

THE RITUAL OF THE RUNWAY: STUDYING SOCIAL ORDER AND GENDER
PERFORMANCE IN *PROJECT RUNWAY*

A Thesis

by

ANDREA SCHWEIKHARD ROBISON

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

December 2009

Major Subject: Communication

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ABSTRACT

The Ritual of the Runway: Studying Social Order and Gender

Performance in *Project Runway*. (December 2009)

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Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Antonio La Pastina

Project Runway premiered on Bravo TV on December 1st, 2004, and is now in its sixth season, which aired on Lifetime. On *Project Runway*, designer contestants live together in apartments in downtown New York for the duration of filming and work on weekly challenges at Parsons The New School for Design. I am interested in determining the ways in which reality shows like *Project Runway* both allow and restrict the display of gender and sexual identity for contestants through the construction of a social order.

This study is a textual analysis of all five currently released seasons of *Project Runway*. I draw from theories of social interaction to provide the interpretive framework for this study. In order to conduct the textual analysis, I purchased all five currently released seasons of *Project Runway* and watched them all in order one time through, making notes as I watched them. I then went back through individual episodes to hone in on key themes and framing devices. As I watched, I looked for commonalities across episodes and seasons that demonstrate elements of a manufactured social order, including rules, codes and norms that were formed both through official ceremony by

the producers as well as those that emerged and were passed down unofficially through the contestants living and working together. I also looked for the various ways that performances of sexuality were allowed or constrained within this social world.

I then divided the data from the analysis into two distinct chapters: the first one (Chapter III) deals entirely with the way in which social order was created and presented on *Project Runway*, and the second (Chapter IV) explores the way that roles and gender identities are regulated and displayed within that social order.

Despite the seventy-four contestants of various gender and sexual orientation, designers on *Project Runway* are portrayed performing their identities within a limited range of roles. Gay male designers, while given some degree of authority within the realm of women's clothing, are represented through a series of hyper-ritualizations that tend to perpetuate stereotypes rather than challenge them. Straight male designers have few options for enacting their sexual identity on the show, and these often also play to stereotypes of masculinity. Female designers are generally not allowed to perform sexuality as part of their identities and are restricted to playing the part of the hysterical, bitchy or motherly female.

Furthermore, these gender and sexual identities serve to allow and restrict certain characters in their place at Bryant Park. Patriarchal gay men and sensitive straight men are given a shot at the prize, while women are only allowed to win if they do not perform their womanhood. Left in the margins, the performance of mothers, non-patriarchal gays and non-parental straight men always end with an "auf Weidersehen."

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother and father, who always told me I was smart. It is dedicated to my sister, for reminding me that I'm not. It is dedicated to my dogs for not caring either way.

This thesis is also dedicated to my husband for putting up with me while I wrote it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION: THE CHANCE
OF A LIFETIME

We sent fashion experts to four cities to find the best undiscovered designers in America...A panel of judges met to discuss the finalists and narrowed it down to the twelve best. Project Runway offers these 12 unknown designers a chance to show America and the fashion world what they can do. Every week we will give them a different challenge that will test their abilities to the limit. And the top names in the industry will be judging them. One designer will be cut every week until three remain. Those three will show their line at Olympus fashion week. Then one winner will be chosen. The winner will receive a spread in Elle magazine, a mentorship with a Banana Republic design team, and a hundred thousand dollars to start their own line. It's a head start that money just can't buy given to one designer who earns it where it counts—on the runway...For these 12 contestants, Project Runway is the chance of a lifetime. (Weinstein, 2004)

This thesis follows the style of *Critical Studies in Media Communication*.

Project Runway premiered on Bravo TV on December 1st, 2004, and is now in its sixth season, which aired on Lifetime. On *Project Runway*, designer contestants live together in apartments in downtown New York for the duration of filming and work on weekly challenges at Parsons The New School for Design. Design challenges range widely from using expensive fabrics to create a red carpet gown to using unconventional materials like plants to create a garden party dress or grocery store items to create a cocktail dress. All are intended to test various skills that a real designer is supposed to possess, for example, innovation, execution, and distinct point of view—in addition to making for good television, of course. The show’s hosts are supermodel, Heidi Klum, and Tim Gunn, who also serves as the designers’ mentor during challenges. Heidi usually presents the challenge, and the designers have a short amount of time to sketch out their designs before Tim takes them shopping for fabric at Mood Designer Fabrics. The contestants get anywhere from a few hours to a few days to complete their designs, which are then fitted to their models and presented on the runway. A panel of judges consisting of Heidi Klum, Michael Kors (“top American fashion designer”), Nina Garcia (“editor of Elle Magazine”), and one other guest judge rate the garments as they come down the runway; then, designers are called up onto the runway to be interrogated and to defend their designs. One designer is named the winner of each challenge, and one designer is named the loser, earning him/herself the famous “auf wiedersehen” from Heidi (commonly known as getting “auf’d”). After a number of challenges, the last three standing are given a 3 to 6 month hiatus to work on a collection, which they

present at New York Fashion Week. The judges then deliberate and choose the winner for that season.

As an avid consumer of the show, who has shamelessly seen each episode more than once, I began to be aware of various trends and themes that emerged both across episodes and across seasons. I am interested in determining the ways in which reality shows like *Project Runway* both allow and restrict the display of gender and sexual identity for contestants through the construction of a social order.

Defining the Reality Competition Show

Once a novelty out of necessity, reality television now represents a large and popular corner of media consumption. According to Andrejevic (2004) in *Reality TV: the Work of Being Watched*, reality television has come a long way from the cheap form of niche programming that began with CBS's *Survivor*. He argues that it has emerged as a new and distinct genre, evidenced by its own formulaic bag of tricks as well as two new Emmy categories, one for programs that include a game-show format and one for those that show dramatic incidents from "real" life, created for it by the U. S. Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.

A consideration of genre is important, as it serves to inform audiences of what can be expected of a particular film or television show. According to Truby (2009), each genre is a complex system of story, with its own unique hero, opponent, story beats, structures and themes, all of which are present in reality competition programs. He continues:

Genres aren't just systems for expressing certain themes. They are also strategies for storytelling. Action stories set up a kind of heavyweight fight with an intense punch/counter-punch between hero and opponent. Science fiction sends the hero to a unique technological future that highlights strengths and weaknesses in the present world. Thriller places a weakened hero in a tight box and shows him or her struggling to escape. (Truby, 2009)

Reality competition shows are conceived around the idea of a hero that perseveres through the challenges and eventually emerges as the triumphant winner—supposedly on the merit of his/her talent. However, it becomes clear that talent alone does not warrant the prize, at least not on *Project Runway*. Certain rules apparently govern who is allowed—or maybe more importantly who is *not* allowed—to be the next great American fashion designer. Additionally, where there is a hero, there must also be a villain. The villain heightens the dramatic tension of “who will win” that the producers want to ensure occurs. It is safe to assume that when careful casting fails to produce the desired villain, producers are not above manipulating an environment that will surely make it easy to frame one. The role of the villain also appears to be reserved for certain individuals, based, at least in part, on their gender identity. Both the hero and the villain are accompanied by a host of other formulaic or often-repeated character types that seem to almost follow a script. As Juzwiak (2009) observes, saying the now infamous line “I didn’t come here to make friends” ensures a good deal of playing time for the villain, but never results in a win. So the reality show, despite its name’s claim, is not a show of the real; ultimately, it is a fiction.

The problem with programs like these is the contradiction invoked by the word “reality”; it implies that these shows are some sort of reflection of what we believe to be real. Dubrofsky (2006) argues that when series make use of the term “reality,” they in turn naturalize any constructions of race, romance, sexual orientation, etc. and promote these to their audiences. Furthermore, when we stick fifteen people together and make them live together and work together, we believe we are somehow watching what any of us in a random sample would do in such a situation. We are being asked to accept a highly crafted version of what Durkheim calls “the social.”

Analyzing the Reality Competition Show

While the reality show has been studied in a variety of ways, there are still questions that need to be asked. Because reality shows are essentially shows about the social, we need to understand the basic elements of social order in order to fully understand the devices employed in their construction for reality shows. The key term here is “construction,” as we are not actually seeing unfettered social interaction. Rather we are offered a version, a touched-up snapshot, of someone’s idea of what reality should look like. By examining the social order that is created in *Project Runway*, we learn much about the crafting of rules, norms, and codes that are then used to allow and restrict representations of identity. When scientists want to know how certain drugs affect productivity, they force the situation (usually on rats) in a laboratory and watch what happens. In reality shows, producers not only force individuals into specified situations, they also doctor their findings by carefully selecting the images that most benefit their objectives. With *Project Runway*, Bravo presents the perfect scenario for

asking questions about how rules and norms are created, protected, and violated within a highly manipulated community. Bravo even coyly tells me to “Watch what happens!”

Goffman (1979) addresses how we must approach this issue in a way that makes one wonder whether he was somehow able to foresee the future popularity of what would be reality television:

Our concern as students ought not to be in uncovering real, natural expressions, whatever they might be.... These acts and appearances are likely to be anything but natural indexical signs, except insofar as they provide indications of the actor's interest in conducting himself effectively under conditions of being treated in accordance with the doctrine of natural expression. (p. 7)

Much like the performances of everyday social interaction, reality television is a constructed performance but with tighter parameters within which its performers may act. Here, rules are not distributed unilaterally telling everyone to act or not to act the same way. Rules vary according to roles or identities, and these identities must be performed by the appropriate characters for the society—and for good reality television—to function.

Furthermore, Goffman (1979) observes that gender displays are the most common ways in which people communicate how they should be interpreted and reacted to in a given situation. *Project Runway* is especially rife with gender displays, as the performance of gay male designer is a feature of every season. We also learn what it means to be a straight male designer by watching the performance of this identity as well as the performance of others in reaction to this identity on the show. Female designers

on the show are all but asexualized, and ancient stereotypes are perpetuated through the performance and production of their identities in relation to the male designers and to each other. Here, again, I include “production” as a key concept in the performance of identity. On *Project Runway*, as in “real life,” we do not have total agency in regards to the performance of our identities. Even more the case on reality shows, it is important that we be mindful of the ever-present hand of the producers and editors in constructing the version of “reality” that they deem most real or appropriate for characters on the show. We must question why gay male designers’ coming out narratives are included in the final cut and lesbian designers’ sexuality is not so much as mentioned.

Justifying the Ritual Lens

To know what [the social is] made of that we have not made ourselves, it is not enough simply to consult our own consciousness; we must look outside ourselves, we must observe history, we must establish a whole science, and a complex one, which can advance only slowly, by collective effort. (Durkheim, 1912/2001, p. 21)

Rothenbuhler (1998) provides multiple reasons for applying a ritual lens to my study. Using ritual as a theoretical framework for research allows me to do several things, the first of which is to rethink something that has been overanalyzed in only a certain way. As I have already mentioned, reality television is now a firmly situated cultural object in modern day media consumption, a fact that has not gone unnoticed by media scholars. Ritual allows me to bring a fresh eye to the study of this type of media, and uncover new facets of its function in our society. Rothenbuhler argues that using a

ritual lens also helps to identify aspects of things that have not been analyzed at all. For example, looking at the ceremony surrounding the ominous black runway in the show points to a creation and manipulation of a sacred realm; it has yet to be asked what if any implications arise from such an observation. A third purpose that a ritual framework serves is to explain aspects of things that do not make sense in other theoretical frameworks. In this study, I am able to ask—and answer—why some female designers are allowed to play certain roles while others are not. A ritual lens also provides me with the means to form expectations about how or why certain things will work. In this case, it enables an explanation of how framing is used to strengthen certain social norms that then further regulate behavior (often in a highly dramatic way).

Lastly, Rothenbuhler suggests that using ritual theory expands the current boundaries of our field. Communication and media studies are inherently social in nature, so it makes sense that any study in these fields would benefit from the incorporation of other social disciplines. According to Durkheim (1912/2001), “[sociology’s] goal is first and foremost to explain a current reality, something close to us and consequently capable of affecting our ideas and actions. This reality is man, more specifically man today” (p. 3). And now, this reality is on television.

Our most basic definition of the social order is inherited from Durkheim (1912/2001), who contends that it is contained in rites and rituals that serve to simultaneously empower and restrict the individual in order to maintain social order and provide for social integration on the moral level. The producers of *Project Runway* work very hard to foster and craft a social order so that they can reap the benefits of its

dramatic violation. In Season 2, when Zulema Griffin wins a challenge, she is empowered by her entitlement to choose her model first for the next round (Weinstein, 2006). However, we see an even greater restricting power at work when she violates the social norm of model-designer loyalty by choosing Nick Verreos' model and consequently loses the trust of the rest of the contestants on the show. Several framing devices were used to turn this violation into an outright scandal, thereby securing this norm for future designers and making for rather good television.

Although designers are framed as being on the show with the single goal of making it to Fashion Week, social interaction is at least an equal feature of the overall production. Some designers seem open to making friends while others make it clear that they are only there to compete. Whichever the attitude, Turner (1969) is keen to point out that:

the spontaneity and immediacy of *communitas*...can seldom be maintained for very long. *Communitas* itself soon develops a structure, in which free relationships between individuals become converted into norm-governed relationships between social personae. (p. 132)

This is very clearly the case in *Project Runway*, as the relationships between the designers evolve and come to be understood in certain ways. Does a female designer come to be known as the group's den mother, the little sister, or the bitch?

Rothenbuhler (1998) notes that all of this is symbolically constructed and voluntarily performed through ritual. Rituals make up the "moral regulation of social life" (p. 5), and constitute the things that we ought or ought not to do as members of our

given society. He also points to things that, in *Project Runway*, appear off the runway, through small everyday orders like “smiles and nods, offices with windows, and turn-taking in conversation” (p. xiii). Shifting the analytic point of view from rituals as things to a ritual aspect of things allows us to study the “everyday interpersonal communication through which relationships are conducted” (p. 5) and—in the case of reality television—produced.

Dubrofsky’s work (2006) on the reality show *The Bachelor* points to ways that everyday ritual is used to construct a startling resemblance to the Western idea of the harem. She points out the Oriental rugs, lush sofas with exorbitant amounts of pillows, floor-style dining, ceiling-to-floor draperies, and hot tubs in every nook of the labyrinth-like house. She even notes the “Oriental” music constantly playing in the background of each scene. Dubrofsky makes clear that the producers are using every iconic device imaginable to create the West’s idea of the harem. It will be an important point of analysis in my study of *Project Runway* to see how producers use music and lighting to create boundaries for contestants.

Perhaps the most important function of this study is to point out the ritualistic ways in which gender and sexual identity are allowed or not allowed to be performed in a show about “reality.” Here, Goffman’s work (1979) on gender advertisements is of greatest use in attempting to understand both the performance and the production of ritual-like gender roles and sexual identities. In defining the function that gender displays serve in society, Goffman writes that they “provide evidence of the actor’s alignment in a gathering, the position he seems prepared to take up in what is about to

happen in the social situation” (p. 1). He argues that displays include all of an individual’s behavior and appearance, and they work to inform everyone around the individual about his/her social identity, as well as how those around him/her should relate to him/her. These displays are ritualized so as to provide easy access to the performer and his/her interpreter(s); however, on *Project Runway*, these displays are selected and woven together to create a more perfect representation of a character. They are no longer everyday ritual displays of the performer’s identity; they have become hyper-rituals of what the producers want that performer’s identity to look like. The ways in which these hyper-rituals are portrayed will be the focus of much of the analysis of *Project Runway*.

