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Russian Bodies We Can Laugh About? Ethnic Drag in Race Conscious Gay US Media

Abstract: This article problematizes ethnic drag in the popular US-American reality TV-series *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Building on prior works that address the racialization of Black contestants and Contestants of Color, it critically investigates the representation of white female Russianness through the *Drag Race* season seven and *Drag Race All Star* season two contestant Katya. It makes visible how Russian femininity becomes meaningful through performance, style and mannerisms. Reading Katya's embodiment of Russianness against the context of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and liberal gay progressive discourses around the concept and artistic form of drag in general, the article aims to demonstrate that although Katya's performance is a form of ethnic drag that could have the potential to unmask racialized signification as cultural construct, it ultimately fails to do so. Moreover, by employing the concepts of orientalism and racialization as well as homonationalism the case study of Katya shows the covert racialization of (female) Russian bodies as one aspect of homonationalism that depends on the very visible and widespread critique of Russian homophobia.

Keywords: Drag Queen, queer, racialization, whiteness, Russianness, comedy, East/West divide, homonationalism, racial commodification

1 Introduction

This essay investigates the potential of comedy and ethnic drag to critically interrogate prejudice and stigma through the reiteration of racialized social stereotypes in *RuPaul's Drag Race*. *RuPaul's Drag Race* is the most popular representation of drag queens in popular culture and arguably one of the most successful reality competition shows in the history of US television and beyond. RuPaul – the show's host, head judge, and contestant mentor for the series, is one of the most famous African American drag performers. As of 2024, the show has 16 seasons and several spin-offs, such as the *All Star* series; RuPaul has won numerous awards for her role in the show, among them several Emmys.¹

¹ Sandra Gonzalez: RuPaul makes Emmy history. *CNN* (September 2021). <https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/19/entertainment/ruPaul-emmys/index.html> (last accessed 15 August 2022).

American feminist media theorists such as Sabrina Strings and Long T. Bui² have long pointed out that *RuPaul's Drag Race* is a space that signifies American national belonging and queer neoliberalism, and where race, racialization, and American racial politics are negotiated. They criticize the uneasy place of race and racialization within *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Public critics such as the popular bloggers Jason Flores³ and Grace John⁴ as well as YouTube commentators such as Kevin O'Keeffe and Mathew Rodriguez⁵ have equally publicly criticized the racist and classist baseline of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which confines Contestants of Color to a limited set of "queens" they are allowed to impersonate as well as the blunt racism of the fan community. Most recently, researchers have discussed racialized gender performances, particularly with regards to trans* contesters, and the show's struggles with issues on the intersection of racialization and transphobia.⁶

While most of these discussions seem to debate Black and People of Color representation, sentiments against LatinX and Asian performers as well as anti-Black racism, this article focuses on the representation of white female Russianness through ethnic drag in the example of the *Drag Race* and *Drag Race All Star* contestant Yekaterina Petrovna Zamolodchikova, Katya for short. It analyzes the relationship between the bodily performance of Katya's Russian femininity as expressed through style and mannerisms and liberal gay progressive discourses around the concept and artistic form of drag.

Analyzing Katya against the context of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, this article tests the thesis that although Katya's performance is a form of ethnic drag that could have the potential to show racialized signification as cultural construct, it ultimately fails to do so. It employs the concepts of orientalism and racialization to analyze the construction of white Russian bodies through ethnic drag. The Palestinian American postcolonial scholar Edward Saïd⁷ coined the concept of orientalism to describe how philosophers of the European Enlightenment constructed the "East" or "Orient" as a distinct sphere to distinguish it from a white civilized superior "West." These mostly male white Euro-

2 Sabrina Strings / Long T. Bui: "She Is Not Acting, She Is." The conflict between gender and racial realness on RuPaul's Drag Race. *Feminist Media Studies* 14/5 (2014), 822–836.

3 Jason Flores: No Matter How Much You Like "RuPaul's Drag Race," It's Still Problematic. *Pride* (April 2016). <https://www.pride.com/firstperson/2016/4/07/no-matter-how-much-you-rupauls-drag-race-its-still-problematic> (last accessed 10 April 2018).

4 Grace John: "RuPaul's Drag Race" Often Displays Racial Bias to Favor White Queens. March 2018. <https://studybreaks.com/tvfilm/rupauls-drag-race/> (last accessed 10 April 2018).

5 Kevin O'Keeffe / Mathew Rodriguez: Racism in RuPaul's Drag Race. The Kiki Ep 3. *YouTube*. (August 2018). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3Gj2wUgKpI> (last accessed 16 August 2022).

6 Lore/tta LeMaster / Michael Tristano: Performing (Asian American Trans) Femme on RuPaul's Drag Race: Dis/orienting Racialized Gender, or, Performing Trans Femme of Color, Regardless. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 16/1 (2023), 1–18.

Marcos Gonzalez: Fantasies of Valentina. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9/4 (2022), 587–608.

