

“Get in some good trouble!”  
Meaning and Representation in Drag Response to Hate Crimes.  
A Stylistic and Multimodal Analysis

**Abstract:** In recent years, incidents of discrimination based on ethnicity, gender and religion have risen sharply. The murder of George Floyd has sparked the emergence of movements that intersect various rights initiatives. This activism is more intersectional, highlighting the awareness among activists of the need to address multiple levels of discrimination simultaneously. This has emerged through public protests and celebrity support for equality and solidarity, despite being countered by right-wing policies. This article examines solidarity and resistance movements from a linguistic and multimodal perspective, focusing on televised drag queen activism, specifically on one episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race* season 13, recorded in 2020. The study examines how drag queens perceive and respond to hate crimes, testing a cross-disciplinary approach using Stylistics and Multimodality. Drag performances are analysed in terms of transitivity and representation of social actors, to investigate and better understand the semiotic process of meaning-making, and to gain insights into the drag community's response to Hate Speech.

**Keywords:** *hate speech, hate crime, drag queens, RuPaul's drag race, multimodality, stylistics*

## 1. Visibility and Activism: Study's Overview

The last five years were marked by a series of discriminatory incidents, predominantly of an ethnic, gender, and religious nature. Among them, the murder of George Floyd has represented an indelible image, and a critical trigger for our society's battles. Although it is evident that similar tragic events already occurred before the ongoing decade, the increasing pervasiveness of (social) media has undoubtedly contributed to foster the awareness of different forms of social inequality, as a vehicle of both information and Hate Speech.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, and consistently observed by media such as *The Guardian*, the fight against hatred has manifested in two main broad forms: on the one hand, strikes and street marches, which have also become a sharing point of reflection for activists engaged in different fights, such as racism, gender equality, and climate change;<sup>2</sup> on the other hand, activism has been significantly endorsed by artists, athletes, and celebrities, who used their media exposure to foster equality and by taking concrete action and spreading solidarity messages.<sup>3</sup> Thus, activism has recently been supported by a higher consciousness – one effect of globalisation. The evidence of this strong

<sup>1</sup> Giuseppe Balirano, and Brownen Hughes, “Editors’ Introduction”, in Giuseppe Balirano and Brownen Hughes, eds., *Homing in on Hate: Critical Discourse Studies of Hate Speech, Discrimination and Inequality in the Digital Age* (Napoli: Loffredo, 2021), v-xiv.

<sup>2</sup> Jessica Murray, and Aamna Mohdin, “‘It was empowering’: teen BLM activists on learning the ropes at school climate strikes”, *The Guardian*, Tuesday 11 August (2020), <https://www.theguardian.com>, accessed 30 April 2025.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Gallan, “Usman Khawaja Challenges Cricket’s Uncomfortable Relationship with Activism”, *The Guardian*, Friday 15 December (2023), [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com), accessed 30 April 2025.

defiance of power is that both public protest<sup>4</sup> and artistic social engagement<sup>5</sup> are challenged by far right-wing politicians and with a series of actions that are sometimes repressive.

In the present article I try to exemplify these movements of solidarity and resistance from a linguistic and discursive perspective, by specifically focusing on televised drag queens' activism. This study has two main objectives: (1) investigating the modalities through which drag queens perceive, discuss and respond to hate crimes; (2) testing a cross-disciplinary approach that hybridises frameworks from stylistics and multimodality. The first purpose is pursued through the analysis of a conversation and discussion retrieved from an episode of the thirteenth season of the TV contest *RuPaul's Drag Race*<sup>6</sup> (RPDR). The season was recorded in 2020 and aired at the beginning of 2021. In episode 5, *The Bag Ball*, drag participants seized the opportunity presented by their visibility to initiate a discourse on the ethnic crimes that have happened in 2020. The matter is importantly discussed from an intersectional point of view, as the queens highlight the ethnic-gender oppression suffered by Black trans lives.

The methodological purpose of this article is closely related to drag art, as drag performances are a proper field for investigating two complex linguistic issues: (a) how the joint use of language and body triggers a semiotic process of meaning-making that can hopefully foster social change; (b) the re-semiotization of the concept of 'style', which ought to be no longer conceptualised only in stylistic terms – how a text says what – but also according to a more common idea of style, therefore in visual and aesthetic sense.

This introduction is followed by a review of some remarkable linguistic research on the verbal and non-verbal performativity of drag queens, along with a framing of Hate Speech and 'hate crime' in relation to the drag community. Successively, a methodological section illustrates the stylistic and multimodal categories chosen for the analysis, namely Paul Simpson's model of transitivity<sup>7</sup> and Theo van Leeuwen's network system of the representation of social actors<sup>8</sup>. In the fourth section, after giving some context about RPDR's format, the analyses be carried out. Finally, some concluding remarks wrap up considerations on drag response to Hate Speech, and on the application of the cross-disciplinary approach proposed.

## 2. Drag, Drag Language, and Hate Speech

It is always appropriate to provide a comprehensive definition of the term 'drag'. It has undergone significant evolution over time, yet there is a certain degree of consistency about what the word 'drag' evokes in mind. According to Gonzales and Cavazos, "although there is no generally agreed upon definition of 'drag', an appropriate characterization of drag performers is individuals who publicly perform gender [...] as well as blur the lines between masculine and feminine".<sup>9</sup> The act of drag subverts the dominant ideologies and heteronormative binaries by challenging conventional gender norms. In her seminal work, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler introduces the concept of gender performativity: "The subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated because signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules

<sup>4</sup> Adria R. Walker, "Seven Organizations the Far Right is Targeting for Diversity Efforts Post-Affirmative Action", Friday 12 April (2024), [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com), accessed 30 April 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Nadia Khomami, "ACE's 'Political Statements' Warning to Artists Came After Government Talks", Friday 17 May (2024), [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com), accessed 30 April 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Nick Murray, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Logo TV (2009-2016), VH1 (2017-2022), MTV (2023-present).