Organizing the Analysis

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how reality shows use certain framing devices to create a sense of social and moral order that limit gender and sexual identities. Chapter II provides a more in-depth grasp of the many theorists/theories that have contributed to this study as well as an explication of my methods for going about the analysis. Chapters III and IV proceed into the actual findings of the analysis. Chapter III is devoted to the social order of *Project Runway*, including the way that rules, norms, moral codes, violations of these, and ceremony are produced and highlighted. Chapter IV then takes us further inside the manufactured social order to point out how roles are crafted on *Project Runway*, including how gender and sexual identity are allowed or not allowed to be performed by gay men and straight men, and how the identity of women is equally limited in performance. This analysis includes both the ritual portrayals of these

identities/roles as well as the ritual portrayals *toward* or in shaping these identities/roles. I conclude this study with a final chapter that reviews the major findings and suggests implications for further research based on revelations from the data.

As media continues to dominate so much of what we understand about our culture, it only makes sense that our research should follow this trend. With reality television nowhere near a decline in popularity, it also makes sense that we begin to consider more seriously what exactly the media's definition of reality implies for society at large. This in-depth look at *Project Runway* provides insight into the construction of a social order on reality shows, as contestants living and working together are used for the benefit of good TV to demonstrate the serious role that rules and norms play in the regulation of self and other in the performance and representation of community. Furthermore, this show has the potential to reveal how social performances of gender and sexuality are regulated and manipulated by producers, as the various identities of gay men, straight men, and women are displayed as part of the appeal of *Project Runway*. Ultimately, it could even lead to a better understanding of the reification of stereotypes in society as a whole. As human beings, our lives are wrought with ritual and its various counterparts. *Project Runway* provides the opportunity to witness the media's function in producing and perpetuating those ritualizations. It is time to accept Bravo's invitation and "watch what happens."

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND METHODOLOGY

Review of Literature

Several theorists can contribute greatly to a basic understanding of the production of social order, as well as the gender roles and sexual identities created as a byproduct of it for *Project Runway*. In this chapter, I will look first at how genre theory provides a foundation for studying reality competition television. Then I will examine the ways in which social order is conceived both in broad terms and how such theories might be applied to better understand the context of reality television. Finally, I will examine theories concerning the construction and performance of roles and how gender and sexual orientation often work to restrict those performances.

On Genre

“Every aspect of television exhibits a reliance on genre” (Mittell, 2001, p. 3). Industries rely on genre to produce programs, to self-define, and to coordinate line-up schedules. Audiences rely on them for ordering personal preferences, for viewing practices, and for everyday conversation. Scholars use genres to organize research projects, to create special topic courses, and to locate common frameworks. In his article on cultural approaches to television genre, Mittell (2001) argues that television genre can be understood in the same way as film genre; however, it comes with its own unique genres enabled by the specific medium of television.

Altman (1999) explores the basic concepts of genre theory, defining genre as a complex idea that can refer to a blueprint, a structure, a label, a contract, or all of the above. Even though genre theorists do not necessarily agree on all four of these meanings, genre can generally be defined as “patterns/forms/styles/structures which transcend individual films, and which supervise both their construction by the filmmaker, and their reading by an audience” (Neale, 1980, p. 7). In this way, genres often provide the formulas that drive production. They constitute the structures that define individual texts, and producers often base programming decisions on criteria laid out by the specific genre at hand.

Altman (1999) further informs us that for films to be recognized as members of the same genre, they must share both a common topic and a common structure, or “a common way of configuring that topic” (p. 23). Genre programs use the same material time and again; they rely on the same fundamental conflicts and repeatedly resolve them in a similar way, often varying the details but leaving the overall pattern or structure unchanged. This repetitive nature makes genre shows somewhat predictable; they “guarantee a certain style, a particular atmosphere and a well-known set of attitudes” (Altman, 1999, p. 25).

Perhaps for this reason, audience’s expectations for a show have been found to depend heavily on their understanding of its genre (Altman, 1999). Schatz (1981) asserts that “the genre film reaffirms what the audience believes both on individual and on communal levels” (p. 38). Levi-Strauss argued that narrative or genre can sometimes work as a form of self-expression for a society. “According to this approach,” says

Altman, “the narrative patterns of generic texts grow out of existing societal practices, imaginatively overcoming contradictions within those very practices” (p. 27).

Genre programs also depend largely on intertextual references to make sense (Altman, 1999; Mittell, 2001). New seasons of *Project Runway* are more easily understood in the context of previous *Project Runway* seasons or even in the context of other reality competition shows than in the context of the real world (no pun intended).¹

Andrejevic (2004) speaks to how reality television, originally a cheap way to fill niche programming slots in the wake of a writers’ strike, has expanded into a genre of its own. He writes:

Reality TV formats have multiplied to the point that they have become self-conscious parodies of their original premise of access to the unscripted interactions of people who are not professional entertainers. The genre has done little to follow through on the promise to ‘share’ control with viewers by setting aside hackneyed formulas. Rather, reality shows are becoming the latest and most self-conscious in a string of transparently staged spectacles, complete with their own formulas and increasingly reliant on a cast of demicelebrities culled from the pool of would-be actors. (p. 3)

¹ Much of this research has drawn from the work of Altman (1999) on film genre. His work also includes a new theory of film genre that proposes that genres arise in one of two ways: “either a relatively stable set of semantic givens is developed through syntactic experimentation into a coherent and durable syntax, or an already existing syntax adopts a new set of semantic elements” (pp. 221-222). However, I have not chosen to include this theory in this paper, as it primarily deals with historical questions and does not directly contribute to our understanding of genre as related to this particular study.

In a broadcast for *This American Life*, Juzwiak (2009) speaks specifically to this issue when he argues that reality television finds its charm in repetition, especially in shows where people compete. “It’s like sports,” he says, “the game stays the same, and the fun is watching how different people play.” As Andrejevic (2004) pointed out, reality television relies on its own host of formulas, and because of this, certain phrases have a telltale tendency to pop up. Whether someone “threw me under the bus,” “I’m here to win this,” or “you will see me again,” producers rely on a standard set of clichés created specifically for or by the genre. However, Juzwiak contends that one phrase stands out above all others as representative of the reality competition program: “I’m not here to make friends.” He argues that reality competition shows create a place where:

an aggressive declaration of incivility is not just acceptable, it’s inevitable. And what makes “I’m not here to make friends” quintessential reality TV is that it’s impossible to imagine ever saying it in real life. If you’re in a situation where you actually don’t want to make friends (waiting in line for three hours, sitting on a plane, playing a game of pick-up basketball), what would you gain from announcing to everyone that “I’m not here to make friends?”

Furthermore, Juzwiak observes that this phrase is not associated with contestants at random. Rather it is almost always reserved for the show’s villain, or “the one we love to hate.” Reality competition programs rely on a strong cast of characters each season, and even more so on the ability to craft these characters into specific roles—like villain—that have come to represent the genre. These and other concepts related to character types will be discussed at greater length later in this chapter. In the meantime,

we must lay the groundwork with a solid understanding of the social world created for these roles, and the ways in which ritual can be used to define them.

On Social Order and Ritual

Within [man] are two beings: an individual being that originates in the organism...and a social being that represents within us the higher reality of the intellectual and moral order that we know through observation—by which I mean society. ...Because he participates in society, the individual naturally transcends himself when he thinks and when he acts. (Durkheim, 1912/2001, p. 18)

Rothenbuhler (1998) argues that regardless of the instrumental ideology, formal organizations—which include reality competition shows—are social orders. For this reason, things like rite, ceremony, and the ritual aspects of interaction will serve the same functions in *Project Runway* that they do elsewhere in social life. “They are a performance of participation” (Rothenbuhler, 1998, p. 114). It is important that we understand the basic nature of social order so that we may better contextualize the processes at play in the creation and maintenance of roles and identities in reality competition television.

Durkheim (1912/2001) wrote about “the social” as a *sui generis*, a unique category of its own, that functions through a regulatory process. This process, Westley (1978) argues, is largely contained in rites and rituals that serve to empower the individual or restrict the individual while at the same time maintaining social order and providing for social integration on a moral and/or cultural level. Because the social is a

reifying system, when individuals are compliant with their society, they are rewarded with feelings of satisfaction or a sense of job well done.

Furthermore, Durkheim (1912/2001) argues that for society to exist we must perform it, and rituals are the means for us to do so. Rituals are purposeful ways of acting, with the specific goal to stimulate and sustain or recreate certain mental states within their group. Rothenbuhler (1998) defines ritual as “the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life” (p. 27). This means that ritual can work both as an expression of social order and as a source of social order. For this reason, rituals are an absolute necessity of any social order, working to create, maintain and adapt it.

If ritual is present in all social interaction, then it is always there, waiting to be used, to symbolize and bring meaning to otherwise unnoteworthy objects or practices (Rothenbuhler, 1998). Two individuals may be friends regardless of whether or not they have a secret handshake; but having a secret handshake provides them with a symbol, something they can point to as a meaningful and visible expression of their friendship.

The secret handshake example demonstrates another aspect of ritual; it is both backward, in its reference to what came before, the symbols and meanings of the ritual in the context of its social order; and forward, in its immediate enactment by the people participating in it (Rothenbuhler, 1998). Ritual, then, symbolically constructs the social order and provides the means for its participants to perform it. Altogether, rituals make up what Rothenbuhler calls the “moral regulation of social life” (p. 5), and

simultaneously create and represent the things that we ought or ought not to do as members of our given society.

The “oughts” and the “ought nots” exist to mark out the serious life from the mundane and vice versa. In order for members of a social order to know what they ought or ought not to do, a clear distinction must be made between these two worlds, between the sacred and the profane.

On the Sacred and Profane

Durkheim (1912/2001) insists that the sacred is, by definition, separate. It is characterized by the very fact that it is set apart from the profane. Mircea Eliade (1959) elaborates on this definition of the nature of the sacred. He writes that we become aware of the sacred only and directly because the sacred manifests or shows itself as something apart from the profane. Any society, he argues, is constituted entirely by its various manifestations of sacred realities. In each case these sacred things that do not belong to our world are manifest in objects that are an integral part of our world, in other words, natural and profane. In *Project Runway*, the black plywood runway is nothing special in itself; however, it becomes special by the manifestation of the sacred upon it. Fates are decided upon that black plywood runway; Heidi announces future challenges there, she introduces judges there, the designs are presented there, winners are chosen there, and people are eliminated there. It is a sacred space, not because it is a black plywood construction, but because it represents the serious life. Profane things, then, are not necessarily vile, but are simply those things that are not the sacred; they are the things

that must keep their distance from what is sacred, in order to mark the sacred as set apart (Durkheim, 1912/2001).

Negative, positive and piacular (reparatory) rites are very important—they serve to protect this distinction between the sacred and profane through both external constraints and internal motivation. Sacred things are protected and isolated by prohibitions (Durkheim, 1912/2001). For example, crime has a very positive social function. By labeling certain acts as crimes and then punishing those acts, moral standards become visible. The sacred is actually being reconstituted every time someone violates it and is punished for it. Crime and punishment, then, are “symbols that bring abstract ideas of social order into everyday practice” (Rothenbuhler, 1998, p. 93).

An individual’s identity is based on the location of the individual within this system of boundaries. At the most basic level, the individual that violates the moral code is a villain, while the individual that abides by it, upholds it, or restores it would be a hero. However, the rules and rituals of the social order do not apply solely to criminal behavior. Rules and rituals also serve to create, protect, and dictate several roles within a society. In this way, an individual’s alignment or lack thereof to certain roles creates his/her identity.

On Ritual and Identity

What the human nature of males and females really consists of, then, is a capacity to learn to provide and to read depictions of masculinity and femininity and a willingness to adhere to a schedule for presenting these pictures, and this

capacity they have by virtue of being persons, not females or males. (Goffman, 1979, p. 8)

According to Rothenbuhler (1998), an individual ritually performs his/her identity based on his/her position in a network of social relations; furthermore, they are only enabled to do this through a ritually coordinated sequence of social actions, or displays. Goffman (1979) wants to assume that “all of an individual’s behavior and appearance informs those who witness him, minimally telling them something about his social identity, about his mood, intent, and expectations, and about the state of his relations to them” (p. 1). He adds that in order for an individual to give and receive what the ritual rules of the social situation dictate, he/she must—in some way—style him/herself so that others in the social situation can immediately know his/her social—and sometimes personal—identity. Rothenbuhler (1998) defines style as the unique qualities that help to identify various texts or performances as belonging to a particular group. “If the elements of style correspond to social conventions of performance, they can be seen as ritualization” (p. 111).

Moreover, Rothenbuhler (1998) informs us that the objects of style that come to represent a particular group must in some way originate in or grow out of the attitudes of the group identities, and they must be organized into a system. Utility, aesthetics, semiotic opposition, and metaphor work together to create “a recognizable style that defines group membership and performs self identity” (p. 112). If these elements match the society’s rules for performing the identity, it thus marks participation in the serious life. The performance becomes repetitive, it has an agreed upon definition, it is

symbolic in form, and it is therefore ritual. These rituals are used to initiate interactions, in which an individual not only presents a role for him/herself to play, but also for the other as well. The interaction is significant based on the acceptance, rejection, or amendment of that role (Rothenbuhler, 1998).

Gender plays a large part in this construction of identity and social interaction. It is common knowledge that society provides a limited number of acceptable options for portraying masculinity and femininity. Numerous studies have been done in an attempt to reveal how society teaches girls that they should want to play with Barbie and boys with G.I. Joe (and further how society goes about defining these two toys as inherently different objects). In defining the function that gender displays serve in society, Goffman (1979) writes that they “provide evidence of the actor’s alignment in a gathering, the position he seems prepared to take up in what is about to happen in the social situation” (p. 1).

