

## **North American Universalism in *RuPaul's Drag Race*: Stereotypes, Linguicism, and the Construction of 'Puerto Rican Queens'**

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Without question, *RuPaul's Drag Race* (RPDR) has included a diverse range of contestants. Those most commonly deployed as signifiers of diversity within the show, however, are contestants typically referred to as "Puerto Rican queens". Each season of the show has featured at least one such queen. Yet while RPDR may be seen as commendable for including a culturally diverse group of queens in each season, an intersectional analysis of the show suggests that significant issues arise in the way RPDR positions Puerto Rican drag queens. Notable in regard to drag queens situated within this category is a consistent emphasis on their English language capabilities and, more broadly, a focus on their knowledge of North American popular culture.

This chapter takes up the topic of North American universalism and investigates how RPDR and some of its North American queens become complicit in "border control" in relation to queens from "the south". Taking season three of RPDR as a case study, we argue that the show's evocations of both linguistic imperialism and stereotypes based on assumptions about Puerto Rican culture perpetuate the exclusion of those from the global south, thus echoing wider narratives of nation, borders, and belonging. As such, in this chapter we suggest that challenging the operations of stereotypes about those from the global south is important in and beyond the context of RPDR, with the latter serving as but one iteration of a wider cultural phenomenon.

### **Race and the Universal Subject**

Representations of Puerto Rican drag queens on RPDR do not arise in a vacuum; these depictions are interwoven elements of a complex tapestry of particular political,

geographical, social, and media histories. To explore portrayals of drag queens from Puerto Rico in the context of RPDR we must first consider the position of “Latin America” and “Latinidad” identities in relation to these histories, particularly as they intersect with the hegemony of North American cultural values over those of the global south (Demuro, 2012).

Central to the ongoing positioning of Latin American cultures and identities as inferior is the pervasive understanding that Western European politics, economics, and ideologies provide a universal benchmark against which all other cultures are compared. Our investigation here is particularly interested in the mechanisms of this universalism and how it is enacted to locate the “proper” US citizen as the universal subject. Sara Ahmed (2015) states that “the universal takes form around some bodies that do not have to transform themselves to enter the room kept open by the universal” (n.p.). As Ahmed goes on to explain, “some have to find voices because others are given voices... the universal is *distributed*. Some embody its promise; others embody the failure to live up to the promise” (n.p., italics in original). Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1999), too, examined borders and social divisions – particularly those between the US and Central American cultures – and how they work in the service of some while oppressing others.

Following Ahmed’s and Anzaldúa’s arguments, we posit that continued references to North America as the universal underpins the asymmetric power relations apparent between Latin American and North American contestants on RPDR. Certainly at stake in our analysis is how certain groups are marginalized and how this is legitimated through the perpetuation of racialized stereotypes.

### **Latinidad Media Representation and Stereotyping**

The ways in which North American universalism manifests in RPDR entwine with the

evolution of Latinidad media representation. Mainstream media are a key site where popular understandings of Latinidad subjectivities are produced and explored (Beltrán, 2002; Molina Guzmán, 2007; Aparicio, 2003). Such productions and explorations encompass the ways in which Latinidad subjectivities are framed through a relationship with Western, and specifically North American, subjectivities. For example, Elena dell'Agnese (2005) identifies and examines North American cinema's longstanding fascination with politically charged Mexico-US border spaces and stories. Dell'Agnese finds that across many decades of filmic renderings, the Mexico-US border is presented "as a closed boundary for the Mexicans and an open frontier for the Americans", which "highlights the United States' double standard in its relations with the rest of the world, in which the United States does not see itself as an equal among equals" (p. 218).

In stark contrast to the leading role of white North American males in constructions of the borderlands stands the marginalized figure of the Latina. A number of scholars have analyzed the construction of Latinas in North American popular culture suggesting, for example, that "Leading renditions of 'Latin beauty' are performed in harmony with prevailing commercial, political, and cultural repertoires" (Mendible, 2007, p. 2). Despite their marginalization, however, Latinas are potent symbols of Latin America. Indeed, "Women continue to function as a very powerful sign for identity and nation" (Valdivia, 2007, p. 130). Angharad Valdivia asserts that although the US is a nation "increasingly composed both of other ethnic groups and of hybridities within these," it "continues to see itself in terms of a dominant white identity and a black minority" (p. 131). As such, Latinas are seen to pose a sexual and racial "double threat" to "the dominant popular culture and social and political order" (ibid). Similarly, Isabel Molina Guzmán (2007) argues that North American popular culture tends to offer racialized, hypersexualized representations of Latinas, who are thus deemed to transgress, and therefore sit outside of, hegemonic

boundaries.