7 Edward Saïd: *Orientalism*. New York, NY 1978.

peans connected a presumed lack of civilization among inhabitants of the “Orient” to bodily phenomena, such as skin color. This process of assigning meaningful racial markers or characters to peoples is a specific form of othering, generally referred to as racialization. Using the concept of racialization highlights the artificiality and constructiveness of “race” – as visual phenomena and meaning – and its contested relationship to biological bodies. Although Said did not discuss the position of Russians or Slavic peoples in his text, scholars such as American historian and European Studies professor Larry Wolff⁸ and Scandinavian international relations professor Iver Neumann⁹ have argued that the (white) inhabitants of Eastern Europe and Eurasia were produced through the same orientalist discourses. Because of their signification as white and their geographic location in-between the presumably civilized West and the presumably uncivilized Orient, they were understood to be a group of half-civilized or transitional people who were only in the process of becoming as civilized as the modern West.

This article proposes that Russian embodiment and characteristics are still imagined through orientalist discourses, and that the identification of such bodies as white plays a significant role for how Russianness becomes represented and evaluated in popular culture. It argues that while Russian whiteness is a privilege within the racist white supremacist Western context of the United States and Europe, it is a kind of whiteness that is classed and gendered in a way that signifies embodied difference as slow, not-yet modern, not-yet civilized, or even backward. This embodied difference will be identified by building on the findings of critical whiteness studies, decolonial studies, and the orientalization of Russia as a geo-political location. Moreover, current methodological tools of queer theory that were developed in a US-American decolonial and anti-racist context will be adapted in order to make them applicable to white Russian bodies. In particular, the concept of homonationalism, developed by American gender, queer, and decolonial studies scholar Jasbir Puar,¹⁰ will be adopted to analyze the place and function of Russian bodies in liberal pro-gay discourses. Homonationalism describes how Western national and supranational discourses include gay and lesbian minorities and claims to minoritarian civil rights into ideas of progress and civilization in order to distinguish themselves favorably from racialized Others. This allows nationalists for example to identify racialized migrants as a threat to sexual minorities or reject entire nations’ rights to sovereignty because of their alleged homophobia. It will be argued that the contemporary covert racialization of (female) Russian bodies is one aspect of a form of homonationalism that depends on the very visible and widespread critique of Russian homophobia in mainstream discourses.

⁸ Larry Wolff: *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*. Stanford, CA 1994.

⁹ Ivar Neumann: *Russia and the Idea of Europe*. New York / London 1996.

¹⁰ Jasbir Puar: *Terrorist Assemblages. Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham, NC 2007. Jasbir Puar: Rethinking Homonationalism. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45/2 (2013), 336–339.

2 Katya: Ethnic Drag or Racialized Commodification?

In 2006, American actor, author, and comedian Brian McCook created the Russian drag character Yekaterina Petrovna Zamolodchikova or Katya for short, to work as the hostess of a monthly drag show called “Perestroika” at a cabaret club in Boston.¹¹ McCook is from Massachusetts and of Irish Catholic ancestry.¹² He is neither Russian nor a Russian heritage speaker, although he speaks some Russian and his pronunciation is quite authentic.¹³

In his first appearance on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* in March 2015, McCook said that the Russian-based aspect of his persona was inspired by one of his female professors at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design who “never left the house without a full face of makeup [with] six-inch stilettos in the snow.”¹⁴ On other occasions he stated that the stage name is a reference to one of his favorite gymnasts, Elena Zamolodchikova.¹⁵ After her participation in *RuPaul’s Drag Race* in 2015 and 2016, Katya hosted the drag comedy YouTube series *UNHhhh*¹⁶ and later became co-host of a similar comedy format called *The Trixie & Katya Show* on Viceland.¹⁷ Additionally, she recently featured in the comedy movie *HURRICANE BIANCA: FROM RUSSIA WITH HATE*¹⁸ and co-authored “a parody of self-help and [women’s] etiquette” book;¹⁹ she frequently tours with her own live performance show.

Katya represents many American stereotypes about Russian women throughout *Drag Race* season seven. An entire bundle of stereotypes is mentioned in the first episode of the video series *RuFLECTIONS* dedicated to her character. Each character gets her own *RuFLECTIONS* series which consists of several one-and-a-half minute long professionally produced YouTube videos where the show’s contestants have the chance to develop and explain their characters in more depth than the TV episodes allow for. The

11 Maria Oliver: Night Watch. Perestroika. *Boston Globe* (29 April 2011). http://archive.boston.com/ae/music/articles/2011/04/29/night_watch_perestroika/ (last accessed 06 April 2018).

12 RuPaul: What’s the Tee? SoundCloud Episode 76 – Katya. *SoundCloud*. (2017). <https://soundcloud.com/rupaul/episode-76-katya> (last accessed 15 December 2016).

13 Stephan Lee: RuPaul’s Drag Race Miss Congeniality winner Katya speaks! *Entertainment Weekly’s EW.com*. (02 June 2015). <https://ew.com/article/2015/06/02/rupauls-drag-race-miss-congeniality-winner-katya-speaks/> (last accessed 31 January 2022).

14 “Katya Gets To Work.” RuPaul’s Drag Race S7 E1. Video Clip. *LOGOTV.com* <http://www.logotv.com/video-clips/b84pew/rupauls-drag-race-katya-gets-to-work> (Retrieved 18 April 2016).

15 Andre Akimov: His name is Katya. *Russian Chicago Magazine* 125 (May 2015) https://russianchicagomag.com/katya_zamo_eng/.