So gender display refers to any form of conventionalized portrayal of the culturally established correlates of sex (Goffman, 1979). By wearing a skirt, I display my gender. When a stranger steps in front to open a door for me, he displays his gender. Gender is displayed when an infant is wrapped in a pink or blue blanket. Furthermore, Goffman discovered a clear hierarchy being presented through gender display. He points to the ways in which the shared social experience of the parent-child complex is used fundamentally in adult social interaction. Goffman found that in many situations:

whenever a male has dealings with a female or a subordinate male (especially a younger one), some mitigation of potential distance, coercion, and hostility is

quite likely to be induced by the application of the parent-child complex. Which implies that, ritually speaking, females are equivalent to subordinate males and both are equivalent to children. (p. 5)

He further alludes to Durkheim when he suggests that this type of expression is never incidental, but rather a political ceremony, which affirms women's place in the social structure. Goffman (1979) goes as far as to say that all feminine expression that aligns itself with society's gender norms is ultimately an indication of acceptance of the social structure, simultaneously expressing subordination and constituting it:

The expression of subordination and domination through this swarm of situational means is more than a mere tracing or symbol or ritualistic affirmation of the social hierarchy. These expressions considerably constitute the hierarchy; they are the shadow and the substance. (p. 6)

On Hyper-ritualization

What was a ritual becomes itself ritualized, a transformation of what is already a transformation, a "hyper-ritualization." Thus, the human use of displays is complicated by the human capacity for reframing behavior. (Goffman, 1979, p. 3)

It is apparent that ritual is used in all aspect of human interaction. It works to create and sustain a social order, helping to inform individuals on how they should or should not act in community. It also works to display identity and to direct individuals on aligning their identities within the social order. However, reality television—despite its name—is not a true reflection of the social order. It is a show *about* reality rather

than a show *of* reality. For the show to be successful, for it to accomplish its generic goal, it must somehow recreate a picture of social order, of rules and norms, and of individuals acting within it, bound by its moral code. Producers are able to do this through the selection, perfection, and magnification of specific moments. They ritualize the rituals of social interaction (Goffman, 1979).

As we have just seen, displays are how individuals communicate their identities; they tell others in the social interaction who they are and how they should be dealt with. Goffman (1979) argues that “once a display becomes well established in a particular sequence of actions, a section of the sequence can be lifted out of its original context, parenthesized, and used in a quotative way...including, very commonly, the depiction of make-believe scenes in advertisements” (p. 3). Goffman calls this effect hyper-ritualization, where the standardization, exaggeration, and simplification that characterize rituals in the first place are further exaggerated for commercial—or reality televisual—purposes.

Rothenbuhler (1998) contends that the entire genre of commercial realism, and again I would add reality television, is built on this stylization of style. It depends on the “extra-careful display of already narrowly structured display forms” (p. 95) to communicate or represent the intended social reality. The central concern of the producers, then, is how to concentrate and intensify certain traits of unmediated behavior and interaction (Ytreberg, 2002).

This is the real obstacle, because, as Rothenbuhler (1998) points out, there is no unitary self:

everyone is an amalgam of partial, ill-defined, overlapping, contradicting, simultaneous, and distinct roles. There is no unitary social world; situations are mixtures of responsibilities, desires, knowledge, relevancies, constraints, resources, and performances. In any given moment, one may be polite, attractive, assertive, attentive at some level, unavailable at others, a friend, and a professional; with the choice of a few words, the turn of a conversation, the whole combination shifts like the bits of glass in a kaleidoscope into an utterly new but equally structured pattern. (p. 109)

That there is no unitary social world is actuality; that there is one unitary social world is reality...television. Which is why the editors of reality competition shows have so much work cut out for them. They must take all of these elements, these amalgamations, these mixtures of responsibilities, and convey only one to an audience.

According to Ytreberg (2002), editing is the general process behind hyper-ritualization and its associated effects. He credits Goffman when he says that editing takes out the “dull footage” that makes up the majority of interpersonal social interaction and, in cases like reality television programming, leaves us with the high points or moments of dramatic interest. Mass-mediated social interaction, then, is a “more condensed and more crafted version of its interpersonal origin” (Ytreberg, 2002, p. 486).

On Framing

Framing becomes the producers’ means of crafting the version of reality they feel is most appropriate (entertaining). Goffman (1974/1986) provides a good working definition of framing in his work on *Frame Analysis*. Although his goal was to equate

framing with the production of meaning in a more general sense (Ytreberg, 2002), the theoretical concepts can easily be transferred to understand the practice of framing within the context of reality television. Goffman argues that there is a limited number of possibilities available to an individual for defining a situation and their relationship to it. This is true for producers as they sort through the hundreds of hours of raw footage of contestants on reality shows and try to determine which of those limited possibilities they want to portray. Based on their decision, the frame device is then used to render “what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful” (Goffman, 1974/1986, p. 21) in order to adequately portray the intended version.

Producers rely on other devices for framing as well. In addition to carefully selected formal interactions, Rothenbuhler (2008) points to ways that rituals might appear through small everyday orders like “smiles and nods, offices with windows, and turn-taking in conversation” (p. xiii). He observes that:

ritual elements constitute a thick layer in the everyday representation and performance of status, authority, etiquette, and procedure within organizations, as individuals are assigned office space and furniture, as dress codes are performed, greetings given, access controlled, meetings conducted, and reports circulated (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983). (p. 113)

Dubrofsky (2006) demonstrates how these framing concepts can be applied to the analysis of reality television when she examines the reality show, *The Bachelor*. She highlights the various ways the program uses the West's idea of the Orient's harem to

frame monogamous romance as something that should take place between a white man and his white woman. Dubrofsky goes to great length in her examination of the set to reveal a startling resemblance to the Western idea of the harem as she points out the Oriental rugs, lush sofas with exorbitant amounts of pillows, floor-style dining, ceiling-to-floor draperies, and hot tubs in every nook of the labyrinth-like house. She even notes the “Oriental” music constantly playing in the background of each scene. Dubrofsky makes clear that the producers are using every ritualistic device imaginable to create the West’s idea of the harem. Her analysis clearly supports Goffman’s finding (1979) that any scene “can be defined as an occasion for the depiction of gender difference, and in any scene a resource can be found for effecting this display” (p. 9).

So again, the basic component of a frame is not the individual but the limited set of stances available at any given moment. Goffman (1981) concludes from his study on “Radio Talk” that:

although it may appear that the tack given by an announcer is an expression of his personality, in fact one finds that the choice was necessarily made from a handful of established possibilities, and that what should impress is not the idiosyncrasy of the choice, but the conventionality and paucity of the options. (p. 273)

On Performing Reality

Although it exposes participants to a degree that is unthinkable in most everyday unmediated social interaction, today’s reality programming points to exactly the

aspects of interaction that Goffman focused on: generalized surveillance countered by constant role performance. (Ytreberg, 2002, p. 485)

Even if framing does tend to make individual contestants somewhat disposable, *Project Runway* must still convince its contestants to buy into the rules of its social order so that they will in turn recreate and perform it. A game cannot work if none of the players believe in its rules. Even in choosing not to play or not to play by the rules, they are at least acknowledging that something exists for them to play or not to play.

The performances of reality show contestants, like musicians, artists, reporters and politicians, are not readily distinguished from their selves. Their media representations are based on a sense of honest expression, on a supposedly direct and uncalculated relationship between self and expressive work. “They are, in the system, supposed to be themselves” (Rothenbuhler, 2005, p. 96).

However, they are similar to other media stars in that they represent characters, and their characters are supposed to represent familiar types, albeit pushed to extremes and somehow simultaneously unique. In fact, reality competition programs lend even more credibility to the idea that the star is a symbol of a social type. The various roles being displayed on *Project Runway* are actually ritual performances of otherwise ordinary ways of being (Rothenbuhler, 1998).

Furthermore, the designer contestant’s ability to perform in this social world is a learned behavior. Much as we are socialized as children as to how we are to interact in our everyday social world, designers on *Project Runway* learn from past seasons how they are expected to act as competitors on the show. As already discussed in thinking

about reality competition shows as a genre, phrases like “I’m not here to make friends” demonstrate a specific knowledge on the part of the contestants of how they should perform the given social order. Interestingly, they also demonstrate a certain awareness of the framing process and its possible effects on their performances. Juzwiak (2009) says of this, “It’s as though the savvy contestants say, ‘If I’m going to be spun or edited to look a certain way anyway, I’m going to take control of this,’” presumably through playing to standardized roles like the villain in this case.

In a chapter exploring how the media serves to celebrate and even worship the individual, Rothenbuhler (2005) speaks more to this issue when he writes that ritual does “more than present heroes and villains; in this way, heroes and villains are created” (p. 94). Moreover, their performances serve a larger function; the moral dramas presented in reality television competitions like *Project Runway* show “what happens to people who perform their individuality in good and bad ways” (Rothenbuhler, 2005, p. 94).

Methodology

This study is a textual analysis of all five currently released seasons of *Project Runway*. Textual analysis, as the phrase implies, begins in an effort to position the text at the center of the analysis (Jasinski, 2001). For this study, I take a text-activated approach, in which the text (*Project Runway*) provides information for the reader (myself) to read and interpret. Staiger (1992) says that, with this approach, the dynamic of the experience is centered on answering two questions: “what are the specific features of the text? what will the ideal or competent reader do when encountering those texts?” (p. 36) Furthermore:

a reader interpreting any work of literature or film will be drawing upon interpretive frames historically available to him or her, and these frames will be influential even in the act of perception or the process of comprehension and evaluation. (p. 21)

Jasinski (2001) builds on this when he discusses the relationship between theory and text. Textual analyses are concerned with particular cases but draw from theoretical principles that are outside of the isolated text. Consequently, “the explanation of the specific phenomenon under investigation is itself theoretical” (p. 94). As should be evident at this point in the paper, I will be drawing from theories of social interaction to provide the interpretive framework for this study.

Positioning the scholar as the reader of the text is perhaps not what Staiger (1992) had in mind in her discussion of reception studies, and admittedly it comes across slightly narcissistic. However, Dow (2001) provides the perfect rationale for doing it anyway. She argues that the critic gives authority to the method rather than the other way around. The text is transformed into something when we interpret it and make it our own. The aim of textual analysis then is not to discover the truth about the artifact, but to illuminate it. Dow writes:

Our greatest obligation is not to render it transparent, but rather, as Jasinski would argue, to “thicken” it with critical *impasto*, to authorize a reading that makes it *interesting* in a way that it was not before. (p. 346)

In her introduction to *Prime-time feminism: television, media culture, and the women’s movement since 1970*, Dow (1996) considers what terms like *criticism*, *text*,

audience and *theory* mean when looking at television as a textual artifact. She again offers up the view of criticism as a form of argument “rather than a quest for truth” (p. 3). It becomes an almost performative activity, in which we as critics put forth one of many possible interpretations of the text as enriching without ever needing to claim that it is the best way, the only way, or even the audience’s way of seeing that text.

In order to conduct this textual analysis, I purchased all five currently released seasons of *Project Runway* and watched them all in order one time through, making notes as I watched them. I then went back through individual episodes to hone in on key themes and framing devices. As I watched, I looked for commonalities across episodes and seasons that demonstrate elements of a manufactured social order, including rules, codes and norms that were formed both through official ceremony by the producers as well as those that emerged and were passed down unofficially through the contestants living and working together. Similarly, I looked for violations of these norms and rules to see how such violations were dealt with by producers and by other contestants.

I also looked for the various ways that performances of sexuality were allowed or constrained within this social world. Where and how was gayness allowed to be performed? Where was it restricted? How did contestants respond to the straight male designer, and what did it say about that particular identity’s role in this particular social world? What were the options and/or limitations for performing womanhood on *Project Runway*?

At the outset of watching all of the episodes, I created a list of these types of elements, dividing them into specific categories. Then as I watched *Project Runway*, I

entered examples of these things into the corresponding categories, including full quotations from contestants, music cues, background images, episode information, etc. I also kept a second running document that followed each season chronologically. Into this document, I again entered full quotations and other displays of items that I felt were interesting or relevant but did not fit very well into one of the predetermined categories.

After watching all five seasons, I began a comprehensive review of the literature for this study. The theories highlighted in the literature provided further insight into many of the predetermined categories and the examples that corresponded with them, as well as provided new insight into the situations I had recorded as not fitting within a particular category. I then divided the data from the analysis into two distinct chapters: the first one (Chapter III) deals entirely with the way in which social order was created and presented on *Project Runway*, and the second (Chapter IV) explores the way that roles and gender identities are regulated and displayed within that social order.

CHAPTER III

ESTABLISHING THE SOCIAL ORDER

Ultimately, the reality show strives to create a picture of a social order among its contestants. In claiming that what we see is “real,” it is important for the producers to demonstrate that the social world we are viewing has all the same components as the world that we, the viewers, know from our own everyday experience.

To accomplish this, however, it must magnify and exaggerate various features. We are perhaps best aided in our thinking about this when we compare it to a stage play. The goal of a play is to create a believable world with identifiable and relatable characters. While expressionism is certainly not dead, the majority of plays strive for a high degree of realism, integrating as many details into sets, props, and costumes as possible to help us, the audience, believe that what we are watching is a representation of real people. And from our seats in the audience, they might accomplish this. But only if we stay in our seats. If we get too close, we see that their make-up is extreme and garish, their costumes are overly detailed and gaudy, and that the buildings have only a front. Similarly, in order for us to believe the reality show, producers must exaggerate certain features, behaviors, and actions. In order for us to see what they want us to see from our couches at home, they must over-accentuate anything they want us to notice.

That said, we are able to analyze the consistent features of *Project Runway* that most represent the social order being constructed. I am not in any way claiming that everything we see on reality shows is a manipulation of producers. It is important to

acknowledge that there is no script, that the players on these shows are choosing their words and their actions, and that the interactions that arise among players are also unscripted. However, it is equally important to note which of these interactions are chosen as features of the show. It is important to remember that the moments highlighted as most representative of the social order on *Project Runway* are indeed highlights chosen to paint a specific portrait of the individuals and the community.

The Serious Life

It is perhaps easiest to see the producers' hand in establishing the social order through their construction of ceremony throughout the show. Ceremony plays a rather large role in constituting the sacred or the serious life for the contestants on *Project Runway*. From the presentation of each challenge to the presentation of the designers' work to the elimination of a designer, ceremony and ritual guide us through the serious life one frame at a time. And at the center of it all lies a black plywood runway.

The runway show is set apart in its presentation compared to every other aspect of the show. Heidi even says of the runway in the first episode of the first season, "This is where your fate will be decided" (Weinstein, 2004). The lighting is low. There is nothing on the set other than the chairs for the judges and designers and the actual runway. Color is limited to black and blue for everything but the backdrop of the runway. Designers sit quietly on one side of the runway. The music is somber, serious, ominous. A heavy drum beats while the designers wait to hear their fate. The music shifts to a "happy" tune when someone is named winner, but then immediately goes back to the somber "scary" drumbeat as the remaining designers wait for the impending

elimination. The runway is central even in the finale episodes. Even though they present their final collections at the tent at Bryant Park, they always return to Parson's black runway for the final judging and announcement of the winner.

The sacred is most clearly depicted through the distinct contrast with the profane. In *Project Runway*, the profane is anything outside of or away from the runway. The contrast could not be more obvious. Compared to the runway set, the workroom is well-lit with bright colors, clutter is visible on the work tables and on the floors. Camera shots are often pulled back, panning the whole room or at least several tables, with action going on in the background of whatever is being fore-grounded. If music is playing at all, it is upbeat, and chatter is constant. Designers joke and banter with each other. All of these things serve as contrast to the darkness of the runway.