<sup>7</sup> Paul Simpson, *Stylistics: A Resource Book for Students* (London: Routledge, 2004), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Theo Van Leeuwen, "The Representation of Social Actors", in Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard, and Malcolm Coulthard, eds., *Texts and Practices, Second Edition* (London: Routledge, 2003), 66.

<sup>9</sup> Jorge C. González and Kameron C. Cavazos, "Serving Fishy Realness: Representations of Gender Equity on RuPaul's Drag Race", *Continuum*, 30.6 (2016), 1.

precisely through the production of substantializing effects".<sup>10</sup> According to Butler, drag exemplifies gender performativity, as it subverts traditional gender roles through exaggerated performances associated with a birth sex different from one's own. Within drag culture, these performative practices are vividly embodied, as testified by television representations of drag, which evolved alongside the lived realities of the drag community, mutually influencing each other while navigating the heteronormative constraints of mainstream media.<sup>11</sup> The most compelling example is *RuPaul's Drag Race*, an American reality competition television series created by drag icon RuPaul Charles. Each season features a diverse group of drag queens who compete in various challenges to win the title of America's Next Drag Superstar. The show premiered in 2009 and has since become a cultural phenomenon, celebrating drag culture and providing a platform for drag queens to showcase their talents and eventually get a start to their careers. As host, mentor, and head judge, RuPaul guides contestants through a series of challenges designed to test their charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent (C.U.N.T.).

Among RPDR's most enjoyable moments, there are those sophisticated linguistic performances that contribute to the construction of gender identities. It has been demonstrated through sociolinguistic research that language plays a crucial role in the formation and perpetuation of drag identities. According to Barrett, drag queens rely on multiple linguistic codes and styles to construct their social and gender identities.<sup>12</sup> One example that has drawn the attention of much linguistic research is the drag practice 'reading', that is making humorous and sometimes exaggerated remarks about someone's perceived flaws or characteristics as a form of mock impoliteness.<sup>13</sup> Studies have demonstrated that LGBTQ individuals frequently engage in ritual insults and playful putdowns in order to foster in-group solidarity.<sup>14</sup> McKinnon further elaborates that such practices help drag queens develop a "thick skin" to navigate the hostile environment they often face, both within and outside the LGBTQ community.<sup>15</sup>

Drag queens' thick skin is a critical area of study where drag culture intersects with Hate Speech. The subverting performance of gender often makes drag queens the target of hateful language. Hate Speech, as well as hate crimes, are acts motivated by bias, prejudice, or animosity towards a particular group on the basis of social categories like ethnicity, gender identity, religion, or sexual orientation.<sup>16</sup> Although it is not easy to provide an all-encompassing framing of such phenomenon, Hate Speech remains a challenging issue that requires, linguistic, rhetorical, but also other types of analysis to understand its impact and elaborate counter-strategies, as it can manifest in various forms, which means not only verbal, but also non-verbal and symbolic expressions.<sup>17</sup> It is of paramount importance to gain insight into how drag performers interpret, address, and react to Hate Speech. Within research on drag culture, many scholars have focused on both public performances and behind-the-scenes interactions of drag performers in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of their community and their responses to social hostility.<sup>18</sup> This study also aims to contribute to research on the social and linguistic practices that influence the experiences of drag queens.

---

<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), 45.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Macherey, "A Production of Subjectivity", *Yale French Studies*, 88 (1995), 48.

<sup>12</sup> Rusty Barrett, "Indexing Polyphonic Identity in the Speech of African American Drag Queens", in Mary Bucholtz, A. C. Liang, and Laurel A. Sutton, eds., *Reinventing Identities: The Gendered Self in Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 314.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Culpeper, *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 208.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen O. Murray, "The Art of Gay Insulting", *Anthropological Linguistics*, 21.5 (1979), 211-223.

<sup>15</sup> Sean McKinnon, "Building a thick skin for each other": The Use of 'Reading' as an Interactional Practice of Mock Impoliteness in Drag Queen Backstage Talk", *Journal of Language and Sexuality*, 6.1 (2017), 121.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Delgado, and Jean Stefancic, "Images of the outsider in American law and culture: Can free expression remedy systemic social ills?", In Richard Delgado, ed., *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1995), 217-227.

<sup>17</sup> Chris J. Vargo, and Toby Hopp, "Fear, anger, and political advertisement engagement: A computational case study of Russian-linked Facebook and Instagram content", *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 97 (2020), 743-761.

<sup>18</sup> Dana Berkowitz, and Linda Belgrave, "She works hard for the money": Drag queens and the management of their contradictory status of celebrity and marginality", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 39 (2010), 159-186.

In conclusion, the study of drag culture, gender performativity, and Hate Speech suggests that language and performance can intersect in complex ways to construct and challenge social identities. By examining the linguistic and embodied practices of drag queens, researchers may gain a deeper understanding of how these performers navigate and resist societal norms that seek to marginalise them. In this respect, RPDR is a proper case study, as it profoundly impacted both the LGBTQ+ community and mainstream culture. It has brought drag culture into the spotlight, fostering greater acceptance and understanding of gender diversity and artistic expression.

### 3. A Cross-Disciplinary Approach to Style(s) and Representation(s)

#### 3.1 *The Encoding of Meaning: Style as Choice*

Language plays a crucial role in shaping and defining everyday experiences, encompassing actions, events, thoughts, and perceptions. In Simpson's words, it does so by

encoding into the grammar of the clause a mechanism for capturing what we say, think and do. It also means accommodating in grammar a host of more abstract relations, such as those that pertain between objects, circumstances and logical concepts. When language is used to represent the goings on of the physical or abstract world in this way, to represent patterns of experience in spoken and written texts, it fulfils the *experiential* function. The experiential function is an important marker of style, especially so of the style of narrative discourse, because it emphasises the concept of *style as choice*.<sup>19</sup>

This means that language allows for the representation of the same event in multiple ways, according to what Halliday indicates as "mental picture of reality".<sup>20</sup> Stylistician's task is to understand why a particular structure is chosen over others. These stylistic choices, whether conscious or unconscious, significantly impact the structure and interpretation of texts.