A key way in which media representations serve to marginalize Latinas occurs by re-invoking existing stereotypes and emphasizing particular racial and sexual signifiers. In this framework, stereotypes of “the sexy Latin beauty” and/or “the sassy, crazy Latin” are prominent. Arguably, the prototype for these stereotypes was Carmen Miranda. Known as “The Brazilian Bombshell”, she was famous for what was treated as her exoticism, signaled by a trademark fruit hat, and what was perceived as a nearly incomprehensible accent. It is now well understood that Carmen Miranda could not escape the “hyperlatinidad” stereotype (Fregoso, 2007, p. 58) her stardom helped create, even when she deliberately attempted to do so later in her career.

Stereotypes of the sexy, sassy, crazy Latin beauty were advanced further when Charo came to fame in the US in the 1970s. Such is Charo’s (US) influence, that her “shadow looms so large over Latin performers that she seems almost mythical; certainly, the type of loud, dancing, hypersexual Latin femininity she cements is a myth” (Mayora, 2014, p. 118). Charo, a Spanish-born musician and entertainer, is best known for her flamboyant stage persona, busty outfits, and signature phrase, “cuchi-cuchi”. In media representations of Latinas such as Charo, their language and accent are positioned as deficient in relation to the universal North American subject.

Issues of linguistic imperialism similarly arise in representations of Puerto Rican contestants on RPDR. Among its other aesthetic and cultural functions, RPDR parodies popular reality/competition TV shows, particularly *America’s Next Top Model* (2003–2015). In contrast, RPDR searches for “America’s Next Drag Superstar” with veteran drag superstar RuPaul at the helm, with tongue firmly in cheek. At the same time, however, the show actively pursues what it parodies, as it is a popular reality TV show that grants fame

and mobility to its successful contestants. In a similar way, the Latinx drag performed on RPDR may parody gender norms, yet it also actively participates in and thus potentially reinforces hierarchies of gender and ethnicity.

The forum of reality TV, in general, lends itself to perpetuating such hierarchies. Reality TV is widely acknowledged as having democratic outcomes, but so too is it widely recognized as a genre ultimately beholden to capitalist, commercial forces. Grace Wang (2010) asserts that reality TV relies on a limited selection of “stock characters” as a form of shorthand communication with a broad audience base (p. 405), as do many fictional television shows and films. However, as Wang points out, reality TV shows “adhere to, and authenticate, racialized narratives and stereotypes by embodying them in the characters of ‘real’ people” (ibid). As such, reality TV’s inclusions of stereotypes can be particularly persuasive. Audiences are not invited to understand reality TV contestants as manipulated characters, but rather as “real” and “authentic” people.

In the case of RPDR’s Puerto Rican drag queen contestants, they come to embody the same sexy, sassy, crazy Latin as discussed above, yet these stereotypes are cast within the queer context of the show. On the show, North American drag queens are, for the most part, “simply” drag queens, whereas Latinx drag is restricted to performances of “Latinaness” that encourage their interpretation as such. The following analysis considers these elements in relation to how other contestants, including from North American minority groups, as well as the show’s framework, patrol and protect a border between the universal North American subject and global south outsiders with specific reference to season three.

### **Racialised Humour and Linguicism**

From the first moments in the workroom, contestants Alexis Mateo and Yara Sofia are pinpointed as “the Puerto Ricans” when fellow contestant Manila Luzon remarks of the

newly formed group of queens, “We got two big girls, two Puerto Ricans.” R. Gabriel Mayora (2014) argues that in identifying herself as separate from the ‘big girls’ and the ‘Puerto Ricans’, Manila, “an ethnic queen herself”, distances herself from the group’s minority subject positions so as to align herself with the majority (p. 117). Mayora writes: “Manila’s own privilege throughout the season comes at the expense of the oppressed groups, something that becomes even more obvious through the challenges in which she personifies a series of negative Asian stereotypes” (ibid). The stage is thus set from the beginning for culture and ethnicity to play a central role in many of the season’s story arcs.

