

“Ciao Italia”: Homonationalist and Homonormative Tendencies in *Drag Race Italia*

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Introduction

After several seasons of the original *RuPaul's Drag Race*,¹ after a variety of international productions (such as *Drag Race Thailand* and *Drag Race España*), and after various prizes and awards, including multiple Emmy Awards, the drag queens-competition developed its Italian iteration with *Drag Race Italia*. The first season premiered on the 18th of November 2021 on Discovery+ Italia and WOW Presents Plus and ended with its last episode on the 23rd of December 2021. The show was presented by the judges Priscilla, Chiara Francini, and Tommaso Zorzi.² Priscilla is an Italian drag queen who acquired fame in Mykonos, Francini is a well-known Italian actor, while Zorzi is an influencer and TV celebrity. The eight drag queens who competed for the crown and for the MAC Cosmetics sponsorship were: Elecktra Bionic, Farida Kant, Le Riche, Luquisha Lubamba, Ava Hangar, Divinity, Enorma Jean, and Ivana Vamp. Albeit all white, the drag queens selected for the show varied greatly by age and origins, as the competitors all came from different Italian regions.

Drag Race Italia and the ground-breaking appearance of Drusilla Foer on the Sanremo Music Festival stage in 2022³ might indicate a gradual opening of the Italian society towards art forms rooted in queerness and performed by members of the LGBTQIA+ community. However, the show was accompanied by events that instead highlighted the opposite. For instance, the Instagram account of *Drag Race Italia* was blocked after it had been reported too many times prior to the premiere (“Drag Race Italia, Chiusa La Pagina Instagram: Il Duro Intervento Di Tommaso Zorzi”). Moreover, at the time of the show’s broadcasting, Italy’s political scene was marked by the failed legislative itinerary of Ddl Zan, a bill that was proposed to expand a previous law (legge Mancino) in order to add homotransphobia, misogyny, and ableism, as discriminating factors. After the law had been approved by the Italian Parliament in 2020, it was blocked in the Senate in 2021 amidst the thunderous applause of Italy’s politicians (“Com'è Finito Il Ddl Zan”). Images of the Senators’ jubilation spread around the world and drew numerous condemnations. *Drag Race Italia* was framed as the direct response to Ddl Zan, as Priscilla stated that the show was “la risposta [...] ai vergognosi applausi in Senato [...] Rappresentiamo l’Italia bella da applaudire [...] facciamo vedere al mondo che ce la possiamo fare” (“Essere Drag È Un'arte”, *Al Via La I Edizione Di Drag Race Italia*).⁴

The blockage of Ddl Zan falls in line with a wider critique highlighted by queer Italian scholarship on whether the country can afford the use of the term ‘homonationalism,’ given its political status (Colpani 2015). The term was coined by Jasbir Puar in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007) while investigating discourses on War on Terror. Homonationalism is a process of absorption of the LGBTQIA+ community within national narratives to such a degree that it presents queer people as fully accepted and as part of national productivity, due to their access to same-sex marriage and to military service (Puar xii). Based on the incorporation of homosexuals within national narratives, the United States articulates narratives of its sexual exceptionalism, comparing it to the seemingly backwardness of Eastern and Islamic countries (Puar 3-11). This apparent progress is employed to justify the legitimacy

of Western governments and their imperialism (Puar 9). Such exceptionalism is mirrored in Europe by countries such as the U.K. and the Netherlands (Puar 3-11). Homonationalism is described as the offspring of another key word, ‘homonormativity’ (Wiegman 8). The term outlines the standardisation and normalisation process related to the LGBTQIA+ community, which was coined by Lisa Duggan in *The Twilight of Equality* (2003). It is “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan 50).

Given the ample difference in the treatment of LGBTQIA+ people in Italy, compared for instance to the U.S., U.K., or the Netherlands, it has been argued that Italy cannot afford the idea of homonationalism (Colpani 188). Gianmaria Colpani and Adriano José Habed highlighted Italy’s contradictory position (2014b, 35) and they stated that Italy is “peripheral on the European map of liberal sexual politics because of its lack of LGBT civil rights and its rampant homophobia” (2014a, 74). A periphery that is configured spatially and temporally by authors such as Marzio Barbagli and Asher Colombo, or Giovanni Dall’Orto, who describe it as “haunted by pre-modern forms of queerness” (Colpani and Habed 2014a, 82).