According to Durkheim (1912/2001), "a whole set of rites exists to bring about this crucial state of separation" (p. 221) between the sacred and profane. The first of these are negative rites or prohibitions, things people are not allowed to do. In *Project Runway*, we can only assume what some of these negative rites might be. For example, we assume that designers are not allowed to cross to the other side of the runway where the judges sit. We can assume that designers are not supposed to talk during the runway show. Because the runway is sacred, it should not be profaned with a garment that has been poorly constructed or is unfinished. One of the biggest sins is to send something down the runway with pins still in the garment.

Positive rites refer to rituals that involve active participation, that encourage individuals to "remain faithful to the past, to preserve the collectivity's moral profile"

(Durkheim, 1912/2001, p. 277). The very act of sending a garment down the runway is an example of this type of ritual. Whether designers are finished or not, whether they are proud of their garment or not, they always send something down the runway to represent them as designers. Consistently designers are pressed for time or do not finish their garments, and often times they talk as if they might not have anything to present. However, they never choose to not participate in this way. We see the strength of this ritual when other designers offer to help an unfinished designer complete their garment. In Season 2 during the “Flower Power” challenge (Episode 9), Chloe Dao is so far behind on her garment that Kara Janx stops working on her own dress to help her. Another example from this season appears in the “Clothes Off Your Back” challenge (Episode 2), when Emmett McCarthy offers to help Andrae Gonzalo sew his model into his garment so he can present it. In Season 1 during the “Postal Uniform” challenge (Episode 8), Jay McCarroll’s model does not show up, so fellow designer Austin Scarlett offers to model his garment on the runway for him. Despite the strong sense of competition, there is a degree of preservation for the sake of the whole occurring in these examples.

Lastly, piacular rites are performed to restore the social order. Durkheim (1912/2001) contends that “any misfortune, anything that is a bad omen, anything that inspires feelings of anguish or fear necessitates a [piacular rite...which] is celebrated in worry or sadness” (p. 289). This is evident in *Project Runway* after each elimination, when the society must recover from the loss of one of its members. After a designer is eliminated, they hug, cry and say good-bye to each other before Tim Gunn says a few

words and then asks him/her to return to the workroom and pack his/her things. At the beginning of each new episode, there is usually an interview in which a designer will comment on the absence of the most recently eliminated designer. Ultimately, the social order is reaffirmed, as these words of sadness are eventually concluded with something along the lines of, "I'm just glad that I'm still here," or, "Now I'm one step closer to Bryant Park."

All the rites work together to protect and mark out the sacred from the profane. They all mark the serious life. Even though these things are entirely arbitrary, society is dependent on them to function. Rothenbuhler (1998) speaks to this when he writes:

If we are to understand rituals adequately as part of the way social systems work, and rituals work through sign and meaning systems, then we must take the effectivity of signs and meanings seriously.... "You're out" hollered by the right person under the right circumstances does not refer to your being out, but makes you out. Similarly "I do" under the right circumstances does not only refer to an act, but is the act. (p. 56)

Similarly, it is important that the producers be successful in the construction of the serious life on *Project Runway*. For the competition to work, we must believe that when Heidi utters the words, "You're out," consequently or in congruence with that action, a designer is eliminated. By participating in this reality competition show, designers participate in the serious life. Furthermore, the rules of the ceremony at each stage are always already set, and each contestant's cooperation or lack of cooperation in each

stage is still a participation of some sort in the ritual. Rothenbuhler (1998) exemplifies this concept:

Participants may or may not believe in a ritual, but their participation in it cannot be a lie; their disbelief does not undo what was accomplished by their participation. People may be married by a variety of ritual procedures, in a variety of institutional settings, in ceremonies that do or do not include reference to a variety of liturgies, religious beliefs, and legal powers. Each of the participants may have a variety of beliefs and doubts; their intentions may be good, bad, or indifferent. But participation in the performance of the ritual is an index of acceptance of the symbolic power of the things said and done. That symbolic power creates a married couple who will be held responsible to their status. The marriage can only be undone by another ritual procedure.

He provides a second example:

If I tip my head and gaze downward, offer my hand and my appreciation while being introduced to someone of higher status, whether I respect that person or not, my performance indicates my acceptance of his or her higher status. If I do not offer my hand, tip my head, or express my appreciation, then I indicate my disrespect. We have very little choice in ritually charged situations—whatever is done is a performance with indexical significance. (pp. 62-63)

In Season 1, Mario Cadenas says, “Some people take fashion too seriously,” and he refuses to use all of his time to work on his garment. Even though he says he does not care and acts as though the competition is not a big deal, he is still participating through

his lack of participation. He still stands on the runway and attempts to defend his garment to the judges, and he still accepts Heidi's words, "Mario, that means you're out" (Episode 2) to literally mean he has been eliminated from the competition. Nora Caliguri, also from Season 1, makes this point rather succinctly in response to fellow contestant Vanessa Riley's complaints about the show during the reunion episode; she says to Vanessa that whether she agrees with how the show was run or not, "the bottom line is that we signed up to do this" (Episode 10).

Rules and Norms

This brings us to the ways in which the social order is most literally carried out. Rules and norms often get lumped together as if they were interchangeable in their function as constraints in societies. However, in regard to our text they shall serve to distinguish between two very different sets of constraints. Rules in *Project Runway* represent those constraints that are formally established as laws of the game. When contestants make reference to the contracts they signed in agreeing to be on the show, they speak to the external rules or laws that apply to being a part of the competition. As with any competition, if they violate a rule of the game, they risk being disqualified and losing the round or even being removed from the competition altogether. There are two very different sets of rules at play in the *Project Runway* game. There are the rules of a particular challenge and there are the overriding rules of the competition as a whole.

In any given challenge, there is a specific set of rules or criteria. In Seasons 1 and 5, the rules of the Gristedes challenge dictate that the designers must use items they can purchase at the grocery store to serve as the raw materials for their garments

(Weinstein, 2004, 2008). Furthermore, the intent behind the challenge—in this case, to test the designers’ innovation skills—functions as a second layer of rules that will help govern the judges’ decision in awarding a winner and determining a loser. Season 5 contestant Jerry Tam makes an ugly dress out of a shower curtain. While other designers may have presented even uglier garments, the judges deemed Jerry’s design most worthy of elimination, because he also failed to use innovation in his material choice, picking a material too close to regular fabric (Episode 1). In challenges that require designers to work with a specific client, they have to make the client happy while maintaining their own point of view. In the drag queen challenge of Season 5, the rules of the challenge called for a highly dramatic design. Daniel Feld’s failure to follow this particular challenge’s rule resulted in his elimination; as Heidi told him, “This was your chance to be theatrical and over the top” (Episode 6). Other rules that become apparent through the judges’ critiques that seem to apply to all challenges are that designers should take risks (“It’s too safe”), the garment should look expensive, (“It looks cheap”), it needs to be for a younger woman (“It’s a bit matronly”) it needs to be skillfully made (“It looks home-sewn”), and it needs to overall avoid provoking Michael Kors (“It looks a bit renaissance fair,” “It looks like fabric exploded out of her rear,” “She looks like Barefoot Appalachian Lil’ Abner Barbie,” “It’s a little Shirley MacLaine when she played a hooker with a heart of gold”).

In some cases, the judges are framed as the ones who are in violation of their own rules in terms of judging criteria. When the challenge is innovation, judges are expected to base their decision not only on how beautiful the garment is, but also on the

supposed creativity in material choices and the use of those materials in an unconventional way. In Season 3 during the “Wall to Wall Fashion” challenge (Episode 1), designers must use raw materials found in their apartments, and Keith Michael makes a dress out of a bed sheet (Weinstein, 2007a). When Keith is awarded the win with the use of such a conventional fabric, other designers are irked that he was rewarded for his lack of innovation.

In the broader scheme of the show, we see a larger set of rules. These rules are portrayed as highly important bordering on sacred. These rules are constructed as protecting the integrity of the competition in keeping an even playing field. We see this in Season 1 when Kara Saun gets called out for accepting favors for her final collection. Kara Saun had a connection with someone who worked for a major shoe company and was able to have her shoe designs specially produced for free. Tim Gunn parlayed the producers’ concern that she had accepted a major favor and referred to this as a clear breach of her contract on the show. When Kara Saun argued with Tim, claiming it should not matter as they were still her design and asking why she was being punished for having connections, Tim continued to respond by pointing out that her connection made for a very uneven playing field as the other designers had to pay for their shoes out of their budget, and had she paid for the shoes to be specially designed, she would have been over budget. Ultimately, Kara Saun was forced to decide how to reconcile herself to this rule by choosing to either not use her shoes in her collection or to use them but not have them count in the judging of her final collection. (Episode 11)

Perhaps the most memorable example of the importance placed on the competitions' overriding rule structure appears in Season 3. Designer Keith Michael is discovered by the other designers to have pattern books in his apartment, another clear violation of contract. A lengthy discussion is shown of several of the male designers deliberating over the decision of whether or not to report Keith. In an interview voiced over the scene, Kayne Gillaspie says, "I consulted Robert and said, you know what do you think about this?" Robert passionately interrupts the voice-over, saying, "It has been explicitly clear what we can and can't do, and how could you think that a pattern-book is acceptable to keep in your room?" The frame switches to Robert alone in an interview informing us, "We weren't to have how-to books nor any kind of supplies, that could aid us or help us in the challenges, because you want to have like an even playing field." The camera switches back to the apartment where Kayne is saying to Robert, "I am pissed because I came here, I'm taking time away from my life, my family to be here, to pursue what I think is an honest f***ing competition." The men conclude that Kayne should report what he saw to producers, and Kayne explains in one last interview, "I just did not want everything to be swept under the rug and everybody forgive him and nothing come out of this because he cheated. He broke the rule, which is black and white" (Episode 5).

When the discovery is reported to the producers, Tim Gunn is sent to parley the news to Keith that he is being promptly removed from the show to protect the integrity of the competition. "And accordingly," Tim tells Keith, "we're going to have to ask you to leave.... We're going to have to ask you to get your things together tonight, and you'll

leave tonight.” That the entire scenario is “caught” on camera and presented in the final cut of this particular episode is not insignificant. The violation and the punishment of the violation serve to reinforce the structure of the social order. To let the violations of these rules go unpunished is to reduce the power of the rules and thereby weaken the social order. Tim solidifies the message or moral of the story for the remaining designers the following morning in the workroom, when he asks them all to “gather round”:

I have an announcement to make, and it’s a very serious announcement. Keith was found in possession of several fashion how-to books. Mere possession of the books is completely against the rules of the show. *Project Runway* is nothing without its integrity and its seriousness of purpose, and therefore Keith had to leave. So he’s gone. (Episode 5)

On the other hand, there are examples of when the producers seem to frame themselves as the ones guilty of rule violation. In Season 3, when they bring back two eliminated designers to compete in the competition, the other contestants are clearly not happy (Weinstein, 2007a). In the “Black and White” challenge, eliminated designers Angela Keslar and Vincent Libretti are given a chance to reenter the competition due to the fact that they had each one a prior challenge. The other designers voice their opinions that this is not fair for the designers that have earned their current place in the competition based on the understood rules of the contest. Uli Herzner remarked in an interview, “Angela basically got kicked off already so I think she should go home,” and

Kayne quipped, “Are you f***ing kidding me, these bitches get to come back? It’s like cockroaches, you step on them once and they just keep crawling around” (Episode 11).

Laura Bennett makes her feelings known to Angela that she does not believe Angela’s win should have allowed her back in, because she won a group challenge in which her teammates (Laura being one of them) carried most of the weight in the challenge: “You’re win was a team win so it doesn’t seem quite as fair that you got to come back...It’s not like you did that win completely on your own.” Producers follow this interaction by showing clips from Angela’s winning challenge episode, highlighting a moment where Laura gives Angela advice on how to edit the garment. The frame then switches back to Laura, this time in an interview: “I was on that team, so I can say for certain that her team members carried a hell of a lotta weight in that challenge for her” (Episode 11). Interestingly, the producers chose to include the upset designers’ reactions to this rule violation in the edited cut. Obviously, the violation served to solidify the sense of right and wrong on the show—as well as create a heightened sense of drama for entertainment measures.

These types of violations are also considered twists in the plot and work to provide a layer of spontaneity to the highly regulated ritual ceremony of the competition. In the Season 2 finale (Episode 13), Tim Gunn and Heidi Klum arrive at the designers’ workspace, where they are putting the finishing touches on their collections, to tell them that they must now create a 13th look for their collections—news that makes finalist Chloe Dao break down in tears (Weinstein, 2006). In Season 3 during the final challenge (Episode 11), the twist is that rather than eliminate one last designer, all four

of the remaining designers will present collections at Bryant Park (Weinstein, 2007a). Season 4 builds on this twist during the final challenge (Episode 11) allowing all four remaining designers to make collections but informing them that only three of them will be allowed to present them at Bryant Park (Weinstein, 2007b). These gimmicks that deviate from the predetermined formula are similar to the intricate turns of plot found in soap operas: producers get themselves into the habit of having to constantly top their own tricks with greater, more shocking stunts. Ironically, these stunts or twists eventually become absorbed into the larger ritual of the competition, and by Season 5, designers truly do come to expect the unexpected (Weinstein, 2008). Season 5 designer Jerrell Scott, on learning that two designers would be eliminated for a challenge, says, “What do you expect? They have to throw curveballs at us, and this *is* Project Runway” (Episode 9).

In addition to rules, norms also serve to inform the designers of how they should or should not act; however, norms emerge from within the group as opposed to rules, which are imposed externally. This is not to say that the emergence of these norms is not greatly influenced by the heavy hand of producers, but the violation of a norm will not get a designer eliminated. Rather, the violation of a norm has a very internal impact on the designer in question. When a designer violates a norm, we see them being punished by their fellow designers in the form of reprimand, mocking, shaming and even exclusion from the group. Norms are unique in that often times we do not even know they exist until they are violated. The violations then become the site of analysis.