The story arcs of most interest to us focus on the construction of both Yara and Alexis (though particularly the former) through a Latinidad lens. For example, during the “workout video” challenge of “Totally Leotarded” (E4), both Yara and Alexis succeed by emphasizing their Latinx identities. As part of this challenge, Yara introduces the Spanish expression that will become her catchphrase: “*echa pa'lante*”, which she explains means “move forward”. Wearing a red and black leotard and a large red flower in her long dark hair, Yara exclaims to imagined and real at-home viewers, “’cause you like Latin guy, you want to work your body, darling!” Mocking her own English abilities and beating others to the punchline, she addresses the camera and comically implores, “Don't worry if you don't understand me, I will include a translation at the end of the video.” The show rewards this statement with a quick-cut to RuPaul laughing heartily with approval, thus setting up Yara’s accent as an “acceptable” source of humor. The combination of Yara’s sexuality, accent, and language of origin continues to be the centerpiece of her routine as she initiates her catchphrase “*echa pa'lante!*” in combination with an emphatic “*cha, cha*” and sensual hips gyrations.

The last word on Yara’s efforts in this challenge comes from the show’s gatekeepers, who commend her “hyperlatinidad” performance. In the episode’s final

judging, RuPaul declares Yara's accent to be a "potential liability" but one she, in this particular situation, exaggerated to her advantage. Guest judge Susan Powter applauds the way Yara implemented "that whole Latin thing and that sexy swish." As such, RPDR binds Yara's über Latinx drag performance to her real Latinx body and speech, and to "real" Latina gender norms. In doing so, the show draws a marked distinction between the presumed universality of North American drag and the apparent specificity of Latinx drag and Latina femininity.

As mentioned above, language and accent is key to the ways in which Latinidad stereotypes are manufactured, and these stereotypes are loud and clear in RPDR's representations of Latinx drag queens. Certainly we are not the first to suggest this, with Mayora (2014) observing that in RPDR, Puerto Rican queens' accents become signifiers of "otherness" that set them apart from the rest of the contestants. Mayora finds that the inequalities between Puerto Rican queens and North American queens are most evident "in the show's focus on the Puerto Rican queens' struggles with the language" (p. 112). Similarly, Matthew Goldmark (2015) asserts that RPDR overlooks issues of language that might disadvantage some contestants and sidesteps "the colonial contours of Puerto Rican citizenship" (p. 502). Goldmark discerns that "language not only generates the program's humor and conflict; the show's implicit English proficiency requirement also determines success on the set" (ibid).

Building on the work of Mayora and Goldmark, we argue here that the dynamics of language, accent, and marginalization in RPDR are most comprehensively understood in terms of North American universalism and its linguistic enactment. The universal is seen as an attribute of the English language, while provincialism defines all other languages. Robert Phillipson (1992) connects the concept of linguistic imperialism with a number of other "isms", including racism, sexism, capitalism, and imperialism. He proposes the term

“linguicism” to convey and summarize how varying “isms” are reflected and used in the English language when it is employed, and thus the way English functions as a tool of imperialism: “linguicism refers exclusively to ideologies and structures where language is the means for affecting or maintaining an unequal allocation of power and resources” (p. 514). Clarifying the relationship between linguistic imperialism and linguicism, Phillipson writes: “for linguicism also to constitute *linguistic imperialism* presupposes that the actors in question are supported by an imperialist structure of exploitation of one society or collectivity by another” (ibid, italics in original). As established earlier, many US media representations of Latinidad – including those in RPDR – are imbued with colonial and imperialist connotations; as such, linguistic imperialism and linguicism are valuable concepts for unpacking how language implicates representations of Puerto Rican queens on the show.

In RPDR, Latinidad stereotypes are fused with occurrences of linguicism, a potent combination that serves to fortify the show’s representations of North American universalism. For example, in “Totally Leotarded”, and similar to Yara’s performance, the success of Alexis Mateo’s workout video is born primarily of the language she uses, her accent, and the ways she invokes “the sexy Latina beauty” stereotype. Performing a hypersexual Latina femininity, Alexis wears a leotard that barely conceals bulging breasts teamed with sparkling, gaudy “bling” on her neck, ears, and wrist. While the guest judge advises Manila to give more “over the top drag queen sexy” and Delta Work to go “over the top” in shaking the arm weight she uses as part of her performance, when Alexis is instructed to go “over the top” the reference is to her “Latina-ness”, especially her accent and language of origin. The instruction quickly results in a close-up of her comically introducing herself using an exaggeratedly long Puerto Rican name pronounced so quickly it is near incomprehensible to non-Spanish speakers. This close-up then cuts to RuPaul

laughing enthusiastically in appreciation of what is treated as a “joke”. Also making use of “sexy” stereotyping and her accent, Alexis goes on to sensually pronounce her exercise prop to be a “stretchy thingy-majingy”. Highlighting the comic nature of Alexis’ accent and reiterating its import to her performance in the challenge, RuPaul imitates her pronunciation of “thingy-majingy” when he announces her as the winner of the challenge.