However, several Italian studies that engage with homonationalism successfully problematized the Italian iteration of the process (De Vivo and Dufour 2012; Colpani 2015; Colpani and Habed 2014a; Colpani and Habed 2014b), stemming from the idea that homonationalism does not necessarily require progressive LGBTQIA+ politics. For instance, Barbara De Vivo and Suzanne Dufour argued that the homonationalist representation of a civilized West “si afferma anche in Italia in un contesto segnato dalla mancata conquista di diritti civili per le persone lgbtiq” (De Vivo and Dufour 206).⁵ 2011 in particular was a year denoted by homonationalist rhetoric in Italy because of two events: the celebrations for the 150 years of Italian Unification and the Europride in Rome (De Vivo and Dufour 206-207). From its configuration in 2011, Italian homonationalism presented a peculiarity compared to its U.S. iteration, that is “una sorta di spinta omonazionalista dal basso che promuove la qualificazione del soggetto gay e lesbico come soggetto nazionale. Una forma peculiare di omonazionalismo anticipatorio, che produce patriottismo omosessuale in assenza, o prima ancora, di inclusione” (Acquistapace et al. 60).⁶ Italy’s case denotes the ambiguous position of its LGBTQIA+ citizens:

Come un amante che spera, l’omosessuale italian* promette amore eterno e fedeltà, non ricevendo sempre e necessariamente le ambite ricompense. È così che l’amore per la nazione mette a lavoro il nuovo cittadino omonormato, sussunto nel nuovo ordine del capitalismo postcoloniale. L’omosessuale, introiettato il proprio status di subordinat*, ne indossa le aspettative, come una maschera: una maschera bianca, una maschera straight (Acquistapace et al. 70).⁷

Moreover, as argued by Colpani, homonationalism does not appear because of the disappearance of heteronormativity (192). Indeed, “l’emergere dell’omonazionalismo non si colloca, dunque, in una traiettoria lineare che prevede, come sua condizione necessaria, il venir meno dell’eteronormatività. Si tratta piuttosto di un’articolazione contingente tra elementi anche contraddittori tra loro” (Colpani 193).⁸ For this reason, analysing Italy through homonationalist (and consequently, homonormative) lens is not only appropriate, but also relevant, given the country’s political climate.

Furthermore, homonationalist (and homonormative) traces can be found in Italian cultural products. Antonia Anna Ferrante in her seminal *Pelle Queer Maschere Straight: il Regime Di Visibilità Omonormativo Oltre La Televisione* (2019) applied homonormative and homonationalist theory to the ‘gay edition’ of *Uomini e Donne*, the popular reality show

produced by Maria de Filippi. The show was first produced in 1996 and its main aim is to form romances between the (mostly very straight and cisgender) participants. For the first time, in the 2016/2017 and 2017/2018 seasons, the show presented gay contestants. *Uomini e Donne* moved Ferrante to theorise an apparatus of visibility control that is rooted in homonormativity and homonationalism, she said:

Partendo da queste considerazioni credo che il trono gay sia stato il programma che più ha contribuito negli ultimi anni alla produzione di quello che qui definisco regime di visibilità omonormativo. Se il regime di visibilità è l'insieme delle norme che regolano la rappresentazione di alcuni soggetti, questo può essere definito omonormativo descrivendo la traiettoria di assimilazione dell'omosessuale nel *mainstream*, in un regime culturalmente e politicamente egemonico. Gay e lesbiche, un tempo tra i "soggetti eccentrici" più destabilizzanti per l'ordine della società, oggi sono assimilabili, perché funzionali, al progetto di rifondazione dell'Occidente nel sistema neoliberista. Il regime di visibilità omonormativo in Italia, e in questo senso del trono gay, è evidentemente parte del progetto di normalizzazione della comunità LGBT nella retorica europeista dei valori liberali (29).⁹

The main practices enacted by the "regime di visibilità omonormativo" are the creation of rules of what is allowed on the screen and what needs to remain invisible (Ferrante 30).