One norm that emerges is that designers should use all of the time provided for a given challenge to construct and perfect their garment. The violation of this norm is not necessarily punished by the other designers so much as it is used as an explanation or justification for a designer's elimination. This norm was established as early as Season 1, when Mario Cadenas fails to use all of his allotted time two challenges in a row and is consequently eliminated. In Season 4 in the "Sew Us What You Got" challenge (Episode 1), Elisa Jimenez finishes her design very early. The other designers' skepticism and comments along the lines of her dress being unfinished are what serve to elucidate the norm that you use all the time you have to make your garment. Later that same season in an interview, Christian Siriano talks similarly about Chris March's decision to not use all of the allotted time, saying, "Are you kidding? It's the last challenge! You can't take a nap!" (Episode 11)

Model loyalty emerges as a very powerful norm among the designers both within seasons and across seasons. Again, this norm is most evident when we look at the places it is violated. People feel compelled to explain or apologize for taking other people's models. In some cases, punishment for this violation is as mild as a sour look or a snarky comment, but in others it can be as extreme as the norm-breaking designer's exclusion from the rest of the group. Season 2 provides us with the first and perhaps the most dramatic example of this norm being violated, when Zulema Griffin takes Nick Verreos' model. Zulema had won the previous challenge and was entitled by her win to choose a new model at the outset of the next challenge (Episode 8). Although many winning designers before her had this exact same opportunity, they had consistently

opted to stay with their models, which meant that every other designer kept their same model as well. Zulema not only violated this loyalty-based norm by asking to bring the models out for her to switch, she also requested a “walk-off” featuring three of the models (prompting one of the show’s most memorable lines from Daniel Vosovic: “It’s a mother-f***ing walk-off!”). When Zulema chooses Nick’s model, Nick responds in an interview, “Literally my throat just dropped to my stomach, and I just wanted to like throw-up. (Camera zooms in on Zulema whispering to Nick that she’s sorry.) Rachel was very very very angry, and the whole time she kept looking at me like, ‘I can’t believe this bitch did this,’ and I was like, ‘I can’t believe she did it either.’” What is interesting about the scenario is that this perfectly legal move brought more than just Nick’s scorn; it is framed as bringing on the scorn and distrust of the entire designer community. For example, later in that episode, all of the designers are shown gathering around the food while Zulema is displayed sitting off by herself. This scene is immediately followed by an interview of Zulema saying:

I don’t understand these people. I mean it’s almost like we’re in kindergarten. It’s not that the others aren’t cordial to me, but you know how people look at you out of the corner of their eye, and it’s just like, they’re talking to you, but they’re always looking at you like “I’m watching you. I’m trying to see what’s going on with you because you’re sheisty,” and I’m not sheisty. (Episode 8)

Furthermore, Zulema feels compelled to explain her decision to switch models in another interview: “I changed models because my model cannot walk. I can’t be concerned with Nick. Do a good job, win, then next week you take her back” (Episode

8). The fact that she felt the need—or was perhaps framed as if she felt the need—to explain her decision demonstrates the restricting power of the group’s norm over her actions.

By Season 4, this norm has become so ingrained in the show that by the second episode, there is already a strong model/designer loyalty at play in model selection. When Ricky Lizalde decides to switch to Elisa Jimenez’s model, he feels the need to explain his choice, saying, “I don’t care if people think I’m the bitch that took Elisa’s model, I really don’t care. I like her, she’s gorgeous and it’s a competition” (Episode 2). However, two challenges later, Jack Mackenroth takes Ricky’s model. Again we see Jack feel the need to apologize, but now Ricky is mad, and even though he originally stole this model from Elisa, it is no longer OK. “I was a little pissed,” he said in an interview. “I was like, you know, now I see you for your true colors” (Episode 4).

Other norms emerge along similar lines, especially when it has to do with the designers’ sense of entitlement. There are multiple examples of accusations of designers stealing other people’s sewing machines (which belong to Parson’s). In Season 4, Joe Faris walks into the sewing room to find Daniel Feld working at a machine that apparently Joe had been working at for the last three challenges. “Daniel rethreaded my machine with red,” he says to no one in particular, prompting Daniel to reply, “What?” Joe continues more directly, arguing, “You rethreaded my machine,” to which Daniel replies, “I didn’t know it was your machine” (Episode 4). Season 2 designer Zulema Griffin accuses someone of stealing her mannequin and demands for it to be returned (Episode 5). In Season 1, Wendy takes a roll of fabric from Kara Saun’s cutting table at

Mood and to see if she wants to use it for her design as well. Kara Saun narrates in an interview that is voiced over the scene, “I had pulled a roll of iridescent chiffon and put it on my table, and Wendy literally took the roll of fabric that I was using and put it near her things to see if she wanted to use it, too. I don’t know if it’s a strategy or not, but that’s how she wants to play it. We had almost the exact same color” (Episode 9).

Again, Kara Saun’s reaction to this situation informs us that to use a fabric that another designer had already chosen for his/her garment is a violation of a norm.

The Moral Order

In this way, we see a very clear picture of a moral order or sense of morality that is being developed among each group of contestants on *Project Runway*. Any time a designer’s actions are being questioned in the sense of right and wrong, we are witnessing an imposition of a moral order. Normally, this would not be a unique observation, as everyone has an individual sense of what is right and what is wrong in a given situation. What makes this unique is that there is clearly an agreement amongst the designers that there is an overriding right and wrong that applies to their actions on *Project Runway* apart from their actions outside of the show, and furthermore, that they all should know what this moral code is without having sat down and decided it in advance.

“Selling out” other designers, especially team leaders, when being questioned on the runway was often a necessary act but was always done so with the utmost reluctance. It was very important for designers to show a good deal of hesitancy before telling the judges that a certain designer should go home, and it became evident that the moral high

road to take in these situations was to suggest yourself to go in another's place. Season 5 designer Blayne Walsh exemplifies this when he responds to Heidi's question of who on his team should be eliminated by saying, "This is an integrity issue, so as the leader, I would say me" (Episode 5). Although many designers did end up selling their teammates out to save their own skins, there was clearly a right way and wrong way to do this. In Season 4, Carmen Webber cries when asked who on her team should go home. "You're asking me to make a choice?" she says through tears, before eventually confessing that Christian Siriano should go before she should (Episode 2). Season 5 provides another example of how to answer the "Who should go?" question the right way when Kelli Martin makes a rational argument for why she should stay instead of Daniel Feld and immediately apologizes to Daniel for having to say anything at all (Episode 5).

Season 4 designer Victorya Hong demonstrates the wrong way to answer this question when she tries to sell Ricky Lizalde out on the runway as a poor leader by talking about all of the things she had to do for the challenge (Episode 4). This attempt backfired on her as the judges turned on her for being a poor team member. Season 1 designer Wendy Pepper most exemplifies the villainy associated with answering Heidi's "Who should go?" question the wrong way. In the "Collaboration" challenge (Episode 4), Wendy unexpectedly tells the judges that if she had to eliminate someone on her team it would be Austin Scarlett for his poor leadership. Later that season, in the "Design a Collection" challenge, Wendy sells Kevin Johnn out as a bad leader as well,

prompting Kara Saun to tell the cameras in an interview that “sometimes when people want something so bad, they lose their character over it” (Episode 7).

Kara Saun was especially vocal in Season 1 about the essence of right and wrong for a designer and on multiple occasions makes reference to keeping your soul intact in the face of challenges. For example, in the reunion show (Episode 10), Kara Saun tells Wendy, “Don’t sell your soul to get anywhere, because you might need it someday,” to which all the other designers echo in agreement. Interestingly, this made for a stronger case against Kara Saun in the finale when she is found in clear violation of her contract for accepting a favor for her final collection. Jay McCarroll responds to her entire predicament by exclaiming, “Finally something happens to Miss F***ing Perfect” (Episode 11). Through this interplay, we see that the moral order is upheld much like in other religious institutions. Certain individuals, like priests and preachers, are allowed to be the spokesperson for a moral code but are not given special privileges in regard to violations of it. A preacher can only speak to the moral order of his congregation until he is discovered having an affair with the church secretary.

The Heavy Hand of the Producers

All of these examples clearly serve the function of reconstituting the moral code of the society however they are not without the aid and certainly the exacerbation of the producers. As I have already discussed, it is important that producers create a social order for the designers to interact within. Without a social or moral order, there can be no violations of it, and for producers, no violations means no drama. In an article for the *New York Times*, Andrejevic reveals the ways in which producers of reality television

shows encourage participation in the social order they have created for contestants. He says that often times they rely on the fact that the contestants are tired, stressed and emotionally vulnerable, which “helps make them more amenable to the goals of the producers and more easily manipulated” (Wyatt, 2009, p. 1). In an interview in this same article, Season 2 contestant Chloe Dao says that the filming often started around 6 in the morning, “and we finished sewing every day around midnight.” Contestants were then required to tape the “confessionals,” in which they speak directly to the camera in individual interviews. “We would get to sleep at 1 to 3 a.m., and wake up again at 6 or 7” (p. 2).

In addition to the conditional devices producers might use to place stress on the social community, producers seemed to pick up on and zoom in on the norms that were emerging among contestants on the show. At the outset of the show, producers were probably unaware that such a strong loyalty would form between designers and their models. However, once they realized that this was the case, they were not above taking advantage of it. For several episodes in a row in Season 5, the winning designers continued to stay with their model, which kept anyone from being able to switch or “steal.” So for the “Rock N’ Runway” challenge (Episode 11), they decided to bring out all of the models and let everyone pick new models. The producers assumedly got the effect they desired when Leanne Marshall switched to Suede Baum’s model. Korto Momolu whispered, “You’re a heartbreaker, Leanne,” and Suede said in an interview, “I’m going to have to kill Leanne!”

Another example is asking designers which of their team members should have to go home. It became clear as early as Season 1 that team challenges were a virtual jackpot for creating and displaying drama. In addition to the inevitable run-ins that would occur just by making two incompatible designers work together, putting them on the runway and asking them point-blank which teammate should be eliminated was a goldmine for drama. As mentioned earlier, many designers would try to take the moral high road by suggesting themselves for elimination. However, on multiple occasions, this type of integrity was certainly not rewarded as the “honest” designers were often eliminated. As the judges said to Season 1 designer Vanessa Riley, “That means, Vanessa, you’re out. You basically took yourself out of this competition. In this business it’s all about selling yourself. You admitted you were the weakest of your team, and that gave us no choice. You’re out” (Episode 4). Offering up oneself for elimination is a nice thing to do, but it does not make for good drama. It is not a stretch to think that this type of noble behavior would be purposefully discouraged by consistently making sure that putting yourself up as the one who should go home over another person would directly lead to your elimination.

Ultimately, the creation of the social order serves an even greater purpose. The rules and norms eventually serve to categorize the designers who follow them and the designers who break them. The way that a designer is perceived in relation to the moral order among other things will determine whether or not that designer is a contender for the hero or the villain.

CHAPTER IV

ROLES ON THE RUNWAY

With a solid understanding of the nature of social order and how producers work to create one specific to *Project Runway*, it becomes possible to analyze the ways in which gender and sexual identity are manipulated within it. Just as there are several layers involved in the production of a social order, there are multiple levels to the selection and presentation of various identities. This chapter begins by examining the ways gender and sexual identity are displayed in *Project Runway*. It seeks to answer questions about the ways in which gay men, straight men, and women are both allowed and restricted in the performance of those identities. Secondly, it looks at the roles of the genre and how framing is used to accentuate them. It explores the ways that gender and sexuality affect contestants' ability to be portrayed within the roles of hero and villain by considering the remaining three (or four) designers represented in each season's finale.

What's Sex Got to Do With It?

As we go about our daily lives, we perform our gender and sexuality in ritualized ways so that others may understand us and perform in sync with us. According to Rothenbuhler (1998):

in any social encounter, there are matters that are relatively more formally coded and that function as relatively unambiguous signs as to who people are, what their intentions are, who they think the other is, what they expect the other to do,

what type of encounter they expect, and so on.... These bits of formal behavior functioning as signs are present as a ritual element of all social interactions. (p. 106)

It is safe to assume that the men and women contestants of *Project Runway* conduct themselves in similar ritual performances of their gender and sexual identity, however, we are not privy to those performances. Instead, what we see is a handcrafted, highly selective portrait of their ritual performances, what Goffman (1979) calls a hyper-ritualization. The recognition of the hyper-ritual is critical; while these are real pictures of real people, they are chosen for display based on their ability to portray the producers' ideals of what gender and sexuality should look like in the social world they have constructed. Hyper-ritualizations, then, are hand-picked, arranged, exaggerated and perfected versions of real ritual performances. In essence, they are fiction.

To say that the performance of gender and sexual identity is entirely manufactured by the producers is—ironically—unrealistic. However, certain devices are at play that both highlight and craft a specific version of gender displays and sexual identity deemed most appropriate for *Project Runway*.

Being Gay on Project Runway

I narrow the focus of this portion of the analysis by looking exclusively at the most frequently paraded sexual identity on the show, that of the gay male designer. On *Project Runway*, there is hardly a season that does not loudly proclaim the presence of the gay male designer. These contestants are often portrayed as witty, sarcastic, fun, talented, and somewhat over-dramatic. Furthermore, their sexuality is not a

happenstance; it is a feature of their identity. This identity is brought to the forefront through the use of several framing devices.

In *Word's Out*, Leap (1996) identifies several ways that gay men perform their sexual identity in order to identify other gay men. In one example, the author describes an observation he made between two gay men at a dinner party. One guest wanted a glass of water, to which the host, busy with other details in the kitchen, informed him that it was in a brown pitcher on the top shelf of the refrigerator. When the guest was unable to find it, the irritated host went and retrieved it, pouring the glass for him. To this, the guest replied, "That pitcher is not brown, it is tan" (p. 38). That gay men are supposedly experts of color description is an obvious stereotype—but that does not mean that gay men will not play to it when they perceive it to provide some sort of benefit—or in this case, alleviation—to a given situation. About this Leap writes that:

most gay men recognize this as a shallow generalization, as stereotypes usually are; but that does not prevent gay men from using those stereotypes—as points of satire, minstrelsy, or exaggeration—when such references are required in text making. (p. 38)

Producers are certainly not above highlighting references to stereotypes wherever they believe it to add to the crafting of a character. For example, in one episode in Season 1, Austin Scarlett is shown ironing the pleats into his pants (Weinstein, 2004). It is safe to assume that he is not the only designer that irons his clothing, however, that gay men are more concerned about their appearance is a valuable stereotype for producers. The

selection of this clip is a specific choice in the crafting of Austin's identity; it is an example of hyper-ritualization that both plays off of and reinforces the stereotype.

Leap's argument speaks directly to what Goffman (1959) identifies as the presentation of self in social interactions. Goffman (1979) informs us that "if an individual is to give and receive what is considered his ritual due in social situations, then he must style himself so that others present can immediately know the social (and sometimes personal) identity of he who is to be dealt with" (p. 2). Again to use Austin Scarlett as the example, he would not have been asked to model fellow designer Jay McCarroll's woman's garment when his model failed to show up if his behavior up to that point in time had not informed Jay that Austin would be willing to be portrayed in such a way (Episode 8). Furthermore, producers make no secret of their crafting together this special role for Austin to fit. In the reunion show (Episode 10), Heidi announces that they have put together a video tribute to Austin. All the designers watch as a montage of Austin's movements, gestures, sounds, makeup, and jewelry are woven seamlessly together to display a very specific picture of who Austin is. He is shown wearing lipstick, using facial masks, wearing hair clips, applying makeup with a q-tip, carrying a floral purse, wearing a matching pearl necklace and bracelet, and jumping up and down flailing his arms in joyful anticipation.

Leap also writes:

Satire, minstrelsy, and exaggeration are not solitary vices, however. To make such references, the speaker has to have an audience that is familiar with the code

and the culture surrounding it and is willing to participate, as an audience, in those terms. (p. 38)

Similarly, producers count on the audience to recognize these codes, and to ensure that recognition, they hyper-ritualize the designers identities as gay men by playing up many other ritual codes of presentations. One ritualistic device used to produce sexual identity is tactical humor or teasing, as noted in a study of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* by Westerfelhaus and Lacroix (2006). Sexual teasing serves multiple functions on *Project Runway*. In addition to the sheer entertainment value, the teasing serves to display sexual identity and create in-group/out-group distinctions. In Season 4, Kevin Christiana is the lone straight man living amongst several gay designers. Jack Mackenroth is the most vocal in teasing Kevin. While this kind of teasing may be fun to watch, it clearly marks or sets apart Kevin from the gay male designers. It is in no way mean-spirited, but it makes clear that Kevin is in the minority on *Project Runway* and perhaps goes so far as to imply that he does not belong there.