The system used to frame experience in language is called transitivity. On semantic, pragmatic and discursive levels of language, transitivity has less to do with verbs taking direct objects, but rather and with how meanings are encoded in the clause, representing different types of processes. Transitivity typically identifies three key components of processes: the process itself (usually a verb phrase), the participants (usually noun phrases), and the circumstances (usually prepositional or adverb phrases). Figure 1 shows the model of transitivity proposed by Simpson, drawing on Halliday's theories. However, this model does not prevent the overlapping of humans' different experiences. In this model, six types of processes are identified:

1. Material processes: those of doing, involving an actor (obligatory) and a goal (optional).
2. Mental processes: those of sensing, involving a sensor and a phenomenon.
3. Behavioural processes: sitting between material and mental, representing physiological actions.
4. Verbalization processes: those of saying, involving a sayer, a receiver, and a verbiage.
5. Relational processes: those of being, establishing relationships between entities.
6. Existential processes: those asserting existence, typically occurring with 'there'.

---

<sup>19</sup> Simpson, *Stylistics*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Michael A.K. Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Edward Arnold 1994), 106.

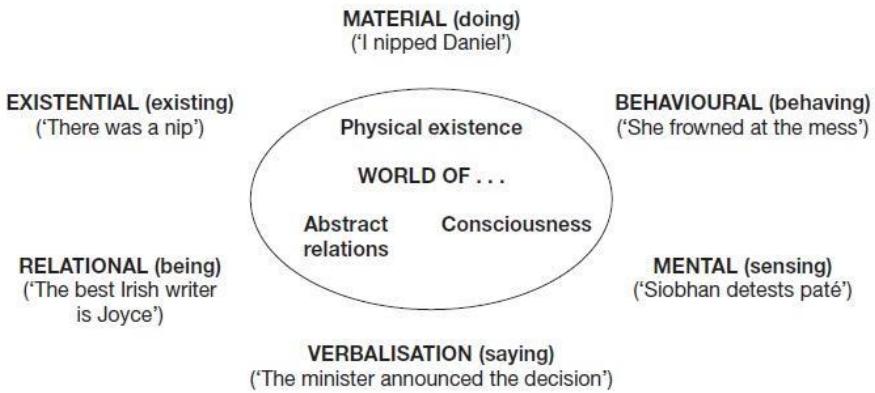


Fig.1: Simpson's model of transitivity

Relational processes are further divided into three types and two modes (Fig. 2). The types are *intensive* ('x is y'), *possessive* ('x has y'), and *circumstantial* ('x is at/is in/is on/is with y'). The modes are *attributive*, when the process describes a quality, and *identifying*, when it defines one entity through another.

Type	Mode	
	attributive	identifying
intensive	Paula's presentation was lively	The best Irish writer is Joyce Joyce is the best Irish writer
possessive	Peter has a piano	The Alpha Romeo is Clara's Clara's is the Alpha Romeo
circumstantial	The fête is on all day	The maid is in the parlour In the parlour is the maid

Fig. 2: Relational processes grid

The model of transitivity and the relational processes grid are used in the first round of analysis carried out in this study to investigate drag queen's discursive encoding when discussing the Black Lives Matter momentum.

### 3.2 Discourse and Representation

In his study, van Leeuwen examines the ways in which social actors can be represented in English discourse. He sets out to develop a socio-semantic inventory with the aim of understanding the sociological and critical relevance of these representations before delving into their linguistic realisation.

Van Leeuwen's approach diverges from traditional linguistically oriented Critical Discourse Analysis by prioritising sociological categories over purely linguistic ones:

There is no neat fit between sociological and linguistic categories, and if Critical Discourse Analysis, in investigating for instance the representation of agency, ties itself in too closely to specific linguistic operations or categories, many relevant instances of agency might be overlooked. One cannot, it seems, have it both ways with language. Either theory and method are formally neat but semantically messy (as in the dictionary: one form, many meanings), or they are semantically neat but formally messy (as in the thesaurus: one concept, many possible realisations). Linguists tend towards preserving the unity of formal categories. I shall here attempt the opposite approach, hoping to provide a set of relevant categories for investigating the representation of social actors in discourse.<sup>21</sup>

Van Leeuwen introduces several key concepts and frameworks for the analysis of the representation of social actors:

1. The concepts of *exclusion* and *inclusion* are of central importance in this context. This entails examining the inclusion or exclusion of specific individuals or groups within a discourse, as well as the implications of these choices. Exclusion can be achieved through two distinct mechanisms: *backgrounding* and *suppression*. In the former, the subject in question is made less prominent, whereas in the latter, it is entirely omitted from the discourse.
2. The process of role allocation is a crucial aspect of discourse analysis. This aspect concerns the roles ascribed to social actors, specifically whether they are depicted as active agents or passive recipients in various contexts. The analysis demonstrates how these allocations can vary depending on the narrative or institutional context.
3. *Activation* and *passivation* are two key concepts in this analysis. The term 'activation' is used to describe the representation of social actors as dynamic participants in actions. In contrast, the term 'passivation' is used to describe the portrayal of social actors as affected by actions. This distinction is of crucial importance for the comprehension of the portrayal of agency within texts.
4. *Genericisation* and *specification*: Social actors may be represented generically (as part of a group) or specifically (as individuals). This decision affects how readers perceive the generalisability of the actions or attributes described.
5. The process of *assimilation* is defined as the act of incorporating a social actor into a larger collective. This can be achieved through two distinct methods: *aggregation* and *collectivisation*. This refers to the representation of social actors as part of a group, either as an aggregate (collectivisation) or as individuals within a group (aggregation).
6. The process of *nomination* and *categorisation* is as follows: The act of nomination involves the naming of individuals, whereas categorisation is the process of classifying them according to their social or functional identities. These choices reflect the manner in which identities and social roles are constructed in discourse.

