Agency and variation in person reference in *RuPaul's Drag Race* contestant introductions

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Conversation analytic explorations of person reference have argued that referring to the self in third person serves as a way to take the footing (Goffman 1981) of an interlocutor or non-present third party (Land & Kitzinger 2007). While this explanation accounts for much shifting person reference in so-called everyday conversation, shifting person reference also appears in contexts of performance where the performer and the persona they perform can be variably collapsed or distinguished when the performer/persona speaks. This paper takes Seasons 1-14 of the television show *RuPaul's Drag Race* as a case study for exploring individuals' agency in articulating this performer/persona relationship through shifting person reference in their introductions in the premiere episodes. Contestants on *Drag Race* are generally presented as male-bodied people who use costuming and make-up to present as feminine personae for the various challenges on the show. While these "male-bodies" are very frequently shown during the show, masculine reference and 'non-drag' names rarely appear. Hence, the contestants are visually represented as existing mainly in masculine bodies that are augmented to become feminine for challenges. However, linguistically they are represented only in feminine forms, thus presenting contestants, primarily as drag personae (and not as drag performers).

The linguistic subsumption of the performer beneath the performed persona, is however sometimes unsettled in the contestants' introductions. In the first few seasons, introductions seem fairly idiosyncratic, but by Season 5, introductions follow clear generic conventions: the contestant enters the "workroom" (one of two main sets used in the show) in drag, delivers a pithy one liner, then meets the other contestants and/or explores the workroom. This in-workroom footage is intercut with footage of the performer out of drag in a confessional-style setting, introducing themselves beginning with "I am X" or "my name is X" where X is their drag name. While these conventions are likely the outcome of producer and editor intervention, within these constraints, contestants still differ in their use of person reference, varying significantly in the degree to which they draw a distinction between the "I" of the introduction and a "she" of the drag persona. E.g.:

(1) I'm Kandy Muse and **I'm** a Dominican doll from New York City (Season 13)
(2) My name is Monique Heart **she's** the razzle dazzle queen (Season 10)

This data set comprising 184 introductions over 14 years of production, provides a valuable opportunity to explore how person reference can be used to reclaim performers' agency within the highly controlled environment of broadcast television. Further, we show how such agency can be deployed to articulate unique relationships between a drag performer and the persona they perform, which, typically being entirely their own creation, is often entangled with the performer's own sexuality and gender identity. We argue that the ambiguous and flexible ways that English person reference can be deployed allow performers to create nuanced representations of their identities, even within the genericized frames of television.

References

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