Sexual teasing works in other ways as well. Instead of playing up Tim Gunn's gay identity like Lifetime's host, Carson Kressley (*How to Look Good Naked*), in order to cater to the stereotype that being gay makes him the perfect fashion mentor, the producers of *Project Runway* do not make reference to Tim Gunn's sexual orientation. Rather, Tim Gunn is a credible authority because he is sharp, impeccable, and highly knowledgeable. However, producers do not leave Tim Gunn's orientation entirely ambiguous either. In Season 2, Santino Rice plays a running joke through several episodes about an imaginary love affair between Tim Gunn and contestant, Andrae

Gonzalo (Weinstein, 2006). Some might claim that these clips were included for their comedic value and should not be interpreted as if they held any truth. Certainly, I am not claiming that these jokes are informing us of a real relationship between Tim Gunn and Andrae, however, to say that the jokes are entirely irrelevant is also problematic. If they are, they beg the question of why Andrae is the stand-in for Tim Gunn's love interest instead of Chloe Dao. They serve to make the point that Tim Gunn is a gay man, and the inclusion of these clips speaks to the producers' belief that this information is somehow relevant to his role on the show. Katherine Sender (2006) similarly notes of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, that regardless of the Fab Five's career qualifications, the construction of their authority as style experts is based on the fact they are "openly and recognizably gay—in their speech and behavior, but most especially in their taste" (p. 137).

Another device employed to showcase the gay male designer is the use of female referents in both self-directed and other-directed language. In one challenge (Episode 2), Austin Scarlett says of himself, "I have a little evil queen in me." On a more negative note (literally), Carmen Webber snaps at Ricky Lizalde in a tense moment saying, "You hit a wrong note, bitch" (Episode 3). Playful hints at the homoerotic are another tactic used to display gay identity on *Project Runway*. Steven Rosengard, of Season 4, tells us, "I also like to draw quite a bit." Shown holding a sketch of a nude man, he adds, "From life whenever possible. Damn, I wish I could remember this guy's phone number" (Episode 1).

A fourth displaying tool is the coming-out narrative for gay male designers that remain in the competition. Although none of the designers on *Project Runway* are introduced as gay or straight, almost every male designer is clearly displayed as one or the other. In fact, as I will demonstrate in a discussion of straight male designers on the show, it almost becomes more necessary to proclaim one's straightness as a male designer, as the assumption becomes that you are gay if you do not say otherwise. In cases where a male designer's sexuality might be ambiguous, narratives are often employed to clarify. In Season 2, Daniel Vosovic shares his coming-out story with the other designers in the workroom, to which Nick Verreos feels compelled to respond with his own story (Episode 9). The two gay men are saying very similar things, using many of the same words even to describe their experience, but the way they tell their stories is very different. Daniel is very low-key, and he continues to work on his garment as he shares his story. Nick, on the other hand, is very loud, implementing a great deal of vocal variety, and he has to stop what he is doing to make large gestures putting his entire body into his narrative. In this case, the display is dependent on the narrative. Nick's sexual identity has already been established in earlier episodes through other devices. If the volume was muted, one might not gather that Daniel Vosovic's sexual identity was on display here. So the framing of his coming-out narrative becomes pivotal, because to not include it would be to leave Daniel's sexual identity ambiguous.

The fact that the designers are portrayed as gay is certainly not insignificant; the show clearly wishes to portray itself as revolutionary in terms of the positive exposure it provides to gay men. Even when gay male designers are eliminated, several contestants

speak to the hope or the change they can inspire by being openly gay on *Project Runway*. The exit interview becomes a ritual performance of this identity in relation to the show. After who knows what kind of prompt he was given, Austin Scarlett says in the interview after his elimination:

I would just love to set an example to any dreamer, maybe not the most popular kid in school, or just anyone who's different, to always stick to that dream no matter how many times people tell you to walk a certain way, talk a certain way, act a certain way, dress a certain way, design a certain way, you can't listen to that, you have to be true to yourself... no matter what. (Episode 9)

In Season 4, after already having thoroughly established Jack Mackenroth as a gay character on the show, episode 3 introduces Jack as HIV positive for 17 years, framing him in the apartment with a large array of medicine bottles spread out in front of him on his bed (Weinstein, 2007b). Two episodes later, when Jack contracts a staph infection in his lip and is forced to leave the show to receive medical treatment, Jack tells the camera:

For me it is important for people to know that I've been HIV positive for 17 years. My immune system is not suppressed at all, so it wasn't about that.

Anyone can get what I got, it's just dangerous bacteria. (Episode 5)

In this situation, the show presents a contradiction. In an attempt to promote the show's gay-supportive image, producers actually create a picture that furthers the stereotype linking homosexual men to AIDS.

This contradiction is repeated in Season 5, when the designers are challenged with creating costumes for drag queens (Episode 6). Immediately after presenting the challenge, Heidi announces that the outfits from this challenge will be auctioned off, and all the proceeds will go to benefit Broadway Cares: Equity Fights AIDS, an organization helping people affected with HIV. Producers could have chosen any charity organization to donate the proceeds, and they could have selected any challenge for the auction. The fact that they linked the drag queen challenge with this particular charity was a very carefully selected framing decision designed to promote a specific image of *Project Runway* by drawing from and further highlighting an unfortunate stereotype.

The identity of the gay male designer, then, is allowed in *Project Runway*, but still often portrayed within the normal range of stereotypes. As Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) assert in a consideration of gay representation in the television sitcom *Will & Grace*, “media critics need to continually interrogate the assumption that a quantitative increase in gay representations (increased visibility) signals a qualitative change in representational practices” (p. 102).

Being Straight on Project Runway

Acknowledging how *Project Runway* challenges or fails to challenge the stereotypes of heterosexist society is the perfect segue into another gender related identity clearly presented on the show: the heterosexual male. In some ways, *Project Runway* challenges society’s gender norms for straight men; after all, this is a show about sewing. Unfortunately, the show perpetuates ideas about masculinity, and any

progress that might have been made is lost as straight male designers either feel the need or are encouraged to defend their masculinity in the context of participating in the show.

Straight male designers are portrayed as especially concerned with proving their heterosexuality. In the first episode of Season 4, Kevin Christiana insists in an interview (presumably in response to a prompt), “There’s a lot more straight designers out there than there were back in the day. Just had to bring that up, since I’m such a tough guy and all.” Also in Season 4, Kevin makes it clear that he is not attracted to the male models during the menswear challenge by making the rather conspicuous claim in an interview, “Being the only straight guy, I’m like, whatever” (Episode 3).

As if this point had not already been run into the ground throughout the course of the season, in the reunion show (Episode 12), Heidi asks (on behalf of the fans, of course), “Kevin are you sure you’re not gay?” He replies that he lives with his girlfriend, and so, “No, I’m not gay.” Heidi continues to push the issue, saying, “I don’t know about this,” to Tim Gunn, “are you convinced?” Tim replies, “Not entirely,” which leads to a “Let’s look and see” moment, in which they show several clips of Kevin living with all gay male roommates. In one of these clips, Kevin is shown in an interview saying, “I’m trying really hard not to be gay here. Maybe I was gay in my former life. I don’t know, but it doesn’t really bother me.” After the video montage concludes, Tim lets Kevin off the hook saying, “If being on *Project Runway* didn’t make you gay, nothing will.”

In addition to outright professions of straightness, these designers are displayed as stereotypically masculine. In Season 1, Rob Plotkin is often shown doing push-ups in

the apartment. In Season 4, Kevin Christiana is presented as the only guy that knows that special guest Tiki Barbour was a running back for the New York Giants (Episode 3). Joe Faris, of Season 5, declares that the Olympics Opening Ceremony challenge (Episode 4) is right up his alley, as he has never missed a viewing of the Olympics. Furthermore, Joe's masculinity is highlighted by contrasting it with Daniel Feld, who is very out of his element in this challenge, saying he has never watched the Olympics. Also in this episode, Joe lets us know that he played football growing up, explaining that only when he was not big enough to play football anymore did he started sewing.

Season 1's Rob Plotkin is perhaps most consistently portrayed as defining what it means to be a straight male designer. Throughout the competition, he is represented as more charming than he is talented. In episode 2, when the designers are charged with selling their garments at a store, Rob instructs Alexandra to "use your smile," as he does. Another designer comments on his performance in this challenge saying, "There were twenty women around his garment and none of them were looking at the dress." Even Heidi, upon giving Rob her famous "auf wiedersehen," says as he leaves, "Very charming, though" (Episode 8).

By virtue of his straightness, Rob is also portrayed as less intelligent than his witty gay cohorts. This attitude is reflected by the other designers' comments. Again from Season 1, Jay McCarroll calls him "Robert the monkey" (Episode 9) and during a highly conceptual challenge, Wendy Pepper remarks, "I don't think Rob has the intellectual heft to contribute to this concept" (Episode 7).

Straight male designers are often times represented as highly sexual in nature. At one point in Season 1, Rob Plotkin exclaims, “I am so sexually frustrated!” (Episode 5) Other designers are quoted verifying his sexual nature. Kara Saun says in an interview session, “Rob talks about sex 24/7.” Jay McCarroll’s testimony adds to this: “He’s fueled by women, fueled by sex.” As an extension of this, straight male designers are displayed as guilty of objectifying women. On two separate occasions, Rob compares women to sports cars (Episodes 1, 5). Mario Cadenas, also of Season 1, says, “Models are hot. They are like sex on legs” (Episode 1). In one episode, when the designers go out to a bar after work, Rob is shown horsing around outside on the sidewalks of New York. He is pulling himself up on a scaffolding bar when his grip slips and he falls on his back on the sidewalk and busts his head, prompting a trip to the emergency room. The entire scenario is framed as something that would happen to goofy Rob as he tried to show off for a woman. This is a perfect example of how the producers and editors work together to create the character they want, as this scene has absolutely nothing to do with the specific challenge at hand. The scene serves only to further the character development of Rob as the stupid straight guy who would do anything to get the attention of a woman.

A subset of being a straight male is being a father, which actually seems to qualify the straight man slightly more than his non-parental counterparts. In Season 5, Joe Faris says, “My main motivation is to show my daughters that they can do whatever they want” (Episode 1). Having daughters gives him credibility in relating to a women’s industry similar to that of the gay male designer. Jeffrey Sebelia of Season 3 is the only

straight male designer to win *Project Runway*. He is also displayed as highly emotional when he talks about his young son. His role as a loving father makes him more sensitive than the average straight male, and therefore allows him access to the necessary insight that other straight men lack.

Being Asexual on Project Runway

For a show that deals almost exclusively with a woman-centered industry, women are surprisingly limited and marginalized in the roles they are allowed to play. They are largely displayed as asexual beings unless being offered up as the sexual objects themselves (although this is usually reserved for the models). While gay male designers tease each other and make homoerotic references and straight male designers sexually objectify the female models, female designers apparently have no sexual drive whatsoever. Even Laura Bennett, whose belly swelled over the course of Season 3 with the evidence of her sexuality, was not shown speaking about her husband and was rarely displayed referencing her pregnancy despite its very obvious presence in the later episodes. In Season 1, Alexandra Vidal was a fairly run of the mill contestant. She was not interviewed often, and she was mostly referenced as the object of Rob Plotkin's sexual desire. In more than one episode, a scene was framed in a way that highlighted Rob's interest in Alexandra, and other designers often talked about his attraction to her in interviews. However, Alexandra was not once interviewed or framed in a way that would display her own sexual interest or lack thereof in Rob. Apparently, it was irrelevant.

Designer Zulema Griffin was rather vocal about her frustration with this representation of women in Season 2, which noticeably cut out all references to her identity as a lesbian. In an interview she did after the season aired, Zulema said that although she did not campaign about it, her gayness was very obvious. She was upfront with the producers and the other designers about the fact that she was a lesbian, and she often conversed with Nick Verreos about it, as they were both in long-term relationships. When asked about being omitted from a promotional article called, “Seven for the Runway,” in *The Advocate.com*’s feature on that season’s gay contestants, Zulema responded:

That is what I was most upset about. More than a month before the Advocate.com article came out, the [Bravo] PR people asked me a very specific question: "Do you want us to promote you in the gay market?" I said, "Absolutely." When I saw that I wasn't involved in the article, I immediately knew how [the producers] were going to play me. (Voss, 2006)

Zulema’s example is representative of the overarching structure of *Project Runway* that allows men to be sexual while pretending women are not. One episode proves the exception to this rule when the designers were presented with the challenge of designing menswear and would consequently be required to work with male models. However, even in this case, the women contestants’ sexual desire was narrated for them and almost immediately overshadowed by the sexual desire of the gay male designers for the male models. Rami Kashou began the narrative: “The guys are good looking so the girls are excited...so are some of the guys of course.” Jack Mackenroth continued,

“Everyone was looking all over the place at all these disrobing men. It was quite an exciting afternoon.” Christian Siriano personalizes the story, adding, “When I saw my model I was like ‘Whoa he is beautiful.’ He is very beautiful.” Steven Rosengard provides another dimension by conceding, “OK, now I get why all the straight guys say ‘Wow, you get to stand around with all the naked girl models’” (Episode 3). All in all, the moment to showcase the women’s sexuality is manipulated to feature the gay men’s sexuality instead.

In addition to limitations placed on female designers’ sexual identity, certain restrictions are portrayed in regards to their overall suitability for the competition. Women are expected to be good sewers, but are simultaneously not necessarily expected to be good designers. If the women contestants are discovered as not being good sewers, then they are truly considered as not having anything to contribute. In Season 1, Vanessa Riley’s alleged poor sewing skills made her the unwanted member for the team challenge, and ultimately served as basis enough for her elimination (Episode 4). On the flip side of this, women are often accused of only being good sewers. This attitude is displayed in Santino Rice’s stinging comment directed at designer Chloe Dao in Season 2’s final challenge, when he says, “I’m not wowed by people who are basically like, maybe brilliant pattern-makers but not necessarily brilliant designers” (Episode 11). This trend is reminiscent of the dialogue that often takes place about women as cooks rather than chefs. In *Dinner Roles: American Women and Culinary Culture*, Inness (2001) analyzes cooking discourse surrounding men and women’s roles in the kitchen. She discovers that cooking is still consistently portrayed as a woman’s domain in

society, unless a man wants to cook, at which point it is raised to a form of art. Inness observes that, according to the dominant discourse, “women lack the drive and talent to be bold and experimental cooks” (p. 31), which is apparently why men are allowed to be great chefs while women remain merely cooks. This is almost an exact parallel to what is projected on *Project Runway*, as further exemplified in Season 1, when judge Michael Kors says of designer Nora Calliguri, “She turned into just a dressmaker,” right before eliminating her (Episode 5).