16 UNHhhh episode 01. Directed by Trixie Mattel and Katya Zamolodchikova. *YouTube* (25 March 2016). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSwY31GMqY0&t=20s> (last accessed 15 August 2022).

17 The Trixie & Katya Show. Viceland 2017–2018. *IMDb*. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7557336/> (last accessed 15 August 2022).

18 Hurricane Bianca: From Russia with Hate, directed by Matt Kugelman. *IMDb*. 2018. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6113122/> (last accessed 15 August 2022).

19 Trixie Mattel / Katya Zamolodchikova: *Trixie and Katya’s Guide to Modern Womanhood*. London 2020.

RuFLECTIONS videos are presented on individual YouTube channels, and Katya's was titled "We Love Katya." In episode one,²⁰ Katya introduces herself to the audience in an inner monologue. In heavily accented English, she tells the audience that she came to the US in the 1990s in search of a better life; that she works as a sex worker; that she loves money and decadence. Her sentences frequently start with "In Russia, we / no one / everyone . . ." indicating that her character – her melancholy, sex- and body-positive attitude, her ruthlessness and shamelessness etc. – are cultural and not individual aspects. Katya's look is also stereotypical. She wears tight clothes, very short tight-fit dresses, a lot of animal print, fur hats, and (fake) diamonds.

While Katya is so far unprecedented within the genre of commercial drag, she is by far not the only Russian sex worker within the recent US comedy media landscape. Katya appeared approximately at the same time as Svetlana Maximovskaya,²¹ an LA-based Russian brothel owner and elite sex worker played by Jewish American comedian Iris Bahr. Other examples of similar representations are several female Russian characters performed by American comedian Kathryn McKinnon in recent episodes of the late-night live television sketch comedy and variety show *Saturday Night Live* as well as the wrestling persona Zoya the Destroyer played by Jewish American actress Alison Brie Schermerhor.²²

None of these representations are meant to be taken seriously since they are all deeply embedded into different forms of comedy. Yet, their jokes rest on the embodiment of stereotypical and essentialist ideas about Russian women. Since none of the mentioned performers and comedians is of Russian descent, yet their embodiment is distinctly signified as Russian, they can be understood as ethnic drag.

Performance studies and queer theory scholar Brian Herrera defines "ethnic drag" as performance strategy that brings forward "attributes of racial and ethnic distinction in order to highlight the poignancy, absurdity, artifice, and/or politics of a particular culture's history of racialized difference."²³ Ethnic drag, according to German theater studies scholar D.C. Katrin Sieg,²⁴ is based on the theories of parody and performativity developed by American rhetoric and gender studies scholar Judith Butler. Additionally, Sieg builds on theories on the perpetual process of the social construction of race, theorized by Asian American ethnic studies scholar Michael Omi together with American sociologist and race theorist Howard Winant.²⁵ It shows race

20 RuFLECTIONS: episode 01. We Love Katya. *YouTube* (04 March 2015). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SaQ6zLj1GLE> (last accessed 15 August 2022).

21 *Sventlana*, HDNet 2010–2011.

22 *GLOW*, Netflix 2017.

23 Brian Herrera: Ethnic Drag. In: *Reading Contemporary Performance*, ed. by Meiling Cheng / Gabrielle H. Cody. London / New York 2015, 114–115.

24 Katrin Sieg: *Ethnic Drag. Performing Race, MEMOIRS Nation, Sexuality in West Germany*. Ann Arbor, MI 2002.

25 Michael Omi / Howard Winant: *Racial Formation in the United States. From the 1960s to the 1990s*. New York 1994.

as “masquerade,”²⁶ thereby drawing attention to the workings of race and ethnicity as continually re-produced significations on the stage and beyond.

Ethnic drag underscores the artificiality of performances of ethnic or racial distinction through accents, physical gestures, and postures or costumes, as well as through social behavior or character traits. Often, ethnic drag performances center on the racial masquerade itself. No matter if ethnic drag is intended to be a celebration of cultural difference or an anti-racist critique, “it exploits the performance event to highlight the theatrical and aesthetic conventions that construct race and/or ethnicity within a given culture,”²⁷ states Herrera.

While I agree with Herrera that ethnic drag can have the potential to critique the construction of race in contemporary culture, I am not entirely convinced that every ethnic drag manages to perform anti-racism. Queer Asian American performance artist Tina Takemoto cautions against an all too optimistic view on ethnic drag as anti-racist critique. Reacting to Herrera’s definition and based on her own experience as a performer she points “to the instability of interventionist art practices and the risk that [ethnic drag] can also be read as reinforcing the stereotypes that are under scrutiny.”²⁸

I want to argue that ethnic drag that performs Russianness is in particular danger of becoming racialized ethnic commodification because, as already pointed out, there is little public discourse on the Orientalization of Russian bodies. This is despite the fact that Katya, much like all the other fictional characters I just mentioned, emerges within a decidedly liberal, pro-gay, and occasionally feminist context. Considering this, my intuition towards these figures is that there is a connection between the emergence of Russian women we can laugh about, and core ideas of what Asian American queer theorist David Eng²⁹ calls queer liberalism. In fact, I argue that their co-appearance is not coincidental but a consequence of queer liberalism’s unwillingness to deal with racial and class-based inequalities.