Stemming from the contemporary Italian context, the paper will examine *Drag Race Italia* as a case study, in order to understand if it follows the imposing guidelines of the "regime di visibilità omonormativo," or if it manages to break free from them. Moreover, as it was broadcasted ten years after the initial studies on Italian homonationalism and during the discourses on Ddl Zan, the paper will investigate if there are differences compared to 2011, or if the Italian panorama presents the same contradictions, the same anticipatory homonationalism. In her theorisation, Ferrante argued that "s'impone un nuovo discorso in cui la sfera del pubblico per i gay e le lesbiche è un perimetro tracciato dalla patria, dalla famiglia, dal libero mercato e da un abuso del concetto di privacy" (32).¹⁰ For this reason, the four pillars of homonormativity and homonationalism (therefore, nation, family, the free market, and privacy) will constitute the basis for the exploration of the show.

Nation

Drag Race Italia's first episode is set to be the introduction of the show, which aims to please not only a national audience but also an international one. As such, the episode is titled "Ciao Italia," which takes its name from the fluorescent sign that is hung on the Werk Room, the area where the drag queens get ready and fabricate the dresses for the competition. Placing Italy at the centre from the beginning, the episode's mini challenge consists of a photoshoot on a Venetian gondola. The queens pose on it, with a gigantic photograph of Venice on the background. Arguably, the challenge is aimed at appealing an international audience, who is already attuned with the more mainstream Italian panorama. The celebration of a glossy Italy continues with the episode's maxi challenge, called "Italian Style," for which the competitors are meant to create a dress that celebrates Italy. The challenge loses any regional particularism, and generalizes Italianness, as Enorma Jean states, "fai vedere che sei milanese, ma anche napoletana, ma anche siciliana, ma soprattutto italiana" ("Ciao Italia" 33:01-33:09).¹¹ Being "soprattutto italiana" appeals to a foreign gaze, and it also assumes nationalist tones. Enorma's generalization is even more present in the queens' choice of dress. Le Riche and Enorma Jean decide to embrace Italy's culinary fame, so their dresses incorporate pasta and a pizza elements. Representing the country through food is a practice that is familiar, and for this reason reassuring. In this way, the drag queens appear as an integral part of the national narrative. Their choice reminds a 2011 poster sponsored by the Europride in Rome, which featured two

women kissing, and surrounded by a bottle of wine, parmigiano cheese, and ham. According to De Vivo and Dufour:

Mettendo in primo piano la familiarità e la tipicità del parmigiano, del vino e del prosciutto, il manifesto ha lo scopo di rendere familiari e addomesticati i corpi delle lesbiche e il loro bacio. La *performance* di classe sociale medio-borghese – incarnata dalla gestualità e dall’abbigliamento – e la bianchezza di questi due corpi indeboliscono l’aspetto ‘minaccioso’ del bacio tra due donne, rendendolo degno della bandiera italiana” (2012, 208).¹²

In this way, the two drag queens insert themselves into a line of homonormative and reassuring representations of members of the LGBTQIA+ community in Italy.

Additionally, the other queens engage with similar cultural references: both Luquisha Lubamba and Farida Kant dress as harlequin, possibly referencing the Venetian Carnevale, while the other queens reference the fashion designer Valentino, the *nonna*, and the sea that frames Italy (Divinity, Ava Hangar, and Ivana Vamp respectively). However, it is Elektra Bionic that thoroughly embraces Italianness, as she creates a dress based on the Italian flag, *il tricolore*, and at the end of the runway, turns around, fully displaying the “Made in Italy” inscription on her buttocks (Fig.1).

While in the end, it is Farida Kant who wins the challenge, Elektra’s outfit is significant for its relation to Italian homonationalism. Indeed, *il tricolore* and its usage were present in an analysis of Italian homonationalism, as it featured in a 2016 campaign in favour of same-sex civil recognition (Acquistapace et al. 2016). The campaign consisted of two posters, depicting two same-sex couples embracing on a bed with white pillows, white sheets, and wearing white shirts, and covered by the Italian flag. While, contrarily to the very domestic setting of the posters, Elektra’s walk is public, both scenes embrace a nationalist rhetoric. Regarding the posters, Acquistapace et al. commented, “riguardiamo l’immagine, e a catturarci questa volta è proprio quel tricolore: cosa significa coprirsi con quel tricolore, proiettarsi nella nazione, per dei soggetti a cui non sono mai stati riconosciuti diritti? [...] ci chiediamo quindi perché [...] siano proprio i gay e le lesbiche a farsi ancora una volta i portabandiera di questa retorica nazionalista” (69).¹³ The same questions could be applied to Elektra’s outfit.