It would, of course, be erroneous to completely discount Yara and Alexis’ agency in these performances. Indeed, Puerto Rican contestants, like all the contestants on the show, are inculcated in and characterize broader ideals of neo-liberal capitalism, choosing to participate in the competition in hope of realizing an individualized quest to prosper socially and economically. However, for reality TV contestants, broader socio-political systems, as well as the media giants who produce and control the shows, tend to be overriding forces, with individual contestants swept up in doing “the work of being watched” (Andrejevic, 2004).

### **Refutations of Latinx Cultural Capital**

We suggested in the previous section that linguisticism is apparent in the judges’ responses to Yara and Alexis’ performances, and that their success on RPDR hinges on their expression of particular Latinx identities that reinforce stereotypes of what it means to come from “south of the border”. To an extent, then, we would affirm that Yara and Alexis achieve success on the show via the execution of particular intelligible Latinx identities that accrue to them a certain degree of cultural capital. While this cultural capital is premised on a narrow form of inclusion, it has arguably translated into brand recognition for them, and relative longevity following each of the seasons.

Nevertheless, within the context of the show, their cultural capital remains unstable. In contrast to the cultural capital RuPaul (and to a lesser extent some of the guest judges)

accords Yara and Alexis as Puerto Rican queens, we continue by focusing on how two of the North American queens challenge it. Specifically, we focus on how the queens Delta, who grew up in Mexico, and Raja, who has Indonesian and Dutch heritage and ultimately won the season, are shown to speak about Yara and her embodiment of Latinidad identity. The comments we focus on come from an episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked*, the after-show that includes “behind the scenes” footage. The episode of *Untucked* we focus on, which aired after “QNN News” (S3, E5), includes Delta and Yara referencing events that transpired both in “Totally Leotarded,” and “QNN News”.

In “QNN News” the queens are split into two teams, each forming a group of news presenters who are tasked with presenting either a news bulletin, a gossip report, a one-on-one interview with a celebrity (Kristin Cavallari), or the weather report. Along with two other queens, Yara, Raja, and Delta form one team, with Yara providing the weather report and Raja and Delta playing the news anchors. In the episode, Yara is directed to “go ahead for Spanglish” in her weather report, again relying upon humor derived from her English pronunciation and comedy treatment in general. This Spanglish instruction comes from both RuPaul and guest assistant “director” Debbie Matenopoulos.

In the *Untucked* episode that followed “QNN News”, Delta questions Yara as to what Delta sees as a repeated use of Spanglish:

Delta: Do you think there's a chance, like if we have to make another video, or we have to be characters, that if you create something funny, like with the accent and songs and that, that they'll say “Oh, you do that every time”? Like, do you think they would say that?

Alexis: Well she don't create her accent. She's not being Manila.

Yara: That is my accent, that is my accent.

Delta: Well no, she's not creating the accent, but, okay, let me repeat myself.

You haven't created your accent, you're from Puerto Rico and your first language is Spanish, and I'm aware of that. But do you think, because there's not a clear and obvious attempt to slowly pronounce the words: there's an attempt to speed it up and include Spanish as part of what you're doing – I'm not saying it's wrong – but do you think they will say, “Well, you're doing that every time?”

Delta [to camera]: The judges really love Yara, and I'm not happy about that.

You know Yara's great, but is she going to be pigeonholed as the “sassy, crazy Latin?”

In response to Delta's suggestion that Yara's identity as Puerto Rican is a “character”, Yara and Alexis refute the claim by referring to the fact that Yara's accent is not artificial. In a sense, neither Yara nor Alexis consider valid the implied meaning of Delta's question, namely that her suggestion that Yara was imitating Latinidad. Instead, they assert the veracity of Yara's performance, and indeed contrast it with Manila's performance (in which Manila used a stereotyped “Asian” accent in her interview with Kristin Cavallari).