To deconstruct McCook’s performance as racialized ethnic commodification, his embodiment of Russian womanhood and femininity need to be understood as racializing practices in the first place. Identifying white bodies as racialized is difficult. Although Jamaican-born British Marxist, postcolonial and cultural theorist Stuart Hall established an understanding of race as denoting essentialized bodily attributes, mindsets, and cultural aspects beyond phenotypes, the concept is still strongly connected to forms of discrimination based on skin color, hence to Black and People of Color. Accordingly, the application of the concept and term of racialization to mark forms of othering of white populations runs the risk of denying white privilege and accordingly anti-black sentiments and colorism. Yet, Eastern European historians

²⁶ Sieg: *Ethnic Drag*, 2.

²⁷ Herrera: *Ethnic Drag*, 115.

²⁸ Tina Takemoto: *Memoirs of Björk-Geisha*. In: *Reading Contemporary Performance*, ed. by Meiling Cheng / Gabrielle H. Cody. London / New York 2015, 115–117.

²⁹ David L. Eng: *The Feeling of Kinship. Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*. Durham 2010.

such as Joseph Rouček have long shown that twentieth century America had a concept and category of Slavic people that signified “inferior” nations and ‘races.’”³⁰ This concept was applied through pre-WWII immigration laws; but beyond the legal, it was also very much part of the general discourses on Western civilization and progress. Although the racist language of eugenics is no longer in use today, the signification of Russians, Eastern Europeans, and Eurasians as latecomers to or outside of modernity and progress is still persistent. Moreover, while it might seem that “Slavic” is today understood to be rather a cultural than a racial category, the construction of Russians and especially Russian women within US media suggests that embodied racial difference is still part of the concept.

3 Western Modernity, Gay Liberalism, and Russian Otherness

Katya’s Russianness is constructed through several visual, bodily, and psychological characteristics: her exaggerated and *cheap* style and makeup, which includes her big blond hair, immediately evoke a Russian identification in the Anglophone audience, (see Fig. 1).

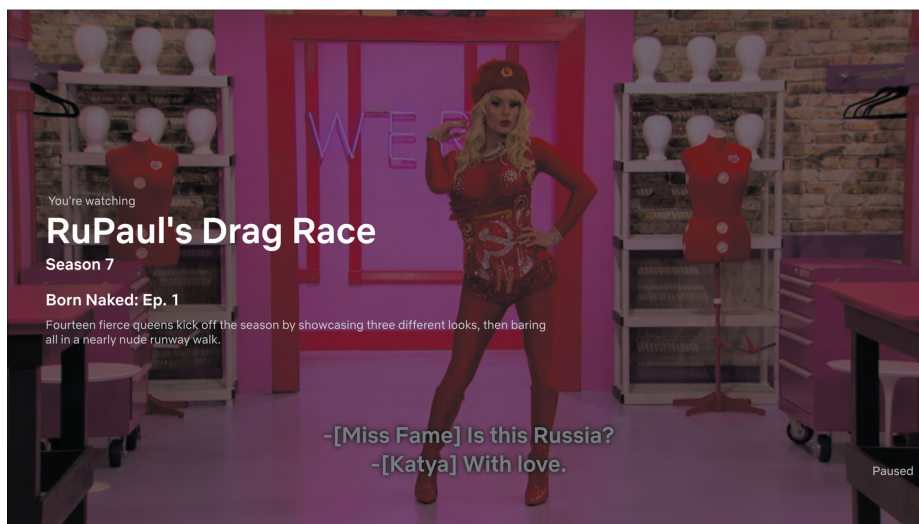


Fig. 1: Katya in her Signature Stage Costumes.
Screenshot: *Drag Race* Season Seven, Episode One. Born Naked. (min 2:57). Netflix.

³⁰ Joseph S. Rouček: The Image of the Slav in U.S. History and in Immigration Policy. *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 28/1 (1969), 29–48.

Her exaggerated embodiment of Russian signifiers is complemented through her dark, disillusioned, slightly depressed yet ruthless character, and of course her thick Russian accent, together with a general *slowness*. These characteristics signify her low-class status, expressed through her choice of kitschy, over-the-top costumes, accessories and make-up, her whiteness, her blond hair, only mitigated through her slowness in comprehension and speech as well as her thick rolling “R,” and her dark moody little sad character. Additionally, Katya is defined as Russian through her wish or aspirations and her belief in the American Dream.

In fact, all of Katya’s characteristics, and particularly her stereotypically aggressive sexuality, go back to the Enlightenment’s orientalist ideas of Russia as almost modern, almost progressive, almost, but not quite Western, or civilized as delineated by the mentioned historians Wolff³¹ and Neumann.³² The project of Western Enlightenment structurally enclosed Eastern Europe and Russia, and Eastern bodies in-between, Western European civilization and the “barbarian Orient”: they are to be seen as similar, but not the same. Building on Wolff’s and Neumann’s work allows one to account for the signification of Russian female bodies such as Katya’s fictional body as old-fashioned, developmentally delayed, overtly sexualized and commodified. The concept of orientalism allows the Russian body to be identified as the *similar Other* to the white European (American). Yet, neither Saïd’s original iteration nor Wolff’s and Neumann’s adaptations provide language to describe the specific demarcation of otherness on white Eastern or Slavic bodies. Placing orientalist understandings of the Russian body as *not-quite-modern* within critiques of current liberal US-American sexual politics as well as discourses that address the construction of American races on the intersection of class and gender might help to understand Katya as racialized embodiment of Russianness.