This goes to further demonstrate that there are very few roles available for women on *Project Runway*. Primarily, they are allowed to be mothers, they are allowed to be hysterical or crazy, and they are allowed to be bitches (and these are certainly not mutually exclusive).

Woman as Mother

The mother-turned-fashion designer is a popular role constructed on *Project Runway*. While some women rely more heavily on their mommy status than others, it is regardless a defining feature of their character. Wendy Pepper of Season 1 was the first and certainly the most notorious mother on *Project Runway*. She immediately claimed her role as the mother figure, setting down rules for eating habits and apartment cleanliness for her cluster of roommates in the Gotham apartments. Korto Momolu of Season 5 was also very proud of her mommy status. In several challenges, she claimed that her experience as a mother prepared her for many of the challenges in ways that non-mothers lacked. For example, in the first episode where designers are asked to

make a dress out of grocery store materials, she responded saying, “I’m a mommy, so I know a grocery store.”

Laura Bennett also made for a unique mother character, as she actually discovered she was pregnant with her sixth child during production of the show. With each episode as her belly swelled with life, Laura went about the challenges with a calmness she insisted came from living amongst five growing boys.

Women as Hysterical

In addition to being moms, female designers are often portrayed as fitting the common stereotype of the hysterical or emotionally unstable woman. Season 1 is all about displaying Wendy Pepper’s dramatic moments (Weinstein, 2004). In episode 3, she is shown hysterically crying after her first win, saying, “Obviously this is going to change my life, I mean how could it not?” This is either a response to an interview prompt or a slightly extreme thing to say. Wendy is also shown on the street pacing back and forth and talking to herself as the remaining designers watch unbelievably from above (Episode 8). Jay McCarroll says of her finale collection, “Wendy is confused. She is an older woman making what she thinks a younger woman would want.” Ultimately, Wendy is framed in a way that instructs us not take her seriously, regardless of how far she makes it in the competition.

While occupying this type of gender role did often ensure longer playing time for many of the most infamous women of *Project Runway*, it eventually was used against them to serve as the rationale for their elimination. This is exemplified as early as Season 1, when Nora Caliguri, who had proven a strong contender for the prize until this

episode, is displayed as having a nervous breakdown. In episode 4 during a team challenge, Nora is not getting along well with her team leader, Kevin Johnn. After much bickering, she is eventually exhibited storming out of the room saying, “I’m outta here.” Nora is then shown in the hallway crying while accusing Kevin of sabotaging her and, in the next frame, accusing the other designers of stealing her pattern. The entire event consumes a large amount of the footage of the episode and is further discussed in the runway judging, where Kevin reports that Nora’s “meltdown” took valuable hours away from the construction of their garment (which was the winning garment). Nora is left on the runway as one of the two contenders for elimination, and although she is not eliminated in this challenge, Heidi scolds her: “Nora, you cracked under pressure; to be successful in fashion, you have to be strong, focused, and in control of your emotions.”

This theme is an often-repeated one on *Project Runway*, and certainly it seems to be directed specifically at the women contestants on the show. Starr Ilzhoefer, also from Season 1, is another example of how women are portrayed as emotionally unstable and therefore unfit as designers; she says in an interview, “I have no confidence in myself or my designs” (Episode 1). She is shown crying in every episode, and upon her elimination, another designer’s voice is heard whispering, “She’s going to have a nervous breakdown.” As Rob Plotkin stops to give her a hug on his way off the runway, she is shown clinging to him and weeping into him as he coos and hushes her and kisses her paternally on the forehead (Episode 3). Wendy Pepper is also presented in this way, saying in one interview, “Personally I cannot believe that I am still here” (Episode 9). Perhaps Vanessa Riley sums up the show’s prevailing ideology toward women best

when she says to Wendy, “If you can’t be strong you can’t be a fashion designer” (Episode 12).

Woman as Bitch

Lastly, the female designer is allowed to play the part of the catty and manipulative bitch. In Season 2, Zulema Griffin was restricted when it came to displaying her lesbian identity, but producers heartily engaged in the production of her identity as that season’s bitchy female designer. Whether it was not sharing her closet space with fellow designer Marla Duran (Episode 2) or telling teammate Kara Janx that if she wanted to cry, she’d have to cut at the same rate as her crying (Episode 6), Zulema was framed almost from day one as the girl you did not want to mess with.

Being framed as the bitch for a particular season often times corresponded with the role of the villain. This is exemplified in Seasons 1, 3, and 5 with designers Wendy Pepper, Laura Bennett, and Kenley Collins (Weinstein, 2004, 2007a, 2008). Each of these designers will be analyzed in greater detail within the context of the role of the villain, which is discussed later in the chapter. All things considered, women are highly restricted in how their identities are portrayed, whether motherly, hysterical or bitchy. For a female designer to stay on the show outside of one of these roles, she must prove herself in some other capacity by clearly setting herself apart from other women who do occupy these roles.

Roles in Relationship

Now that we have examined the individual sexual identities of male and female designers, it is important that gender roles be considered in relationship with one

another. They cannot enact their assigned roles without the apparent participation of others. Goffman (1979) elaborates on the way gender norms play out in relationships between men and women, specifically in regards to ritualistic performances of patriarchy:

It turns out, then, that in our society whenever a male has dealings with a female or a subordinate male (especially a younger one), some mitigation of potential distance, coercion, and hostility is quite likely to be induced by application of the parent-child complex. Which implies that, ritually speaking, females are equivalent to subordinate males and both are equivalent to children. (p. 5)

This is most often apparent in *Project Runway* during team challenges when teams are comprised of both a male and a female designer, as in the case of Season 4's Rami Kashou and Jillian Lewis during the "Trendsetter" team challenge (Episode 4). Even though Jillian is the team leader, she has trouble approaching Kevin Christiana to tell him what to do, and Rami actually chastises her and acts as teacher in trying to instruct her on how to be his leader. In addition to these verbal representations of the parent-child relationship between Jillian and Rami, a visual representation of this relationship is produced as well. Rami is often shown standing face on in front of Jillian, standing tall over her with both his hands on either of her shoulders. Cases where Jillian is not shown in this way are often between her and Christian Siriano; they are portrayed more as equals but seemingly on the level of brother and sister rather than as two adults. Christian is referred to as the "baby of the family" by many of the designers, which furthers the representation that Jillian, as his equal, is also a child.

Angela Keslar may seem like the exception to the rule in Season 3, when she does not get along well when teamed up with Vincent Libretti but turns around and wins the challenge when she is paired with Laura Bennett and Mychael Knight. However, her seeming exception actually works to prove the rule. When teamed with Vincent, she is patronized and distanced as the subordinate of the older, wiser male designer. This is the all the more significant as prior to their pairing, Vincent was consistently portrayed as that season's "crazy" person. The fact that his opinion supersedes Angela's in this episode demonstrates that his role as adult male validates him over Angela even in the face of his "craziness." Her words are framed as a sign of her rebellion or insubordination to her team leader—a point that is featured prominently on the runway and makes her a contender for that round's elimination—and actually serves to define her as the new "crazy" person in the group. The rule is proven when Angela teams up with Laura and Mychael, and there is very little if any argument (or crazy) among them. Although Mychael is a male designer, he is a young one, and therefore an equal to the women designers on his team.

Making It to Bryant Park

Evidently, gender and sexuality are portrayed in a wide variety of ways but result in a limited number of roles. In this final portion of the analysis, it is important to look to how gender and sexual identity impact designers' chances for winning *Project Runway*. Reality competition shows are a genre in their own right, and their presentations tend to follow repeated formulas. Reality shows need an entertaining cast, and specific characters need to emerge over time from within that cast according to the

proven formula. These almost always include a hero, who wins the competition, a villain, who the audience loves to hate, and a foil of some sort, who is usually a fan favorite but not a real contender for the win. It is important to note that talent is certainly a large factor throughout the competition. A designer must be equipped with a high degree of skill and design ability in order to make it to Bryant Park. However, talent alone is not enough. By briefly examining the final three or four designers for each season of *Project Runway* in turn, we can see exactly how gender and sexual identity affect these roles.

Season 1

The villain fulfills a crucial function of the story by providing tension and by encouraging the audience to root for the hero if only because they hate the villain. For this reason, it makes sense that a villain always be present in the finale at Bryant Park. In Season 1, Wendy Pepper is the clear villain, beating out fan favorite Austin Scarlett to make it to the finale. Wendy was set apart early on as the designer to hate, often shown in interviews secretly revealing her strategies. In episode 2, she confesses her plan to exploit her role as mother as a strategy to win. Speaking out against her fellow designers in team challenges seemed to solidify Wendy's villainous status among the other designers and led to a number of opportunities for producers to frame her as truly diabolical. In the reunion show (Episode 10), Wendy is further set apart from the other two finalists as the villain. All of the eliminated designers sit together as Heidi announces that they will now bring out the three finalists. First Kara Saun is announced, followed by Jay McCarroll, both of whom are met with much applause by their fellow

designers. It is certainly not by coincidence that Wendy is brought out last, and she is met with silent stares in lieu of applause. Certainly, Wendy being framed as the villain was not unrelated to the way she was framed as a female designer. She was portrayed as unstable, manipulative, and a mother to boot, so the very things that defined her as the villain also defined her as a woman.

Obviously, the role of the hero is reserved for the winner of *Project Runway*, but many contestants will occupy the role temporarily as they vie for this position throughout the season. Heidi warns us of this each episode, when she says at the beginning of the runway judging, “One day you’re in, and the next day you’re out.” Many designers may start out the season in a position to play the hero, but in the turn of a single episode be repainted as the villain. This seems to be the case in Season 1, when all signs pointed to Kara Saun as the conquering hero on her high horse, winning multiple challenges, never appearing in the bottom three, and having relatively little if any conflict with any of the other designers. However, after the reunion episode when she publicly accuses Wendy Pepper of selling her soul to get ahead, Kara Saun’s role seems to begin a transition. When the designers come back together for the finale, Kara Saun is shown entering the hotel room and walking past Wendy, without so much as a nod, to hug the other finalist, Jay McCarroll. Kara Saun refuses to talk to Wendy and is shown moving her bedding out of the bedroom to a couch in the living room so she does not have to be in a room with her. When Jay eventually confronts Kara Saun about the awkwardness of her not speaking to Wendy, as it is just the three of them, Kara Saun says to Wendy, “You’re a backstabbing liar, and I’m not going to talk to you” (Episode

11). A major argument erupts between the two women, as Jay stands to the side trying to placate them. This is the first time that Kara Saun is portrayed in a negative light, as she is given the same framing treatment normally reserved for Wendy Pepper. The entire framing of this event serves as a clue to the audience that the producers are about to dethrone the reigning good person with a new hero. The next day, when the shoe scandal surrounding Kara Saun's collection is revealed, Kara Saun officially loses her status as the moral gatekeeper, and Jay the peacekeeper is soon awarded the win and hero status.

Here we see gender norms at work. In order for a woman designer to be successful on *Project Runway*, she must separate herself from stereotypical images of women as hysterical, emotional or bitchy—all three of which Kara Saun had been able to avoid until the last two episodes. The irrationality she displayed in moving her bedding to the couch and the emotional instability of her final blowout with Wendy demoted Kara Saun to equal status with her, proving her to be just as unfit to be a designer as Wendy.

Season 2

Arguably, Season 2 winner Chloe Dao is named the hero at least in part due to her ability to separate herself from such stereotypes. She is never depicted as a participant in dramatic conflict and comes across as an overall highly likeable individual. The other part could be related to the fact that she was consistently portrayed as being a successful businessperson. During the finale when Heidi asks her why she should be the winner of *Project Runway*, Chloe responds that: "I think we all have the passion, the

design ability, the creativity, but I'm a real businessperson. If I win, this is gonna be a real business, bottom line" (Episode 13). The judges also repeatedly referenced her professionalism during their deliberations, which further served to move Chloe into the more stereotypically masculine domain of business.

In Season 2, over-the-top gay male designer, Santino Rice fills the role of villain and manages to incorporate a touch of humor while doing it. He is presented as very arrogant and is constantly shown making fun of the other designers, but most of the time he has them laughing with him. Specific moments were used to cement Santino's villain status, including the performance of the infamous "I'm not here to make friends" line that Juzwiak (2009) attributes to reality show villains. In one challenge (Episode 4), Santino argues rather forcefully with judge Nina Garcia on the runway about his lingerie collection, a stunt that had yet to be pulled on *Project Runway* up until that time (and that led to the utterance of another of *Project Runway*'s most memorable phrases: "It's aesthetically not pleasing!"). His rudeness eventually warranted the chivalrous interjection of Daniel Franco, who felt he needed to step in to prevent Santino from talking to Nina in such an unbecoming manner. During the final challenge (Episode 11) before Bryant Park, Santino further solidified his role as villain when he told the judges that he did not believe that soon-to-be-hero Chloe Dao should go to Bryant Park, saying he was "not wowed by people who are basically like, maybe, brilliant pattern-makers but not necessarily brilliant designers." Santino appears to be very aware of the fact that he is being framed as the season's villain, and perhaps even resigns himself to the role, aware that it will at least get him to the finale. On presenting his collection at Bryant

Park, he says to the crowd, “Whether you love to hate me or hate to love me, you have to admit I’m a great designer” (Episode 13).

Season 3

Laura Bennett, who eventually becomes something of a villain in Season 3, was at first framed as a highly capable and successful female designer. She is portrayed as distancing herself from female designers, despite being visibly female through her pregnancy. Laura rarely talked about being a mother without prompting, and even in those cases continued to verbally distance herself from other mothers: “I’ve never dressed down. I think that when you’re 42 years old and you have five children it’s a slippery slope into sweat pants and a mini van, so I just don’t go there” (Episode 1). Instead, she focused on her career as an architect, and spoke about *Project Runway* as an opportunity to pursue another career rather than a forsaken dream (as most mothers tended to do).

Also in this season, Uli Herzner was able to make it to the finale as a successful female designer. Like Season 2’s Chloe Dao, Uli simply stayed off the drama radar altogether, perhaps in a conscious effort to avoid the stereotypical portrayal of her identity as a woman on the show. It appears that female designers are forced to be stereotypical women or avoid categorization altogether. Ironically, Uli still did not win.