Van Leeuwen presents a system network (Fig. 3) that summarises the principal ways in which social actors can be represented. This network integrates various lexico-grammatical and discourse-level linguistic systems, including transitivity, reference, nominal groups, and rhetorical figures. The network underscores the interconnectedness of linguistic and sociological categories in discourse analysis. It can

---

<sup>21</sup> Van Leeuwen, "The Representation of Social Actors", 33.

be applied to different kind of contexts, such as politics, media, and everyday communication. The Representation of Social Actors (RSA) system network is suitable for the analysis of the drag context, as it highlights the power of language in shaping social reality, representing identity, and challenging underlying biases and power structures.

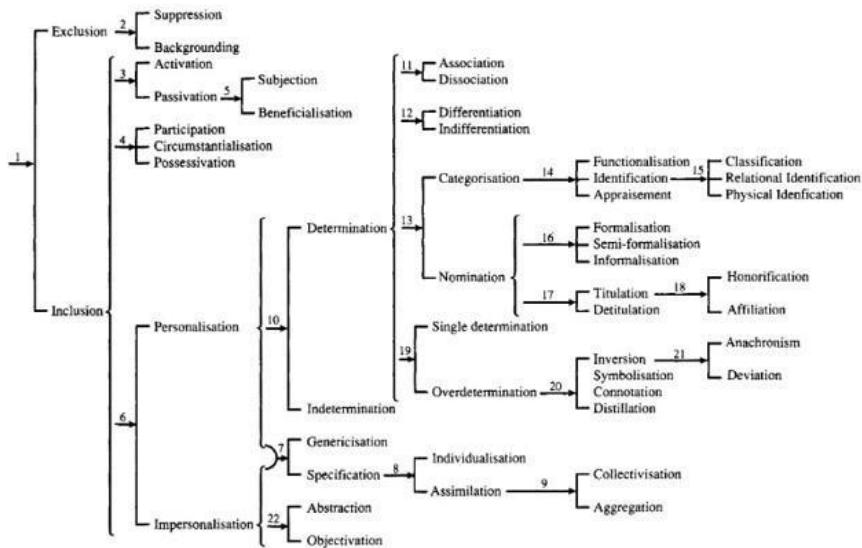


Fig. 3: Van Leeuwen's system network for the representation of social actors

#### 4. Drag Discourse on Hate According to Simpson and van Leeuwen's Frameworks

Building on the theoretical frameworks by Simpson and van Leeuwen, the article now turns to the analysis of the extract retrieved from season 13 episode 5, *The Bag Ball*. This section is divided into two paragraphs, respectively dedicated to stylistic and then representational analysis. However, it is first necessary to provide some context about the structure of RPDR's episodes.

The format of RPDR comprises a number of recurring phases. At the beginning of each episode, the racers engage in a 'mini challenge', a brief, often comedic task. It may take the form of photo shoots, rapid costume changes, or other activities. They serve to facilitate interaction and provide the contestants with opportunities to win small prizes or advantages in subsequent phases of the episode. Then, the programme progresses to the 'maxi challenge', the main event, which varies in nature and complexity. The format of RPDR encompasses a variety of elements, including parody, musical performances, celebrity impersonation, and, most importantly, the design and construction of outfits for runway presentations. Subsequently, the contestants present their creations on the runway, where they are evaluated on their creativity, fashion sense, and ability to embody the challenge's theme. At the end, the queens receive feedback from a panel of judges, who assess the contestants based on maxi challenge and runway. The two queens who are deemed to have performed the least well in the episode must compete in a lip-sync battle. This showdown determines which queen will remain in the competition and which will be eliminated.

The conversation under analysis takes place in the so-called Werk Room, specifically before the maxi challenge, and during the dragging process while the queens put on their make-up and outfits. The moment is typically marked by exchanges of opinions, shared concerns, and encouragement for the show, all often delivered with the usual drag humour. However, in this episode from 2021, this moment is completely different. As the queens prepare, the drag performer LaLa Ri starts talking about the anti-racist protests of the Black Lives Matter movement. A debate ensues regarding the alarming surge in ethnic hate crimes that have occurred in 2020. However, the murder of George Floyd was the epicentre from which activists have insisted on the necessity to fight for rights with an intersectional approach. The episode under analysis represents a perfect example where discriminations of non-binary, non-cisgender and black non-privileged people may intersect.

Despite the sequence's overall duration of 3'33", it is an intense moment of alternate shots in the Werk Room and behind-the-scenes interview, where queens appear as 'male'. The debate oscillates between an analysis of the distressing reality of the events discussed and a sharing of opinions and emotions.

#### 4.1 *Transitivity Processes*

For the analysis, the script of the sequence has been divided into five segments. The criterion follows the observation of significant shifts in the process of linguistic encoding of meanings, the analysis of which requires illustration and comment at regular intervals.

To facilitate comprehension, a brief list of abbreviations of transitivity processes and relational sub-processes is provided:

Material Process	MaP
Behavioural Process	BP
Mental Process	MeP
Verbalisation Process	VP
Relational Process	RP
intensive	in.
possessive	p
circumstantial	c
attributive	a
identifying	id.
Existential Process	EP

The abbreviations are employed as tags in the subsequent analysis of the conversation in the Werk Room, which is mostly tagged at the level of clauses unless whole sentences convey the same kind of transitivity process. Queens talking behind the scenes are indicated as 'interviewed' (int.). When more than one queen or one unidentified speaks, they are indicated with '-'.

LaLa Ri	So I have a question.
Kandy Muse	What's the tea?
LaLa Ri	So with the whole Black Lives Matter movement going on, [EP] has anyone been protesting? [MaP]
-	Yeah, for sure.

Kandy Muse	When all the marches and protests in New York City were happening, [EP] I made sure I was out there [RC: c, id.] protesting [MaP].
Kandy Muse (int.)	Being an Afro-Latino from the South Bronx, [RP: c, a] when I see Black people [MeP] being murdered by police, [MaP] it just puts so many things into perspective. [MeP]
Kandy Muse	Fighting for Black lives is very, very important to me. [RP: in., a]

EP as an opening process of transitivity is a predictable occurrence, as it dictates the topic-context of the discussion. EP and MaP answer the question “What happened?” and are generally conveyed in continuous tenses. Although there is no ‘there’ to introduce the EP, the present continuous in LaLa Ri’s question makes up for it by indicating the continued and thus existential state of a subject, which – another characteristic of EP – is the result of a nominalisation from verb to noun, i.e. move > movement. Another difference between EP and MaP lies in the higher ‘concreteness’ of the latter, as is evident from the main clause, in which the verb ‘protest’ indicates something more concrete.