Building on the assumption that *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is a space that signifies American national belonging and queer neoliberalism, and that it negotiates race and racialization, previously mentioned feminist media theorists Sabrina Strings and Long T. Bui argue that the show fashions racialized and class-based caricatures to satisfy market demands and to expand the brand. Adapting “minority subculture for mass consumption and mainstream titillation,” season three of the show for example increasingly pushed contestants into “stereotypical racial identities” under the innocent label of “giving ‘personality.’”³³ Demanding *authenticity*, People of Color characters on the show are required to perform what is understood to be their off-stage racial identity. “This policing of racial identity for certain minority characters reinscribes them as fundamentally ‘Other’ [. . .], re-instating race as ‘natural’ or ‘real’ at the same moment as it undermines gender’s ‘realness.’”³⁴ Thus, *Drag Race* contributes

³¹ Wolff: *Inventing Eastern Europe*.

³² Neumann: *Russia and the Idea of Europe*.

³³ Strings / Bui: *She Is Not Acting, She Is*, 824.

³⁴ Strings / Bui: *She Is Not Acting, She Is*, 823.

to the naturalization of stereotypes through the signification and demand of “racial ‘realness’” as “avant-garde.”³⁵ This had the unfortunate effect of not only commodifying or stereotyping, but effectively re-essentializing race.

Katya’s Russianness needs to be understood within this arena of essentialized racialized drag queens on the one hand and white individualism on the other. Following Strings and Bui, and their argument that People of Color performers are limited to their heritage, it can be said that Irish American McCook’s embodiment of a Russian sex-worker is allowed because he is white, which means not reduced to his heritage. However, given the progressive liberal audience of the show, blackface or any other clearly racist racial impersonations would be forbidden. Since Slavic people are understood as white, the same does not apply to the Russian drag.

3.1 Queer Liberalism, Homonormativity, and Homonationalism

Two further aspects made any contestations of McCook’s embodiment of Russian femininity unlikely and furthered its success: the connotation of drag shows as progressive on the one hand and the looming *New Cold War* between the US and Russia on the other. Queer theorist Matthew Goldmark argues convincingly that *Drag Race* is a “tale of gay integration and social mobility”³⁶ that “performs a fiction of national improvement wherein the contestant’s body serves as a metonym for the national one.”³⁷ He reveals what he calls a “critical paradox” at the heart of US gay integration into the imaginary national body: “though contestants must work to prove their desire for the United States, the United States presented by *Drag Race* is imagined to have embraced its gay subjects already.”³⁸

Goldmark shows that *Drag Race* follows a model of social progress where certain sexual identities are granted the possibility to enter the concept of the nation. To do so, however, racial and class-based inequalities need to be negated. Only if racial and economic divisions are ignored can the US queer community appear as a coherent group that can be integrated, “based on individualism and merit.”³⁹

One strategy to create notions of unity and racial equality is to focus on questions of sexual freedom globally. “Contestants perform for a ‘world’ that looks to the United States as a social trendsetter,”⁴⁰ to use Goldmark’s words. Although he does not refer to Puar, he describes homonationalism, a nationalism that uses “‘acceptance’ and ‘tol-

35 Strings / Bui: *She Is Not Acting, She Is*, 823.

36 Matthew Goldmark. NATIONAL DRAG. The Language of Inclusion in RuPaul’s *Drag Race*. *GLQ* 21/4 (2015), 501–520.

37 Goldmark: National Drag, 510.

38 Goldmark: National Drag, 510.

39 Goldmark: National Drag, 507.

40 Goldmark: National Drag, 508.

erance' for gay and lesbian subjects [as] a barometer"⁴¹ to evaluate other nations and people. Homonationalism is "a facet of modernity and a historical shift marked by the entrance of (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of protection by nation-states."⁴² Within homonationalism, gays and lesbians are put forth as visible signs of modernity and progress. The inclusion of gay subjects in the idea of the nation and their construction as signs of modernity, however, demands the exclusion of racialized Others, who used to be seen as having achieved progress but are now among the uncivilized or half-civilized.⁴³ In other words, the positive progressive attitude is constructed in opposition to racialized populations, who allegedly threaten its endurance.

Puar developed her concept to understand how US xenophobia and Islamophobia structure racialized Muslim subjects as (homophobic, misogynist) terrorist subjects.

