees her sensational image and immediately calls out, "that's Marilyn Monroe and she really is inside of me!" Pegah coils and admits, "I was scared. It was that sexy-sex aspect of it that scares me the most"(RuPaul's Drag U, 2010).

While the images play different roles within the women's lives, through an interaction with this imagery, they embark on a process of becoming, where they become the sensation while at the same time the sensation becomes them: "These intensive forces cannot be understood by any empirical sense. With the notion of intensity, sensation ceases to be representative and becomes 'real'" (Kennedy, 2002, pp. 110). The intensity grows strong, as the women have now seen a potential becoming to aspire to, as they swiftly begin to work. Some try to recreate the self they see in the image and become it, while others pick and choose certain elements they wish to incorporate into their own becoming. Again, "Drag U" equips these women with a practice, an instrument to expand their becomings, the ability to become a BwO, to seize this opportunity and transcend identity. The women, with the help of their drag professors, work on their dresses, wigs, make up, and practice lip-synching, choreography and runway struts towards their upcoming performance.

“I’m taking her home with me”

After a long and gruelling day of preparation, the women come back to the workroom and begin preparing for the final show. Emotions run high as the women and drag professors apply final touches to their looks. Friends and family members start pouring into the theatre, anxiously waiting to see the transformed women. One by one the women walk the runway, display their newfound diva attitude while answering the judges questions and dancing confidently around the stage. Rather than focus on this moment of performance, I want to focus on the commentary the women and their family members give at the end of the programme, when speaking of the experience and its lasting effects. When asked what he makes of his mother’s transformation, Lanae’s son responds “I want my mother, every single day, to incorporate her new look and attitude, the sky is the limit for her” (RuPaul’s Drag U, 2010). Following the Deleuzian lexicon I have developed, this look, that attitude, has now been incorporated into Lanae’s assemblage and is an indispensable part of her, and of her becoming sensation. Laura, an episode winner, comments, “I found my diva by putting that outfit on, and having fantastic makeup and that big hair bump on the top of my head. It was fantastic!” (RuPaul’s Drag U, 2010). Laura shines a light on the connections made between the human and non-human that assisted her in gaining this machinic assemblage that assisted her to become something different, new and exciting—a sensation. Despite there being a winner, I would argue that through the practice of drag an expansion of all the women’s becoming is enabled. The women take the chance to move beyond the identity they found so restricting, and destabilize the self and position they knew and loathed; sensation is now

embraced, forever connected to their becoming future identities. This is a lasting win for all.

Julie Hanson, makes a compelling argument regarding the meaning of the act of drag in her writing about drag kings (2007), which I find useful when approaching drag as a practice: "Drag king embodiment should be seen as a form of corporeal 'invention' that effects a positive difference from regular, normalized or constrained ways of being" (pp.72). I wish to move forward from Butler's understanding of drag as ambivalent (1993), as caught in the tension between subversion and appropriation, and apply the understanding of Deleuzian interlocutors like Hanson and Braidotti (2001, pp.246) who comprehend the positivity of the Deleuzian post-human which breaks away from the regular and normalized, enabling the body to transcend the limits assigned to it by society and encourage it to become the BwO. Many theorists choose to read drag as perpetuating misogyny and patriarchal motives (Morrison, Sachet & Underwood, Taylor & Rupp), and although queer theory managed to move beyond and acknowledge drag's ability to destabilize gender's inherent naturalness (Butler, 1990), I still I find that these approaches miss out on the immense possibilities that drag as a practice can offer when looked at through a Deleuzian perspective.

No longer just a copy of copy that lacks an original, not mimicry or parody, but instead a tool by itself, encouraging a different formation of the body, instigating connections between different bodies to achieve a becoming that is post-identity, that permits the subject to understand itself outside of constricting and dichotomous societal concepts. "Becoming is not to imitate or identify with

Yarden Stern

something or someone... Becoming is to extract particles between which one establishes the relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness that are closest to what one is becoming, and through which one becomes" (Deleuze & Guttari, 1987, pp.300). By focusing on "RuPaul's Drag U" I was able to show how both men and women can use drag as a practice, not to achieve a standard of femininity but to transcend it; use drag as a tool to encourage the body to embark on the never-ending process of becoming, and allow one to be comfortably situated in an everlasting middle, as there is no final outcome, no end to a becoming; use drag as a practice to enable the symbiotic moment of sensation, as definitions of subject and object become blurred and mangled, the self becomes multiple, ever changing and adaptive. I end with a slight amendment to RuPaul's timeless quote. I too believe we're born naked, but the rest is *becoming*.

Conclusion

To conclude, I offer a short summary of the motivations and choices that guided my thought and writing. Beginning with an attempt to break away from traditional ethnographic interrogations as well as queer theory's shortfalls in conceptualizing drag queen personas, I offered a new perspective through my choice of a methodological approach. Through a study of the philosophical canon of Gilles Deleuze I found that Deleuze's understandings of the body is a plea for distance from our selves, which he argues has become deeply rooted in rigid dichotomies of identification and social organization. This aim, I have argued, is closely linked to the objectives I conceptualized drag is embodying. Through an analysis of the reality TV programme "RuPaul's Drag U", I was able to not only offer a different perspective to the usual feminist reading of transformation shows but also to conceptualize drag as a tool that can bring the body closer to a liberation from the static position it is theorized under in both social and academic terms. Through an exploration of Deleuzian terminology, I attempted to reconceptualise the potential and meaning of drag and the drag queen, to reaffirm how important Deleuze's post-identity project is and how useful it may be.

Starting with a rhizomatic understanding, I attempted to rid myself from hierarchical conceptions as I approached this subject matter. This enabled me to focus on the positive aspect that a post-human project holds. While taking into consideration the usual critique directed towards drag, considering it misogynistic or a sublimation of an urge to identify as a woman, I instead situated drag within a project of becoming. Through a deconstruction of the drag queen as an assemblage,

not only a mechanic or external assemblage but also as internal assemblage, I identified the components needed for one to become a drag queen. Using and applying Deleuze's concept of the Body without Organs, I demonstrated how this theory links with the goals and aspirations of drag performance. Finally, I situated drag as a form of becoming sensation, by utilizing two of Deleuze's key concepts, becoming and sensation. By merging the two I argued that drag could be considered a becoming sensation as it blurs the distinction between subject and object, creating a moment where two bodies unite yet remain separate, becoming through one another in a sensational way, cementing the potential of drag as an emancipatory practice of bodily freedom.

I attempted the uneasy task of marrying two histories, two disconnected concepts and situating them together in the hopes that they illuminate one another and shed light on the potential a joint reading of drag and becoming can have on both Deleuzian understandings of the post-human project, as well as on drag as a tool for liberation from gender's rigid dichotomy. I hope to one day continue this project and expand its potential, bringing in more examples and experiences of drag's rich history and present, as well as to expand the Deleuzian lexicon that I have established to include his theories of deterritorialisation, the aspiration to become minoritarian and a fuller reading that connects drag to the Deleuzian conception of "becoming-woman". I believe that drag and Deleuze have a tremendous amount to gain when put in an academic assemblage together, as they deconstruct previous understanding of each other, they connect and together create new forms of becoming.

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