The same pattern of transitivity is reproduced in Kandy Muse’s answer. As this is also the first sharing of personal experience in the conversation, there occurs a RP, the transitivity of being. As shown by Simpson’s model, these processes pertain to the realm of “abstract relations”. This seems to contrast with the meaning of Kandy Muse’s statement, which informs of their physical presence in the protests. However, the queen’s use of ‘make sure’ allows for a shift from thoughts to deeds. This is achieved through the relational sub-processes: “I was out there” conveys a circumstantial process with identifying mode. Kandy Muse’s interview-like talk continues with another RP. Here, the discourse shifts from identifying to attributive mode, as Kandy defines themselves according to their ethnicity and origin. This is followed by a first MeP, one concerning perception: seeing the murder of Black people by police triggers a process of elaboration and recognition. It is interesting to note how the text has already started to require flexibility of the model of transitivity. The verbs ‘see’ and ‘put’ should be classified as MeP, but in the conversation the act of seeing goes beyond the simple physical act of observing, the same way ‘to put things into perspective’ exemplifies a MeP by itself.

At the end of his talk, Kandy summarises the previously observed processes with another RP, which is intensifying (“very important”) and attributive (“to me”).

Symone	Of course, we all know the George Floyd thing [MeP] that really, like, sparked all this shit. [MaP]
–	Yeah.
Symone	And thank God. I mean, like, not since that-- It’s sad that that had to happen, [RP: c, a] but I’m happy [RP: in., id.] that people are waking the fuck up, [MeP] because it’s always been there. [RP: c, a]
Symone (int.)	Being Black [RP: in., id.] and seeing the George Floyd video being played over and over and over again, [MaP] there’s a level of trauma that comes with that shit. [MeP] So even with Corona going on, [MaP] I felt immediately compelled [MeP] to be involved in protests here in Los Angeles [RP: c, id.]. Because enough is enough [RP: in., a]. Things need to change.

Upon tagging of transitivity processes in the first segment, in the second one it becomes evident that the conversation is pragmatically and discursively settled, with MaP no longer alternating with EP, but rather accompanied by further MeP.

Symone points at the murder of George Floyd as the catalyst that precipitated the situation, making it clear that, although tragic (c, a), truth is the problem has always been there (c, a), thus the tragic event at least had the effect of opening people's eyes onto a sad reality that is far beyond that. The phrasal verb 'wake up' is a compelling example of MaP, except that here it is used figuratively to mean 'becoming aware', therefore in a MeP.

A similar ambiguity is immediately, again evident in Symone's interview-like talk. Following a transitivity pattern like that of Kandy Muse (RP and MaP), the queen comments on the repeated viewing of Floyd's murder as a traumatic input. So, while the trauma is undoubtedly a MaP, it is also a MeP. A further example of a false MaP is in "I felt compelled", followed by new RP. This expression refers to the COVID-19.

LaLa Ri	I don't know if you guys heard about the whole Rayshard Brooks thing that happened in Atlanta that got all of this press. Well, that actually happened, like, two minutes away from my house. [MaP] [RP: c, a]
-	What?
-	Oh, my God, girl.
LaLa Ri	Like, at the <i>Wendy's</i> that I go to on a daily basis. [RP: c, a] This situation happened [EP] and it kind of scared me, [MeP] because I'm, like, that could have been me. [RP: in., id.]
Symone	That could have been you. [RP: in., id.]
LaLa Ri	Easily. You know what I mean?
LaLa Ri (int.)	It kind of just really hit me [MeP] that I could easily be in that drive-thru, [RP: c, id.] and there could be a situation [EP] where they pull me over [MaP] just because I look like I don't belong in that type of car. [RP: in./p/c, id.]
Symone	It's a fear that a lot of Black and Brown people live with. Like, it's not a fucking game or it's not a joke. [RP: in., a] [MeP]
LaLa Ri	It's really not.
LaLa Ri (int.)	I don't know how it escalated [MaP] from him saying that he can just walk to somebody's house [VP] to him being shot. [MaP] That's crazy to me [RP: in., a] how it went from-- ooh-- how it went from... [MaP] Now I'm gonna cry [BP]. You can just be a Black person in this world [RP: c, id.] and you can just get killed for nothing. [MaP] Like... It's just-- It's scary [RP: in., a] that you could just get killed just because of the color of your skin. [MaP] Like...

The analysis now moves to the third segment, which is the pivotal one. Once again, LaLa Ri employs a mixed transitivity of MaP and RP (c, a), this time to refer to the murder of Rayshard Brooks, another incident of racism, dating back to 2020, occurred in Atlanta, and in which police officers were involved again. LaLa Ri's specifying her domicile in proximity to the site of the incident appears to be mere idle gossip. However, it soon takes the form of an identification with the victim, in fact the RP changes from circumstantial and attributive ("two minutes away from my house", "the *Wendy's* that I go to...") to intensive and identifying ("that could have been me").

The identification is then reinforced by an even more elaborate transitivity, which LaLa Ri conveys in her interview-like talk as a version of the killing of Rayshard Brooks in which they are the victim. Following the occurrence of a new MaP to be interpreted as a MeP ("hit"), a complex functioning of the relational sub-processes can be observed, as they become cross versions between circumstantial/attributive, which are more descriptive, and intensive/identifying, which lies more in identity and emotion. LaLa Ri's first RP is circumstantial and identifying. In contrast, the second one deploys a highly referential style, as the utterance "I look like I don't belong in that type of car" encodes

an unquestionable identifying mode, but it can also express and thus pertain to all the three types of RP: it is intensive since there is a comparison between a pre-assumed conforming identity and a non-conforming one; there is possession, that is ethnic and social belonging, encoded in the image of the car; it is circumstantial as an everyday life situation is imagined.