Researchers working on discourses concerning Russia, however, have long pointed out that Russia and Russians are being evaluated according to the same standards of gay liberation and gay rights, with the same effect of supporting Western hegemony. Some, such as Helen Jefferson Lenskyj⁴⁴ and Fred LeBlanc,⁴⁵ use the framework of homonationalism to signify the current evaluation of Russia. They show that US and Western European national discourses refer to homophobia in law and society to *Other* Russia and Russians as intolerant, backward, and uncivilized, and confirm themselves as highly progressive and modern nations and people. LeBlanc goes as far as to say "in 2013 Russian homophobia seems to have momentarily trumped Arab homophobia in the media's discussion."⁴⁶

Although the drag persona Katya does not signify Russian homophobia or its victims on the surface, it does so within the context of *Drag Race*, which stands – as shown – for gay liberalism and the US progress itself. In this context, Katya's Russian-ness evokes discourses about Russian homophobia without having to explicitly verbalize it. In turn, any mentioning of Russia – which is also known for hating drag queens⁴⁷ – helps to elevate *Drag Race* as national sign for US superiority, progress, and tolerance. Hence the critical framework of homonationalism can shed light on the construction of her racialized body and personality.

⁴¹ Puar: *Terrorist Assemblages*, 4.

⁴² Puar: *Rethinking Homonationalism*, 337.

⁴³ Puar: *Rethinking Homonationalism*, 337.

⁴⁴ Helen Jefferson Lenskyj: *Sexual Diversity and the Sochi 2014 Olympics. No More Rainbows*. New York, NY 2014.

⁴⁵ Fred Joseph LeBlanc: Sporting Homonationalism. Russian Homophobia, Imaginative Geographies & The 2014 Sochi Olympic Games. *Sociology Association of Aotearoa New Zealand Annual Conference 2013* (2013), 1–14.

⁴⁶ LeBlanc: *Sporting Homonationalism*, 7.

⁴⁷ Yulia Yurtaeva: Ein Schwarzer Rabe gegen Conchita Wurst oder: Wovor hat Russland Angst? In: *Eurovision Song Contest. Eine kleine Geschichte zwischen Körper, Geschlecht und Nation*, ed. by Christine Ehardt / Georg Vogt / Florian Wagner. Vienna 2015, 111–135.

3.2 Gendered Racialization and Classed Whiteness

Kaya's physical features, her style, and her mannerism and speech are unmistakably Russian: her (fake) blond mane, over-the-top style that looks "cheap," her ruthlessness, and sadness; her simple mind and character; her athletic, hourglass-shaped body, with long legs and big tits. In their combination, all these markers differentiate her from other contestants and are at the same time unmistakably ethnically and culturally specific.



Fig. 2: Katya's big, artificially blond hair, her glowing eyes with exaggerated make-up. Screenshot: *All Star Season Two, Episode One – Introducing Katya*. (min 3:00). Netflix.

Katya's working-class or low-class status, heterosexuality, her physical appearance, style and (body) language together signify her as Slavic. The combination of her whiteness, her big, artificially blond hair, her glowing eyes with exaggerated make-up (Fig. 2), her big fur hats (Fig. 1), and her occasional Teeth Grillz (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4) – a not-so-subtle reference to the gold teeth dental prostheses that were still common among Russians during the 1990s – and the usage of screaming colors, especially the communist red, creates the meaning of Russianness. These physical and visual aspects correspond to her naiveté and sexual promiscuity. Since these features are not all and not primarily understood to be a result of socialization and culture but seem to emerge from and reside within her body and mind, they can be understood as racialized aspects.

Using the notion of racialization in reference to white bodies is not without risk. It risks the essentialization and naturalization of cultural signifiers. However, I argue that in understanding Katya as embodiment of essentialized ideas of Russianness, the



#LogoTV #DragRace #AllStars
Shequel Runway | S2 E4 | RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars
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Fig. 3 and Fig. 4: Her occasional Teeth Grillz.

Screenshot: *All Star* Season Two, Episode Four, YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSSudLKikkk> (min 0:49 und min 0:51) (last accessed 15 August 2022).

general artificiality and constructed character of processes of racialization through sexualized and classed physical and cultural (personality) aspects becomes clear. Race, according to Stuart Hall, is a “badge, a token, a sign, [. . .] a signifier, and [. . .] racialized behavior and difference needs to be understood as a discursive, not necessarily as a genetic or biological fact.”⁴⁸ Signifiers such as race need to be understood as unstable and in flux. Yet, their meaning is neither arbitrary nor random. The “stratification insignia”⁴⁹ that racially determine Slavic women are subtle and there are no analytical tools to identify and name “racialized physical characteristics like hair, teeth, body type, and clothing styles as well as education, religion, and ‘values.’”⁵⁰

I argue that these insignia can be read exclusively in contrast to the backdrop of the surroundings in which they appear. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is the perfect platform to make Katya appear as a Russian figure, and the Russian figure Katya is the perfect other to make US-American homonationalism effective.

Although Katya’s performance of bodily differences is highly stereotypical and based on an assemblage of problematic ideas of physical and cultural difference, they are not censured, because this form of othering does not manifest itself in discourses around color and race. Since it is commonly agreed that Russians are white, orientalist impersonations of Russian figures can appeal to racist ideas about Slavs in general, and white Russian women specifically, yet are not seen as hateful.