In responding to Yara and Alexis, however, Delta reframes her original question without taking up the comparison to Manila. In doing so, Delta utilizes two particular rhetorical strategies. First, she says, “let me repeat myself”. In fact, she does not repeat herself. Rather, she asks her question again in a way that sidesteps the original implications of Yara and Alexis' responses (i.e., that Yara is playing a character). Second, and in order to further shift focus away from the implied accusation that she saw Yara's performance as a “character” (which carries with it the implication of cultural bias or even racism), Delta engages in what has been termed “raceplaining”. Raceplaining refers to instances where a

majority (typically white) group individual explains race, racism, or racial categories to someone who may be marginalized on the basis of racial categories, as though that person were unaware of how racism works. In this case, Delta states, “you’re from Puerto Rico and your first language is Spanish”, a redundant statement given that Yara knows this already. What this statement achieves is to inoculate Delta from any further accusations of bias or implication of racism. Having established her right to ask questions and limit any challenge to them, Delta then reasserts her right to interrogate Yara. While in the Untucked Lounge, Delta does this in a way that appears deferential (“I’m not saying it’s wrong”), in her confessional it becomes clear that Delta’s concern is not that Yara might be “pigeonholed as the ‘sassy, crazy Latin’” (that is, a concern for Yara), but that such “pigeonholing” might equip Yara with capital that would put her in a favourable position in the competition.

While it is possible that our claim about Delta’s comments to Yara could be read as cultural bias, racism or indeed linguicism itself, a second exchange renders even clearer our concerns. Following the exchange between Delta, Yara and Alexis, Delta and Raja leave the Untucked Lounge to sit alone in the Gold Lounge where the subsequent conversation takes place:

Delta: I know it’s the “character” [uses fingers to denote inverted commas] of Yara to do that, but it’s essentially the same thing from the video, the last video we did.

[Cut to clips showing Yara speaking Spanglish in the “Totally Leotarded” and “QNN News” episodes]

Raja: [Does bad impression of Spanglish]

Delta: But it's kind of like all kinds of things. Like it's like a soccer player from Paraguay, mixed with Afghanistan, and Charo, like, in heat. I don't know. I would almost think that she would think in her mind, "they're going to expect me to be like Charo on the news, so I'm *not* going to give them that. I'm going to give them something else." But you know what? She knows what they want, and they loved it.

Raja: Afghani Charo is ruling [AYEEYAYAYAYAYA]

In this exchange, and despite Delta having withdrawn her comment that Yara is playing a character, she reasserts that Yara is playing a "character" that is "essentially the same thing". In so doing, Puerto Rican culture, and specifically Yara's iteration of it, becomes thingified, depicted as a caricature rather than as a potentially legitimate self-presentation. What falls to the wayside, however, is that Raja and Delta, and indeed all of the queens, play characters in each episode – Raja is always a self-defined runway model, and Delta consistently plays the haughty, huffy, grand dame. Certainly, these depictions of Raja and Delta could be used to define them as "characters", yet it appears that Raja and Delta (amongst others) simply view these traits as their own personalities and not as characters they are playing.

By contrast, Yara's North American peers view her representation of a Latinidad self as a "character". This again highlights the effects of North American universalism and exceptionalism: North Americans occupy the place of the universal, hence their personalities simply *are*. Those located outside North America, however, are primarily perceived as stereotypes or caricatures, hence they are "characters" rather than people being whatever version of themselves they choose to be. A notable comparison arises in Manila's multiple performances of stereotyped "Asian-ness", as Delta does not similarly

see these as Manila playing a “character”. Rather, as a North American, Manila (like Delta and Raja) is able to put on and take off whatever roles she sees fit, given that her decisions are underpinned by a claim to the universal.

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter we have argued that on RPDR, North American universalism is the foundation for disparities between the representations and treatment of Latin American queens and North American queens. While the terms Latin America and Latinidad are often used reductively, we have taken up these terms to interrogate the ways they can be used to homogenize diverse ethnicities and individuals, and to reconfirm the geographical and cultural supremacy of the US.

We have also suggested that recurring Latinidad stereotypes in RPDR are anchored to aspects of language and accent. By analyzing the enactment of linguicism and its ties to North American universalism, we have highlighted the conditional nature of Yara’s and Alexis’ access to cultural capital within the context of the show. Ironically, or perhaps paradoxically, the same evocations of Latinidad stereotypes that grant them standing within the competition – via endorsements by RuPaul and guest judges – also open them up to diminishment and exposure as “other” to the universal North American subject. We also explored the way Delta and Raja – ethnic queens, too, but ultimately beholden to their North American belonging – “pigeonholed” Yara as a Latinidad stereotype and “character”. Indeed, this instance was neither the first nor last time that Yara was classified as a stereotyped “character” (Delta also reads Yara as being “über Charo” following the workout video challenge). Of course, it could be argued that accusations of character-playing indicate self-reflexive insight into the tendency of reality TV to maneuver contestants into presenting “stock characters”. However, reality TV contestants tend to

flow with the currents of bigger forces, and while RPDR is not short of extraverted, flamboyant contestants, seldom are they repeatedly identified as a character; that is, unless the “character” is Latinx.