Symone offers a series of intensive and attributive RP, which are opposed to those employed at the beginning by LaLa Ri: “It’s a fear that...”, “It’s not a fucking game”, “It’s not a joke”. This chain can be tagged as a whole MeP, through which Symone addresses the audience.

LaLa Ri’s second interview-like talk is the most intense and emotional of the whole sequence. This is enhanced by sad and melancholic music played in the background. Most of the transitivity processes are MaP, sometimes accompanied by RP, as evidenced by the queen’s observation of a distressing reality in which Black people are at risk even when leaving their house. The occurrence of the verb ‘say’ marks the first instance of VP, a process that is of interest in the last segment. For the first and only time, also occurs a BP, here expressed with the verb ‘cry’. This exceptional case is addressed in the subsequent section, as it is pivotal to the implementation of van Leeuwen’s system network.

Tamisha Iman	The thing about the fight is Black people been fighting to show who they are for years [MaP] and it took one incident for others to realize [MeP] that we all are still one [RP: in., id.].
Tina Burner	Oh, yeah. I think that’s the most inspiring thing that came out of New York, is, like, to see the support [MeP] to show up, even during, like, COVID [RP: c, a]. You may be scared to leave your house, but think about, like, people of color and, like, transgender people who have been scared their whole lives to, like, leave their front door, to, like, walk down the street [MeP].
–	Yeah, true.
Tamisha Iman	The Black Lives Matter movement is moving [EP], but the trans lives, we losing them left and right [MaP].
–	Yeah.
Tamisha Iman	And it’s not being recognized [EP/MeP] and it’s not being talked about [EP/VP] and covered [EP/MaP] like it should.
Olivia Lux	Statistically, Black trans lives are the most at-risk [RP: in./c, id.].
–	Uh-huh!
–	Yeah, Olivia. That is true.

The fourth segment displays significant changes, starting from the background music, which becomes more upbeat and empowering. Three other queens take the floor at this point. The first one is Tamisha Iman, who reiterates Symone’s perspective, emphasising the historical discrimination suffered by Black people. Transitivity is cohesive, starting with a MaP (‘fight’) and progressing through a MeP (‘realise’) until reaching an intensive and identifying RP enhancing identity and equality – “we all are still one”.

Tamisha posits an intersectional perspective that goes beyond the single social axis of ethnicity to encompass the categories of health and gender. Tina Burner codifies these meanings in a positive way, commenting on the support that has emerged, on the one hand, despite the state of emergency caused by COVID, and on the other in the face of the fear that not only Black people but also transgender people have always lived with. Once more, MaP should be regarded as MeP. Tamisha summarises Tina’s words with a particular set of transitivity processes. After returning to the descriptive EP/MaP structure with the verbs ‘move’ and ‘lose’, along with a MeP (‘recognise’), a VP (‘talk about’) and a MaP (‘cover’), she enacts denunciation and sensitisation. This is achieved through the continuous tenses repeated

twice out of three, which characterises the whole sentence as an EP, the acknowledgement of something that is (not) happening.

Olivia Lux amplifies the assertions of Tamisha and Tina through a RP that, in addition to being identifying, is both intensive and circumstantial, as the expression “at-risk” is both an adjective and a preposition+name compound denoting vulnerability.

Tamisha Iman (int.)	I think [MeP] we're headed in the right direction, [RP: c, id.] but I really do think [MeP] we got a lot more work to be done. [EP] We have to understand [MeP] that we are one, [RP: in., a] and we fight as one [MaP] and we fail as one [MaP].
LaLa Ri	Well, girls, now we know [MeP] what to do when we leave this competition. [MaP] We have to use our voices [MaP] and do the right thing. [MaP] [VP]
–	Amen.
–	Absolutely.
LaLa Ri	So use that platform wisely. [MaP]
Tamisha Iman	And get in some good trouble! [MaP]
–	[all laugh]
–	Come on!

The last segment resumes with Tamisha Iman, this time in the interview-like talk, who wraps up the entire sequence. A general overview of the transitivity tagging and a comparison between the first and the last segments shows a reverse process. This last segment begins with MeP of elaboration, such as ‘think’ and ‘understand’, and progresses through never missing RP. Ultimately, it ends with the prevalence of MaP. The statement “we fight as one and we fail as one” encapsulates the entire discussion, elucidating how the drag community, transcending their context, perceives, processes, and responds to hatred. Tamisha is joined by LaLa Ri, who commits to a process of empathy with her sisters, employing a MeP now encoded with the verb ‘know’, which conveys a higher level of awareness than the other mental verbs. With only MaP, LaLa Ri encourages the other queens to use drag art as a means of activism, both while they’re on RPDR and when the competition is over. The invitation to use their voices – that is to say their body language and identity – signifies that the highly performative verbs ‘use’ and ‘do’ encode not only MaP, but also VP.

Tamisha’s ironic closing claim finally restores the humorous vibes typical of the Werk Room. The aim of this final MaP is to transform one’s own disadvantage into an opportunity, a ‘good trouble’. While encoding such an important meaning, it is inevitable to tag this process as material, as it represents the ultimate endorsement of the Black Lives Matter movement.

#### 4.2 Representation of Social Actors

In this section, the conversation in the Werk Room undergoes the second analytical lens, that of the representation of social actors. The segmentation is the same of the stylistic analysis. This second round of investigation operates differently from the previous one, as instead of going down into the more detailed levels of language, it operates on to the broader level of discourse, also in relation to the frames shown in the multimodal grid. Apart from the frames, the grid contains the numbering of the frames, the relative verbal audio material, and the RSA tags.

For this kind of analysis, it is even more interesting to consider when queens speak in the Werk Room or behind the scenes. As also observed by Balirano, they are presented in two very dissimilar situations in the show: they appear as male when preparing for the exhibition in drag (the pre-

transformational representation phasal set), and as female when acting on the stage as competitors (drag phasal set). It is interesting to observe the way social actors construct their *in fieri* transformation through the semiotic and highly symbolic act of 'becoming women.' When appearing as men, the represented participants are always in close-ups, individually or as a homogeneous group, they are shown as if they were part of the audience, sharing their life narratives as a strategy fostering [...] the representation of the participants as if they were "one of us".<sup>22</sup>

Before applying the second framework, one thing that should be underlined again is that the conversation and the dragging process take place in front of mirrors: this dialogue is a discourse on identity, exploring the concept of identity while engaging in the act of identity construction.