I argue that the contemporary covert racialization of (female) Russian bodies is not an unlucky occurrence but one aspect of a form of homonationalism that depends on the very visible and widespread critique of Russian homophobia in mainstream discourses. The usage of Puar’s concept of homonationalism for the US view on Russians runs the risk of mitigating or relativizing the violence against Black people and People of Color, if the nuances of racialization are all lumped together into discourses around phenotypes. Yet, I argue that homonationalism operates through the racialization of multiple and different racial others, and positions those others, although in different ways, in a hierarchical relation to the white norm. Moreover, the categories or aspects applied to racialize these multiple others vary from phenotype to dis/ability, mannerism, bodily and cognitive movements and functions etc. Importantly, the white others are constructed in relation to Black bodies and Bodies of Color. To put it bluntly, the orientalism within current neoliberal homonationalism signifies white developmentally delayed Russian bodies and Brown Chechen bodies on a scale between the white superior (American) people and the utterly barbaric Brown and Black oriental others, whose developmental location is even further removed from the Western hegemonic centers. Importantly, they are inherently classed.

48 Stuart Hall: *Race, the Floating Signifier*. A Lecture Given at Goldsmiths College in London, 1997. Transcript: Sut Jhalley, Media Education Foundation. <http://www.mediaed.org> (last accessed 21 June 2015).

49 Hall quoted in Anca Parvulescu: *The Traffic in Women’s Work. Eastern European Migration and the Making of Europe*. Chicago / London 2014, 14.

50 Parvulescu: *The Traffic in Women’s Work*, 14.

Gender studies scholar Anca Parvulescu argues that class determines the racialized hierarchy of migrants from the global South and East within the global West.⁵¹ Russian or Ukrainian women, Parvulescu continues, become racialized in the context of migration through their low-class status and a low-class status signifies their racialized otherness in this context. Although Parvulescu notes that skin color is not the determining factor for the racialization of Eastern European women within North Western contexts, she argues that these women are nevertheless hierarchically positioned or labelled as “not quite white.”⁵² She arrives at this interpretation because she rightly notices that skin color corresponds uncomfortably with the economically produced hierarchy in Europe (like in the US), where Brown and Black people get the lowest wages. She further supports her argument by referring to Rosi Braidotti, who shows that “[p]eople from the Balkans, or the South-Western regions of Europe, in so far as they are not yet ‘good Europeans,’ they are also not quite as ‘white’ as others.”⁵³ With this reference Parvulescu suggests that all Central Eastern, South Eastern and Eastern European women are equally racialized. This generalization, however, is highly debatable. I agree with Parvulescu and Braidotti that economic factors play a crucial role in the racialization of Eastern European and Russian women in the context of Western Europe as well as the USA. However, I disagree with Parvulescu’s proposal that the racialization necessarily signifies a less white skin color. Based on the works of critical whiteness studies scholars,⁵⁴ I argue that very specific forms of racialization mark Russian, Ukrainian, Belarussian, Serbian and Polish immigrants despite or in correspondence with their assessment as white, while very different tropes of Southernness mark the bodies of some people from the Balkans. Building further on the findings of feminist scholar Kimberly Williams⁵⁵ and her study on US discourses on Russian women during the 1990s and early 2000s, I claim that although white, Russian women are constructed as bodily different through factors such as style, body language, bodily affect, mental capacities and features, and sexuality, which are all connected to class (Fig. 5a and Fig. 5b are a good example of the cheap glamor – plastic jeweler, high fringe boots, fake flowers, thick black eye make-up – that signifies lower classness and Katya’s clumsy failure to mimic female elegance).

The racialization of Slavic women is a “class-occupational stratification,” which “does not overlap with familiar patterns of racial stratification.”⁵⁶ This fact does not

51 Parvulescu: *The Traffic in Women's Work*.

52 Parvulescu: *The Traffic in Women's Work*, 14.

53 Rosi Braidotti: On Becoming European. In: *Women Migrants from East to West. Gender, Mobility and Belonging in Contemporary Europe*, ed. by Luisa Passerini et al. New York 2007, 23– 44, 34.

54 David R. Roediger: *Colored White. Transcending the Racial Past*. Berkeley / Los Angeles / London 2002, 139–186; Matthew Jacobson: *Roots Too. White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America*. Cambridge, MA 2006.

55 Kimberly Williams: *Imagining Russia. Making Feminist Sense of American Nationalism in U.S.-Russian Relations*. Albany, NY 2012, 4.

56 Parvulescu: *The Traffic in Women's Work*, 14.



Fig. 5a and Fig. 5b: Plastic jeweler, high fringe boots, fake flowers, thick black eye make-up. Screenshot: *Drag Race* Season Seven, Episode One, Born Naked Challenge (min 24:07). Netflix.

make Slavic bodies less white. On the contrary, white Russian and other Slavic women's whiteness is particularly visible within US popular culture. However, class-occupational stratification denominates the Slavic body as *Other*. Katya's Slavic body is constructed through her working-classness and her self-definition as a sex worker (she uses the term *prostitute*). Katya lacks the sophistication, politeness and other manners of a bourgeois lady because she is a sex worker and being Russian predetermines her to become one. She is loud and direct, and her behavior seems unpolished and crude (see Fig. 3 and Fig. 4). Within the context of Drag Race we understand these aspects as belonging to a low class but we also easily identify all of them as emerging from her Russian heritage.