For the majority of Season 3, Jeffrey Sebelia is portrayed as the villain. One of the most painful episodes is when the designers are challenged with creating garments for the other designers’ mothers. It is suspiciously convenient for the producers that of all the designers’ mothers who Jeffrey could have been paired with, he is paired with the

mother of Angela, his sworn enemy on the show. It is hard to imagine anything more representative of villainy than making someone's mother cry, and that is exactly what Jeffrey is depicted as doing (Episode 7). However, there is a definite shift in framing when we move into the finale episodes of Season 3 (Weinstein, 2007a). His home visit is used to explain away Jeffrey's previous bad behavior on the show by framing it within the larger discourse of all of the hardships he had to overcome to get where he is today. Furthermore, producers craft a softer side of Jeffrey by displaying him as a loving father with his young son. As Jeffrey is recreated as an emerging hero, Laura Bennett is set to take his place as the scheming new villain that would stand in the way of his victory. In Part 1 of the finale episode, Laura accuses Jeffrey of having cheated in the production of his final collection. Tim Gunn reports that the producers will conduct an investigation and later reports the findings of the investigation: Jeffrey is cleared. Jeffrey, in response to having been found innocent and being allowed to show his collection at Bryant Park, is shown breaking down and crying. Jeffrey takes his place as the new hero, and Laura will take hers as the bitch who tried to thwart him.

Season 4

Season 4 winner Christian Siriano is the youngest designer to win *Project Runway*. His age is used in large part to help frame his identity as a sort of designing prodigy. Christian is also markedly gay on the show but was able to successfully walk the fine line of being gay as expert without crossing over into gay as joke. In this way the qualified gay male designer is presented as having the strongest attributes for success on the show. He is more in tune with the world of women than his straight counterpart,

but he is more qualified than the woman designer as he still has the rationality and patriarchal attributes that women supposedly lack. Shugart (2003) speaks to this scenario as a popular one in contemporary media representations of gay men and straight women. She argues that:

in these texts, homosexuality is not only recoded and normalized as consistent with privileged male heterosexuality, but is articulated as extending heterosexual male privilege. In so doing, blatant sexism is reinvented and legitimized. (p. 68)

In this way, Christian is able to beat out another young designer, Jillian Lewis, for the win. Jillian might also have been portrayed as a prodigy, being close to the same age as Christian, but for whatever reason, was labeled instead as being still a bit green.

Apparently, women do not make as good prodigies as men do.

Season 5

As I have already noted on multiple occasions, it becomes apparent that the women who are most successful on the show are the ones who are able to distance themselves from the hysterical and irrational female stereotype. The contestants seem especially more aware of this in some of the later seasons, and in an attempt to distance themselves, many women appear to turn on other women or put them down in an attempt to show how much they are not like them. Similarly, this type of behavior is noted as occurring in depictions of gay men by Shugart (2003) when she points out how gay men are portrayed as furthering the heteronormative agenda. In an attempt to show how lead gay male characters are equally capable of filling the patriarchal shoes of their

straight brethren, they distance themselves through somewhat homophobic behavior from the flamboyantly gay community.

This is most readily displayed in Season 5, the season known for having the highest number of women designers in the finale (Weinstein, 2008). In one episode, Leanne Marshall comments that “Kenley is just being very loud about her overconfidence in her design,” to which Kenley Collins responds, “I can see Leanne and Emily rolling their eyes at me...I’m just having fun and some girls don’t like that” (Episode 9). Kenley is clearly depicted as the villain of this season, also uttering the telltale “I’m not here to make friends” line. Korto Momolu is another female finalist whose identity has been heavily built around her motherhood. In this case and in others, the narrative surrounding the mother character is based on the idea of having a second chance or having another go at a lost opportunity. *Project Runway* allows the mother to try again at a dream she gave up on when she decided to have children. It is significant that although the women’s narratives include variations of finally being able to realize their dreams, a mother has never won a season of *Project Runway*. “You can be a mom and be anything you want to be,” Wendy Pepper said after making it to the finale. Anything but the winner, that is. Korto is no exception here, leaving the highly ambiguous Leanne Marshall to be named this season’s winner.

Foils Never Prosper

The foil character tends to be a flamboyant—or at least non-patriarchal—gay or a straight male. These characters are fun to watch and apparently fun to work with. While this character is usually beloved by fans and fellow designers alike, this character is

never seriously considered as a contender for the win. Instead, he is there for comic relief. Generally speaking, there are several gay male designers present in any one season of *Project Runway*. However, one gay man usually emerges center stage as the one to watch for good, old-fashioned gay spectacle.

In Season 1, Austin Scarlett styles himself in a way that sets him apart from other male designers, and producers are keen to highlight these differences. On one occasion, Austin is shown in the apartment applying lotion to his feet and then pulling on long silk stockings over them. This scene is not relevant to the ongoing competition on *Project Runway*, so the only function it serves is to further establish Austin's role as the feminine male designer on the show. Season 2 provides another fan favorite in the presentation of the flamboyantly gay Nick Verreos, and Season 3 introduces Kayne Gillespie, a self-identified pageant queen.

In Season 4, we meet Ricky Lizalde, whose waterworks spectacles remain unrivaled. In addition to crying in almost every episode, Ricky confesses, "I was a cheerleader when I was in high school....I was such a queen" (Episode 1). Later he tells us with a wink, "When I had a girlfriend, I actually made her prom dress. That should have been a clue right there, right?" (Episode 7)

Even though several of these designers are portrayed as highly talented designers and in more than one season make it up until the very last challenge before the finale, for one reason or another they never quite make it to Bryant Park. One distinctive feature of the finale episode is the visit Tim Gunn makes to each of the final contestants' homes, giving us insight into how the designer lives in the world outside of *Project Runway*. Is

it coincidence that until Season 5, a non-patriarchal gay male designer had yet to receive this spotlight?

In addition to having the overly effeminate gay guy on the show to add comic relief to the weight of its stars, the token straight guy provides an element of light-heartedness to the levity of the “serious” designers. This character might also be known as “the one who should not have made it this far,” because that about sums up the dialog surrounding the straight male designers on *Project Runway* with few exceptions. This seems to be the case with Rob Plotkin in Season 1. Kara Saun says in one interview, “Rob has amazing staying power. He schmoozed his way through. He just flashes his smile and makes a dirty comment and he’s still here” (Episode 7). Later in that same episode, paired with a visual image of a confused-looking Rob, Jay McCarroll says in an interview session as if to Rob, “What are you still doing here?” In Season 5, several designers make similar remarks about Joe Faris. In one episode, Leanne Marshall says, “I’m kind of surprised that Joe is here this late in the game” (Episode 8). Later after his elimination, she says, “I’m not so surprised to see Joe go,” to which Korto Momolu replies, “I’ve seen that coming for weeks” (Episode 11).

Conclusions

Despite the seventy-four contestants of various gender and sexual orientation, designers on *Project Runway* are portrayed performing their identities within a limited range of roles. Gay male designers, while given some degree of authority within the realm of women’s clothing, are represented through a series of hyper-ritualizations that tend to perpetuate stereotypes rather than challenge them. Straight male designers have

few options for enacting their sexual identity on the show, and these often also play to stereotypes of masculinity. Female designers are generally not allowed to perform sexuality as part of their identities and are restricted to playing the part of the hysterical, bitchy or motherly female.

Furthermore, these gender and sexual identities serve to allow and restrict certain characters in their place at Bryant Park. Patriarchal gay men and sensitive straight men are given a shot at the prize, while women are only allowed to win if they do not perform their womanhood. Left in the margins, the performance of mothers, non-patriarchal gays and non-parental straight men always end with an “auf weidersehen.”

It is especially relevant to keep in mind that each and every designer contestant is on the show for a specific purpose. While for the designers that purpose may range from establishing a brand to becoming famous to winning the prize money, for the producers the purpose is to form an entertaining cast that will make for good television. It is not such a stretch to argue that when a designer fails to help achieve this goal, they would be eliminated.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: FINALE THOUGHTS

Hopefully, I have made it clear that reality television works to create a social order that is reminiscent of the one in which we go about our everyday lives. Through a highly selective process, producers reinvent the social in a way that both encourages and magnifies the most dramatic moments for our viewing pleasure. Rules provide an external structure that informs contestants on how they should act within a given challenge as well as within the larger context of the competition as a whole. Making one's garment out of car parts is a rule specific to the "Fashion that Drives You" challenge (Episode 7), but that designers are not allowed to walk down the street to get a cup of coffee and email an old friend is a rule that applies across challenges for the duration of the competition. Norms provide internal restraints on designers behavior as well as provide more opportunity for producers to stage drama, exemplified through Zulema's shocking mother-f***ing walk-off.

Together, these rules and norms work to create a sense of morality for the designers. To violate the rules and norms is to deal in matters of right and wrong. Producers rely on this moral code for the framing of characters. Without a sense of right and wrong, there could be neither hero nor villain.

The contestants cast for the show are chosen based on their ability to be crafted and edited into one of several roles characteristic of the reality competition genre. The roles of hero and villain are not always permanent, and there are usually multiple

contenders for hero status so as to keep us guessing until the end, “Who will win?” In addition to affecting a moral order, norms emerge interpersonally and therefore, unevenly. They induce some contestants to act one way, while prohibiting the same behavior in another contestant. This functions to create a distinct number of roles or identities on top of the hero and the villain.

As mentioned, these various roles tend to follow a number of prescriptions or norms that work to limit who can play them. The effeminate gay designer consistently makes it to the final rounds of the competition but has never been allowed to present a collection at Bryant Park. The mother, on the other hand, is almost always allowed to present her collection but has yet to be named the winner of *Project Runway*. Male designers still have the upper hand, as they are allowed a greater number of parts to play. Heterosexual patriarchal male privilege seems to be extended in *Project Runway* world to the non-flamboyant gay male designer, and only women who are able to distance themselves from stereotypical images of women as bitchy, hysterical, overemotional and irrational are allowed to succeed. Consequently, the women who do not succeed in the competition are painted in the aforementioned ways as explanation for their lack of success.

Project Runway and Sexism

Shugart (2003) speaks to this issue when she examines the gay man/straight woman coupling popular in a variety of media representations. She points to the way that heterosexual male privilege is extended to the gay man in order to recreate the parent/child dynamics of patriarchy, or “father knows best.” To do this, the woman is

consistently portrayed as “childlike, silly, and cute, as well as irrational and emotional, often given to hysteria; these actions and behaviors are always juxtaposed with those of the men, who are depicted as stable, mature, rational, and responsible” (p. 83). The implications, Shugart argues, are that sexist practices “don’t count” when practiced by gay men. I might extend this argument to include that sexist practices do not count when they are practiced against women by other women, as is often the case in *Project Runway*, where women feel the need to distance themselves from the stereotypical female character types in order to prove themselves worthy of success in the competition. Ultimately, this display renormalizes sexism for a host of exceptional circumstances and makes gay men and women partners in crime in upholding the patriarchal order (Shugart, 2003).

Project Runway and the Self

In the light of these findings it becomes necessary to also consider the larger social implications of the media in proliferating these views. Rothenbuhler (2006) invites us to think about how the media serves to cultivate the self as a sacred object in modern society. Elaborating on Durkheim’s original concept of a cult of the individual as constituting modern religion, Rothenbuhler contends that the individual self is a sacred object in society today:

No one is allowed not to have a self. Parents, education, counseling, popular advice, and marketing all advocate that we act our selves, be our selves, reward our selves, actualize our selves, live up to our selves, and more....Not only is it

necessary that we each have a self, but that we work on it and that we show it, that the self and our self-work be subject to public display and evaluation. (p. 32)

Furthermore, if the self is a sacred object for all of society, then it follows that all of society's communicative resources (i.e. media) would focus on the "construction, display, celebration, edification, and discipline of selves" (p. 33). Individuality becomes the greatest expression of the self, and therefore its ideas and values, as well as individual performances of heroic or villainous selves, also become subjects or representations of the sacred.

Reality television then serves as the ultimate stage for the public display of the self. However, as I have already discussed in the context of Goffman's hyper-ritualization, reality television exaggerates normal rules of personal presentation and relies on a select number of character types or roles for performances of identity or self. Rothenbuhler (2006) solidifies this point when he argues that media presentations tend to reduce the range of realistic possibilities for role performance to a number of iconographic types. This is certainly evident in what we have seen in *Project Runway*, as both gay and straight men and women in general are limited in the roles in which they are allowed to portray. The implication of this, according to Rothenbuhler, is that the types of roles actually displayed are given "greater public presence and social authority. They become displays in the word that provide orientation (instruction) for how to display one's orientation to others in the world, good examples of how to be a good example" (p. 35).

So when women watch *Project Runway*, they are seeing that even in a women's industry, they should avoid acting in a way that might stereotypically categorize them as women. They should not display their emotions, they should not doubt their work, and they should probably avoid being mothers altogether if possible. Gay men are being shown that fashion is the perfect industry for their success, as long as they do not come across too effeminately. And straight men, unless they have daughters of their own, would do themselves a favor and stay away from an industry that would otherwise show them to be the fools that they are.

Future Studies of *Project Runway*

Future studies in this area might consider the cultural context of *Project Runway* and the popular discourse surrounding it. *Project Runway* has proven to be a hot topic in many gay publications like *411 Magazine*, *Metrosource Magazine*, *AfterElton.com*, *The Advocate.com* and others. Popular blogsites also provide a treasure trove for studying the ways in which fans engage and interpret texts. Blogs, like the highly followed "Project Rungay," are emerging more and more as a new form of online information and community and change the way that audiences interact with the original text on several levels (Blood, 2002). Take, for example, the following sample from a post from Season 4 entitled, "Put the crack pipe down, judges!":

Seriously? This clearance-rack-at-Bebe tackorama took the prize last night? The judges all swooned over it and from where we were sitting, there were at least two FAR worthier candidates for the win....It's just ... ew. It's tacky and too short and sits too low on her boobs and we hate the ruffle on the skirt. Everything

about it says "stripper's night off." So he styled her like Amy Winehouse. Big deal. What did that have to do with anything? Are we really supposed to hold that toothless crackhead up as a style icon now? Darlings, count us OUT on that one. (Fitzgerald and Marquez, 2008)

This post received 229 comments from the blog's followers. Some questions are certainly worth further consideration then. How do blogs like "Project Rungay" change the way we as the audience interact with the original text? What is the significance of the authoritative gay voice as found on "Project Rungay," and how does *Project Runway* allow for or even encourage it?

In addition, a study that looks at representations of race and class on *Project Runway* would be highly informative. Each season, Tim Gunn visits the finalists at their homes prior to the final runway show at Bryant Park. These visits often include intimate views of the designer's workspace, living arrangements, hometown, friends and family. It would be interesting to see how race and class play out in the designers' self-presentations of identity. For example, in Season 5, Korto Momolu welcomes Tim Gunn into her home amongst her friends and family, many of whom are dressed in traditional African garb. She then invites him to a private performance of her playing the drums, a tradition of her family's African country of origin. As Dubrofsky (2006) observes of *The Bachelor*, focusing on race within the context of reality shows can be tricky. We are being asked "to consider race within the logic of relational choice" (p. 42), or in the case of *Project Runway*, within the logic of talent, rather than within the logic of representation.

Regardless of the many other ways one might analyze *Project Runway*, this particular study has demonstrated the multiple ways that we as human beings attempt to recreate our social world for our own viewing pleasure. However, we must be ever wary of what we are recreating and the social statements being perpetuated and upheld as representative of the “real” or even of what should be “real.” Heidi tells us time and again that “one day you’re in, and the next day you’re out.” Yet in terms of gender and sexual identity representation, some things appear to be unchanging.

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