#	Frame	Verbal audio material	RSA
1		<b>LaLa Ri:</b> So with the whole Black Lives Matter movement going on, has anyone been protesting?	Collectivisation Participation
2		<b>Kandy Muse:</b> Being an Afro-Latino from the South Bronx, when I see Black people being murdered by police,	Classification Circumstantial. Subjection
3		<b>Kandy Muse:</b> it just puts so many things into perspective.	Abstraction

<sup>22</sup> Giuseppe Balirano, "Who's Afraid of Conchita Wurst? Drag Performers and the Construction of Multimodal Prosody", in Maria Grazia Sindoni et al., eds., *Mapping Multimodal Performance Studies* (London: Routledge, 2016), 173.

In van Leeuwen's framework, LaLa Ri's topic proposal, which has been tagged as EP and MaP, is a case of *collectivisation* and *participation*. The first strategy occurs when social actors are represented as a single subject, by means of plural or mass nouns; the second one is a form of activation occurring when social actors actively operate in the discourse.

The patterns of relational, mental, and material transitivity, which have been identified as a recurrent feature of the dialogue between the queens, are also evident at the discursive-representational level. When Kandy Muse identifies themselves as "Afro-Latino from the South Bronx", it is a clear strategy of *classification*, plus *circumstantialisation*, that is representing social actors according to their identity and in a given context and situation. This is a social process – in this case an ethnic *identification* – through which social actors are affiliated with a specific group. The MeP observed in this conversation and in the discussion of the topic can correspond to a case of *subjection*, a strategy of passivation where the subject(s) are negatively affected by the action expressed by the verbs. The effect of the *passivation* is represented through *abstraction*, a strategy of *impersonalisation* where non-human subjects become social actors, often denoted with words like the pronoun *it*.

#	Frame	Verbal audio material	RSA
4		<p><b>Symone:</b></p> <p>It's sad that that had to happen, but I'm happy that people are waking the fuck up, because it's always been there.</p>	Appraisement Participation Abstraction
5		<p><b>Symone:</b></p> <p>Being Black and seeing the George Floyd video being played over and over and over again,</p>	Classification Subjection

6



**Symone:**

There's a level of trauma  
that comes with that shit.

Subjection

Symone's resolution (as well as Tamisha's) is reflected in their language and how, through RSA, they propose a conceptualisation of hate crimes in educational terms, namely the possibility of raising awareness of the plight of Black people. Following the incident, the awakening of individuals who comprehend and respond to Floyd's murder is represented with a sequence of *appraisement*, *participation*, and *abstraction*. *Appraisement* occurs for the first time in this analysis, and it consists of a strategy of evaluation. Symone judges the perception of Floyd's murder first as a negative, and then as a positive fact. Then, as Kandy Muse, they use classification and passivation to increase the meaning of what they say. The discourse is helped by the gesture of pointing out made by Symone (frame 7), that makes it clear that the "level of trauma that comes with that shit" does not affect only to black people, but rather everyone.

#	Frame	Verbal audio material	RSA
7		<b>LaLa Ri:</b> Now I'm gonna cry.	Participation
8		<b>LaLa Ri:</b> [cries]	

9



**LaLa Ri:**

You can just be a Black person in this world

Classification  
Circumstantial.

10



**LaLa Ri:**

and you can just get killed for nothing. Like...

Subjection

11



**LaLa Ri:**

It's just-- It's scary, that you could just get killed just because of the color of your skin. Like...

Appraisement  
Subjection

Since LaLa Ri's segment is the most emotionally charged and paced at a slower tempo, the representation process also adapts to the rhythm of the interview-like talk. LaLa Ri represents themselves by means of *participation* in two steps: the first one is verbal, enacted with future tense, while the second occurs along with that unique behavioural process of crying. As for the stylistic analysis, this pivotal moment ignites a gradual change in the RSA as well, which deviates from the representations of the two preceding passages. *Classification* dramatically increases when LaLa Ri expresses anguish at being a black individual constantly at risk (*circumstantialisation*). Like Kandy Muse and Symone – though in a more emotional way – LaLa Ri speaks about the lives of Black people through appraisement and subjection.

#	Frame	Verbal audio material	RSA
12		<b>Tamisha Iman:</b>  The thing about the fight is Black people been fighting to show who they are for years	Classification Circumstantial.
13		<b>Tamisha Iman:</b>  and it took one incident for others to realize that we all are still one.	Abstraction  Individualisation
14		<b>Tina Burner:</b>  Oh, yeah. I think that's the most inspiring thing that came out of New York, is, like, to see the support to show up, even during, like, COVID. You may be scared to leave your house, but think about, like, people of color and, like, transgender people who have been scared their whole lives to, like, leave their front door, to, like, walk down the street.	Circumstantial.  Subjection  Classification  Subjection

15

**Olivia Lux:**

Statistically, Black trans lives are the most at-risk. Classification

The intersectional wave spreading from the other queens in the fourth segment makes the RSA change as it does with transitivity analysis. However, the observation of this moment is even expanded by RSA itself, thanks to a close look at the frames. The intersectionality that has already emerged in the verbal analysis is enhanced by the intervention of Tamisha Iman (frame 12), a brown queen, with the framing of the white queen Elliot with 2 Ts (frame 13). However, the most significant intervention is that of Tina Burner, another white queen, who highlights the activism manifested in the health emergency and, above all, the condition of Black trans people. This point is finally brought to the fore by Olivia Lux, another Black queen, who points out that Black trans people are “statistically more at risk”.