Though the influence of dominating forces is significant, this is not to say that Puerto Rican queens, or any other queens, have no self-determination within the show. Choosing to self-present as Latinidad and/or play to Latina types is the prerogative of Latinx queens who are often rewarded in the competition for doing so. Nevertheless, this success can come at the price of provoking racialised laughter and linguicism. Moreover, when Yara and Alexis did bank on the (limited, conditional) cultural capital they could access through Latinidad performance, they were open to criticism and ridicule by North American competitors who not only attempted to deplete the cultural capital these queens had accrued, but did so in order to reassert their own upper hand as North American universal subjects.

In offering this analysis, we do not mean to aggravate tensions between Latinx queens and North American queens, on RPDR or anywhere else. We acknowledge wholeheartedly and stand with North American drag queens who fight for due recognition within society. Furthermore, we understand that the representation of contestants on RPDR is influenced by the powers of the show’s producers, and that, as Phillipson (1992) notes, linguicism is not necessarily intentional. It is an apt metaphor for the pernicious nature of linguicism and North American universalism that Yara and Alexis accumulated what cultural capital they could during RPDR, but during the *Untucked* “after-show” refutations of this cultural capital were made apparent. Identifying and questioning such universalism, including in queer spaces, remains an important task. As Ahmed (2015) appeals, “We have to keep up the challenge as the critiques of universalism do not seem to get through” (n.p.).

Given the salience of Ahmed's (2015) argument, we conclude with further extrapolation from her work as it applies to RPDR. Ahmed contends that "Universalism becomes melancholic when you are required to identify with the very promise that *you fail to embody*" (n.p., italics in original); that is, "To be rejected by the universal whose promise is not extended to you" (n.p.). As Ahmed expands on the experience of melancholic universalism:

You try and demonstrate that you are normal even when your desires take you away from the normal ... You assume that this approximation might be rewarded with recognition: oh, you too, you are just like us; after all, you are just like us. You mime in the hope that those you mimic become approving of you; that they might register your becoming with approval (n.p.).

At the beginning of the season, Manila's declaration that "We got two big girls, two Puerto Ricans," is followed by a poignant confessional address in which Alexis states, "What I hate the most is that people label you the Latin queen. I'm not just the Latin queen – when I'm in drag, I'm a star". With this statement, Alexis orientates herself in relation to her minority positioning but also to the universal subject. In a show that seeks to find a "drag superstar", Alexis articulates that as a "Latin queen" she finds herself outside the universal; she does not want to be (stereotyped as) a "Latin queen", but rather wants to be the universal "drag superstar". Yet, entering the realm of the universal for those located outside its borders requires giving something up.

Importantly, throughout the season, neither Alexis nor Yara "give up" their Latinidad identities. In fact, both reiterate their affiliations with their culture and country of origin at significant moments. Perhaps most notably, late in the season when Alexis and

Yara must Lip Sync for Your Life against each other (E 13), Yara breaks down in a devastating emotional display, after which Alexis whispers to her, “I love you like I love Puerto Rico ... let it go.” After losing, Yara reflects on her time on the show, saying, “this is for Puerto Rico, so I’m going to *echa pa’lante*, darling”. While these moments of pride and agency highlight how Yara and Alexis reassert their cultural identity, they also demonstrate how a refusal to “give up” one’s heritage equates with a refusal of entry into the universal. Our argument here is not that Yara or Alexis should have given one another up, nor given up their cultural identity to secure a place within the universal and thus potentially win RPDR. Rather, our argument has been to highlight the costs accrued to queens located outside the universal, and the decisions they must make about the extent to which they are willing to “give up” in order to proceed.

The questions we raise in this chapter are not limited to the context of RPDR. Rather, they speak to wider concerns about Latinidad representations and the ways in which North American exceptionalism exerts itself at the expense of those located outside its borders. While RPDR provides an example of this, it is but one within a much wider cultural phenomenon. To challenge North American exceptionalism in its most marginal forms (a television show about drag queens, for instance) is to highlight both its pervasive nature and to suggest that it must be challenged in all its forms, rather than those occupying a more culturally sanctioned or recognized form.

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