At the same time, the show also presents elements that challenge expectations. In order to explore them, it is necessary to turn to language. According to Ferrante, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* during its multiple seasons has displayed an increasing sanitisation of its language, “la rappresentazione delle pratiche tradizionali della sottocultura drag sembra già congeniale a piegarsi al lessico del linguaggio televisivo nell’egemonia neoliberista. È in questa stessa prospettiva che parlo di evoluzione di un regime di visibilità omonormativo per descrivere le tecniche di disciplinamento che intervengono” (110-111).¹⁴ Indeed, the sanitisation of the show’s language diminishes its queer element (Ferrante 112-113). RuPaul’s iconic closing of her message to the drag queens is rendered as “Nun facit’ strunzate,” which becomes Priscilla’s catchphrase. The word choice references Priscilla’s Neapolitan origins but it is also a good-hearted joke on RuPaul, as Priscilla said, “Abbiamo deciso di napoletanizzare molte frasi, ad esempio con il 'nun facite strunzate’”, tradotto dalla frase di RuPaul che in un video messaggio ha voluto salutare l’edizione italiana del suo talent con un “buona fortuna e non fate strunzate”, detto in italiano e mandando un bacio” (“Essere Drag È Un'arte”, *Al Via La I Edizione Di Drag Race Italia*).¹⁵ The insertion of dialectal words into the show is extremely significant, as it engages with a process of localisation of queerness, which Ferrante deemed as the only way to disrupt homonationalist and homonormative tendencies, as well as Anglo-American homogenising practices (Ferrante 48). Moreover, it promotes a view from the South of Italy, which contrasts homonationalist views that instead promote a homogenisation to the North (Colpani and Habed 2014a; Colpani and Habed 2014b; Ferrante 2019). As argued by Giuseppe

Burgio, “the limit of that continental Europe, of that west that has also labelled, defined, constructed homosexuality as gay identity and from where most of the studies on homosexuality today proceed. Maybe a look from the south... can return unknown shades, perhaps some new questions” (in Colpani and Habed 2014a, 88).

Priscilla’s light-hearted joke on RuPaul is echoed in the final episode, titled “Grand Finale.” While the drag queens are getting ready before the final catwalk and the ones that were eliminated wait in the Werk Room, a video message is shown in which both Michelle Visage and the RuPaul encourage the queens. They talk in Italian, while accentuating each word. To thank them, the drag queens send a message to them in English, which is followed by Ivana Vamp and Luquisha Lubamba screaming, “maccheroni, pepperoni, salami, arancini” (“Grand Finale” 1:00:55-1:00:59). In this way, the queens mock the stereotypical image that Americans have of Italians, by listing items of food either in a North American accent (“maccheroni, arancini”) or by using their Americanised name (“pepperoni, salami”). Ivana and Luquisha change the centre of the narrative, the gaze is no longer North American, but it is Italian. They localise their language, at the expense of the many Anglicisms that recur during the show, and in this way, they demonstrate the vibrancy of queer Italian culture and its ability to resist homogenising and domesticating tendencies.

Family

Following a long-held tradition within the LGBTQIA+ community, the original *RuPaul’s Drag Race* insisted on the notion of family and kinship bonds between the contestants, highlighted by the use of the nickname ‘Mama Ru’ to refer to RuPaul, the mother of all the drag queens. Antonia Anna Ferrante analysed the roots of the use of family imagery and lexicon in the U.S. show, which referenced not only the history of the drag queen community, but also the documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990) by Jennie Livingston. The film describes New York drag Houses, composed by drag queens, who created in this way a new form of non-biological extended families. As stated by Ferrante, “non sono parodie, imitazioni grottesche, sono legami reali tra persone, vincoli reciproci costruiti attraverso l’affiliazione volontaria [...] è piuttosto un legame che si basa sulla reciprocità e la possibilità di riconoscersi in un particolare stile di performance” (135).¹⁶ For this reason, the use of “family” is not part of a process of assimilation, but rather of disruption (Ferrante 134).