3.3 Sex(y)

Her racial stratification is accomplished through her whiteness and her Russianness makes her so appealing to the Western gaze. A feminist scholar working on Eastern European representation, Roumiana Deltcheva states that the whiteness of Slavic women is an important factor for why they "have become a favorite and convenient site for the accumulation of stereotypical images feeding Western lust for the exotic and fear of the 'barbaric.'"⁵⁷ Through their whiteness, they "are not drastically Other and thus are endowed with an aura of familiarity, [. . .] and yet they are not fully familiar [. . .], perceived as almost Oriental, as almost exotic, yet not fully so."⁵⁸ Whiteness, the position between familiarity and otherness, and the emphasis on (hetero) sexuality together complete Katya's Russianness.

The Eastern European woman is generally often pictured as a femme fatale, "alluring, slightly Oriental or exotic temptress with an edge of vampirism"⁵⁹ in North Western media. Especially Russian female bodies are doubly signified as (dangerously) female – first through the imagination of Russia as a feminine (or emasculated) country of bad-tempered white women and drunk incapable men⁶⁰ and, second, through the imagination of the celebration of femininity by Russian women. These highly sexualized figures are often willing to use sex as a weapon and means to an end.⁶¹

57 Roumiana Deltcheva: Eastern Women in Western Chronotypes. Representation of East European Women in Western Film after 1989. In: *Vampirettes, Wretches and Amazons. Western Representations of East European Women*, ed. by Valentina Glajar / Domnica Radulescu. New York, NY 2004, 161–185, 162.

58 Deltcheva: *Eastern Women*, 162.

59 Valentina Glajar / Domnica Radulescu: Introduction. In: id.: *Vampirettes, Wretches and Amazons. Western Representations of East European Women*. New York, NY 2004, 1–11, 6.

60 Williams: *Imagining Russia*, 116–118.

61 Williams: *Imagining Russia*, 123.

Katya's whiteness, her low-class status as a sex worker, her sexualization and her style in combination with the fact that she appears as slow or developmentally delayed (her slow speech and logical errors etc.) signify her as a pre-modern, pre-enlightened Russian body. This depiction is not only misogynist, classist and Orientalizing, but also inherently ableist.

Moreover, this embodiment of Russian femininity needs to be read against McCook's public denouncing of Russian and particularly Chechen homophobia.⁶² Katya is the bad joke that emerges on the surface of queer liberalism and its homonationalism.

4 Conclusion

McCook's ethnic drag fails to make the construction of race visible and highlight the violence of racial and cultural prejudice. His comedy rests on the backwardness, slowness and brazenness of Katya's character, without a reference to anti-racist and anti-orientalist politics that address specifically Russianness, hence it is ultimately not only misogynic, but also orientalizing. Through this lack of a critical discourse on the Orientalization of Russianness within liberal progressive and anti-racist discourses, the comedy and drag can take up and confirm derogatory discourses about Russian women without being questioned or criticized. Tracing Katya's body performance and style back to earlier comedic versions of ethnic drag, I was able to show that the *Ru-Paul's Drag Race* contestant is just one – albeit very successful – iteration of an earlier version of the classist, orientalist and racialized impersonation of Russian femininity and womanhood, performed to joke about Eastern backwardness and to affirm the moral and cultural superiority of Western liberalism. Katya's version of Orientalizing ethnic drag is particularly interesting since it emerges in the context of contemporary female drag performances, which are semantically connoted as highly progressive formats that celebrate LGBTIQ+ existence. Within and against the genre of gender drag, Katya's embodied performance shows how the devaluation or even abjection of Russian femininity and womanhood in the form of comedy and drag emerges in the wake of Western liberal pro-gay agendas and discourses that can be framed with Jasbir Puar as homonationalist.

Importantly, Katya appears as a racialized Slavic woman through gendered and classed markers: her strong Russian accent, a cheap 90s under-class style. In the context of the show, Katya's Russianness, her racialized body and character emerge against liberal progressive discourses that condemn Russian homophobia. Hence, her figure becomes a *venire* to preserve the narrative of a progressive American gay-positive culture and negate racial and class-based inequality. Katya embodies the de-

62 Katya and Milk at the Voices 4 Chechnya March NYC. *YouTube*. (October 2017) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gQM9M6e2X8> (last accessed 16 August 2022).

velopmental delay of Russia in a comical way and offers Americans the opportunity to care for the victims of Russian homophobia and affirm their belonging to an in comparison progressive nation. Importantly, the lack of critical discourse on the Orientalization of Russian and other white, non-European bodies in combination with the unwillingness to address class inequality within American gay culture inhibit the understanding of figures such as Katya as critical commentary on ethnic signification. Understanding Katya's ethnic drag as a common form of embodied performance that makes ethnic difference visible and understandable through class-based bodily performances highlights the urgency to mainstream a class-critical self-reflection of gay media culture and beyond. Moreover, it amplifies the necessity to develop analytical tools that allow to think of ethnicity and racialization as issues that are not only or exclusively signified through assigned differences in skin color. In other words, it prompts the development of critical methodologies that are able to address racialized difference in other terms than a scale of whiteness, and a reevaluation of how ethnicity, race, class, gender and ability on the intersection create certain non-European bodies as *Others*.

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