Tamisha's discursive representation commences with a *classification* that has become a central tenet of the argument: namely, that Black people have been engaged in a long-standing struggle to define and assert their identity. The emphasis on temporal duration encodes a *circumstantialisation* that prepares for the strategies identified for frame 13. The *abstraction* of the social actor-subject of the sentence vehicles the focus on the meaningful statement “we all are still one”. Despite the plurality that should provide *collectivisation*, this passage can also be considered a case of *individualisation*, if we consider the awareness-raising intent that drag queens have towards their audience.

The observation put forth by Tamisha Iman is supported by Tina Burner and Olivia Lux. The former refers to the protest movements that occurred in New York despite the ongoing pandemic as an illustrative example of intersectionality. Tina combines subjection and classification to illustrate how the fear of leaving home during a lockdown may have prompted people to imagine the fear that Black and transgender people have historically.

#

Visual

Verbal audio material

RSA analysis

16

**Tamisha Iman:**

We have to understand Individualisation  
that we are one,

17



**Tamisha Iman:**

We have to understand Individualisation  
that we are one,

18



**Tamisha Iman:**

and we fight as one and we Participation  
fail as one.

19



**Tamisha Iman:**

And get in some good Participation  
trouble!

With Tamisha Iman's speech, which was supported and argued by the non-Black queens, the discourse of "being one" is now consolidated. This is evidenced by the shots of Symone and LaLa Ri's determined and focused gazes. In an interview-like monologue, Tamisha again represents herself, her sisters, and the audience with a strategy of *individualisation* aimed at fostering equality. As transitivity is reintroduced to material processes at the conclusion of the sequence, RSA also demonstrates a return to predominantly *participation* representation. It is noteworthy that even with RSA, the final statement, "And get in some good trouble!", retains the same potential ambiguity that led to the material process being interpreted as a verbalisation process. In this context, the concept of *participation* posits that social actors are represented as actively engaged in the performativity of the action expressed by the verb. Consequently, if the concept of "good trouble" is linked to the utilisation of drag art as a form of activism, RSA serves to illustrate how the performativity of language encompasses all levels of language, from phonology and phonetics to pragmatics and discourse analysis.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

The two-stage analysis proposed in this study, although conducted on an isolated and minimal case study, yielded a considerable number of results regarding both drag community and the methodologies employed. Of course, the analysis of such a limited object does not allow for broad and precise observations on the field of drag queens and Hate Speech. However, the two distinct yet complementary analyses have revealed the extent to which drag queens are capable of creating and encapsulating meanings with their language and body performativity, along with a representation of self that, whether static or kinetic, enriches the meaning of what is expressed verbally.

Concerning the stylistic results, existential and material processes are employed as preambles and serve to set the context for the discourse. The complex relational processes are the ones most frequently employed by drag queens, whose talks often regard identity matters. The three types of relational processes (intensifying, possessive and circumstantial) and the two modes (attributive and identifying) are employed by drag queens as ‘handles’ to regulate the flow of discourse, enabling them to control the conversation. Mental processes facilitate emotional and mental elaboration, both positively and negatively, so as to justify and pace the transition from one process to another. The verbalisation processes become more and more pronounced in the sequence analysed, although they must be sought by forcing Simpson’s transitivity model. However, as both analyses show, a concretisation of language is precisely what is desired and necessary for drag queens. The single behavioural process tagged naturally calls for a multimodal analysis of representation of social actors.

A summary of transitivity processes in the sequence helps to draw conclusions about how drag queens position themselves in relation to hate crime. In the first two segments, the pattern is broadly EP/MaP>RP>MeP>MaP. A tentative interpretation of the pattern suggests that drag queens position themselves in relation to their identity, as perceived by themselves and others. This is followed by a psychological process that leads to a new perspective on the matter discussed. In the third segment, the chain of transitivity is almost reversed: MeP>RP>EP/MaP. This happens along with LaLa Ri’s manifested emotions. The fourth segment’s chain is MaP>MeP>RP>EP, but it can be interpreted as an existential process. In the fifth segment, different processes converge towards a continuity of material processes, possibly concealing processes of verbalisation: ...>MaP>VP.

With regard to the representation of social actors, it is finally possible to see in which part of van Leeuwen’s system network drag queens gravitate while engaged in their conversation. The speakers are consistently present and characterised linguistically and visually, positioning themselves in the zone of *inclusion*. Strategies of *activation* and *passivation* manifest when drag queens contextualise their lived experiences. While *activation* is declined in both *participation* and *circumstantialisation*, *passivation* occurs exclusively as *subjection*, whereby the speaker discusses the various factors affecting them in society. This often corresponds to the alternation of material and mental processes. Another very frequent strategy is *collectivisation*, which emphasises drag queens both as a community and as individuals whose intersectional identities simultaneously represent the cause of their discrimination and the appropriate conceptual framework for responding to hate crimes. With regard to the occurrence of *individualisation*, it is noteworthy to observe the position of this strategy within van Leeuwen’s framework. Both *collectivisation* and *individualisation* are situated within the domain of *specification*, which represents the sole form of representation oscillating between *personalisation* and *impersonalisation*. This disambiguation appears to align with the way in which drag queens alternately utilise singularity and plurality, personal narratives and general considerations, to foster solidarity and equality amongst the audience.

Finally, whenever ethnic or gender identity is discursively pointed out, the process of RSA delves more deeply into van Leeuwen’s chart, towards the area of *categorisation*, specifically declined in

*classification*, even when representation is carried out through words pertaining more to *physical identification* or *connotation*, such as “black”. As an umbrella strategy, *categorisation* encompasses six sub-representations, which are more specific and potentially functional for an analysis focused on traditional drag performances. Indeed, this study represents the inaugural experiment of a broader research project where the categories considered in this study are investigated more systematically in a specialised corpus of verbal and non-verbal drag performances, always retrieved from *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. In this regard, the methodological experiment carried out in this piece of research has confirmed the synergy between stylistics, multimodality, and drag culture, which provide a fertile field for Critical Discourse Analysis:

If the power of discourse to produce that which it names is linked with the question of performativity, then the performative is one domain in which power acts as discourse. [...] There is no power, construed as a subject, that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability. This is less an “act”, singular and deliberate, than a nexus of power and discourse that repeats or mimes the discursive gestures of power.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 225.