Drag Race Italia follows the footsteps of the original show, as the judges and contestants follow the family rhetoric throughout the season. For instance, in the finale Priscilla insists that *Drag Race Italia* is not only a show, but it is also a family. Moreover, in the fourth episode, titled “Snatch Game & Fab 80’s,” Chiara Francini gives a passionate speech on the show, their audience, and the idea of family. Theirs is:

Un pubblico per il quale l’ideale di famiglia rispecchia l’ideale di famiglia allargata LGBTQ, è un pubblico che vede nel programma rappresentata la propria esistenza, vede la celebrazione del proprio modo di vita. Drag Race significa fare comunità, significa installare un senso di prospettiva e di appartenenza, voi siete le radici dell’orgoglio. Studiate la vostra storia, conoscetene gli eroi, raccontatevi, e poi passate il testimone, esattamente come si fa in famiglia. (“Snatch Game & Fab 80’s” 1:00:45-1:01:34).¹⁷

While Francini strongly encourages the contestants to study their own history, the show does not reference it. The contestants are described as “le radici dell’orgoglio,” but *Drag Race Italia* does not promote a further exploration of the “orgoglio,” which could have had a significant impact given the show’s mainstream platform. In this way, it creates a connection only to the Anglo-American sphere and its history.

Moreover, the only local event that the show insists on celebrating is the 2016 recognition of same-sex civil unions. In the fifth episode of the series, titled “Long Live the Drag Bride,” the drag queens are visited by their loved ones, either partners or close friends, and they are required to put them in drag for the wedding-themed maxi-challenge. The episode’s main theme is part of Duggan’s definition, as the homonormative process is anchored in domesticity (50). Indeed, “il matrimonio non diviene solo un modo per buttare fuori dalla casa della patria le sessualità perturbanti, ma anche un istituto per riscrivere un nuovo patto di cittadinanza con nuovi membri della comunità nazionale” (Acquistapace et al 2016, 69).¹⁸ Furthermore, while the law constitutes a milestone for LGBTQIA+ rights in Italy, it was nonetheless criticised by many for the lack of the so-called ‘stepchild adoption,’ the adoption of the child of one’s civil partner (“Unioni Civili, La Legge Punto Per Punto: Stralciata La Stepchild Adoption Per Le Coppie Gay”). The judges and contestants on *Drag Race Italia* do not reference such criticisms and they approach it uncritically.

The homonormative trend is only highlighted by one of the two guest judges in the episode: Enzo Miccio. His appearance is significant because he rose to fame as a television presenter due to his programme *Wedding Planners*, which ran from 2005 to 2014 on RealTime and, as the name suggests, focused on planning weddings.¹⁹ His personality is built around the ideals of elegance and propriety, so it does not come as a surprise that, as soon as Elektra (once again) shows her exposed buttocks on the catwalk, Miccio says she could have avoided this. In his further feedback on Elektra’s outfit, Miccio comments that, “l’ho trovato sopra le righe, associando questo look alla sacralità del matrimonio” (“Long Live the Drag Bride”, 1:07:31-1:07:34).²⁰ Miccio’s comments embrace an ideal of respectability politics and propriety, whose aim is presenting the members of the LGBTQIA+ community as domesticised and harmless. The choice of describing a wedding in terms of “sacralità,” highlight the need to be worthy of the institution and it also exposes the great absent from the show, the Catholic Church.²¹ While the institution is a constant presence in Italian politics and society, the absence of any reference to it on the show appears like a deliberate, and disciplined, choice, especially given Priscilla’s comment in response to Miccio, “quello che noi drag queens facciamo sul palco è anche un po’ scandalizzare” (“Long Live the Drag Bride” 1:07:47-1:07:51).²² While the show could have embraced the disruptive nature that is part of the art of drag, it appears more focused on looking respectable, exemplified by the contestants’ need to talk about the responsibility they feel during the show. For instance, Luquisha Lubamba said, she felt the responsibility of representing a part of the population in the third episode, and Ava Hangar, in her speech after her elimination said, “non è da tutti e da tutte far parte di un progetto così importante per un paese come il nostro” (“Long Live the Drag Bride” 1:17:05-1:17:14).²³

The need to appear presentable and proper explodes between the third and fourth episode, after Enorma Jean and Ava Hangar fight following the judges’ comments on their outfits. While their reactions, and especially Enorma’s, might have been over the top, nonetheless, the consequences can be inscribed into a politics of homonormative respectability. Right after the incident, for instance, Elektra seems preoccupied with the audience’s reaction, saying, “sono schifata per il messaggio che passerà a casa,” as they are trying to “sdoganare con un programma televisivo un’arte, delle vite” (“Snatch Game & Fab 80’s” 5:59-6:05).²⁴ The judges decide to take disciplinary measures against the two contestants. While it might appear as the right decision to some, the punishment can be inscribed into the neoliberal competition matrix, which is at the basis of the show (Ferrante 110). Enorma and Ava, in order to remain in the competition, have to compete in a Lip Sync. In this way, an incident that could have opened the floor to a discussion on their role as LGBTQIA+ artists on mainstream television, is uncritically reified and re-inscribed into the show’s entertainment paradigm.

Free Market

Antonia Anna Ferrante argued that the competitive dimension of *RuPaul's Drag Race* is precisely the ideal format in the neoliberal modernity (110). She stated, “l’idea stessa di competizione è in sintonia con l’ideologia di mercato che si manifesta in termini di annientamento della concorrenza” (Ferrante 110).²⁵ While *Drag Race Italia* follows a similar structure, one of the queens embodies the neoliberal contest in particular: Enorma Jean. She is the one that pushes constantly for rivalry and competition.²⁶ In the first episode, when the contestants are waiting to figure out who is about to Lip Sync for their lives, Enorma Jean tries to encourage a distressed-looking Divinity, by saying, “non è finita ancora. Tu ti devi mangiare le telecamere, ti devi magna’ il palco, e ti devi magna’, spero e me lo auguro, ti devi magna’ l’avversaria” (“Ciao Italia” 56:50 – 57).²⁷ Enorma is criticised by the others, for instance, Farida tells her, “Non è lo spirito drag, andare avanti magnando l’altra” (“Ciao Italia” 57:43-57:45).²⁸ In a way, Farida is referencing the long history of queer community and support that Ferrante described in relation to *Paris is Burning*. However, Enorma refuses to align to such a vision in this case, “Non ci credo al volemos bene, perché stiamo facendo una competizione” (“Ciao Italia” 57:46-57:51).²⁹ During the show, Enorma is the one that has more openly and more strongly embraced the neoliberal competitive side of it. She does not want to put bonds of care first, since winning is her main priority.

The neoliberal side of the show appears also during the second episode, titled “Divas,” as for the maxi-challenge, the queens need to create a product to sell and subsequently star in its infomercial. Such a consumerist theme falls under the homonormative definition by Duggan, who listed “consumption” (50) as one of the key elements of the trend. In this way, the drag queens are presented as part of the nation, as they contribute to its society. Indeed, “il discorso omonormativo costruisce la rispettabilità di gay e lesbiche sul fatto che sono persone che lavorano, che fanno mutui, che consumano, che pagano le tasse” (Acquistapace et al. 66-67).³⁰ However, the episode also allowed Enorma to challenge the image of herself that she had presented up until that moment. Before the maxi-challenge, the queens take turns to choose the items to promote. While the other queens are able to grasp real and tangible items, Enorma arrives last, and for this reason, she remains empty-handed. She is forced to promote ‘nothing.’ The challenge allows her to ironically sell ‘nothing,’ thus, to make fun of the capitalist and consumeristic society. She says in her monologue:

Amiche, amici, amice, ma soprattutto nemiche. So che nessuna di voi si sta chiedendo, “Enorma, ma come hai fatto ad arrivare fino a qua?” Anche io come voi, sono partita da zero e la mia scalata verso il nulla, è stata difficile, ma anche facile, ma anche di più, ma anche meno. Sogni di essere un fashion designer, ma non sai neanche come si scrive? Ma dov’è il problema! Questo (vestito) l’ho fatto col nulla. Signore, amici, Enorma non è qua a vendere solide realtà, è qua a vendere aria fritta! Metafisica? Filosofia? Libri? A morte i contenuti! Telefona, amica, e ricordati, chi nulla rischia, nulla raggiunge. Ma soprattutto, a comprar nulla, non si perde nulla (“Divas” 1:03:28-1:04:31).³¹

During the promotion, Enorma slowly climbs upon a ladder, towards nothingness (Fig. 2). Her segment is an ironic take on infomercials, and she actively mocks the advertisement by the Immobildream company, by changing their motto, “Immobildream non vende sogni, ma solide realtà,” by proudly announcing, “Enorma non è qua a vendere solide realtà.” She paradoxically exposes the cultural void created by neoliberalism, by saying “a morte i contenuti!” In this way, Enorma is seen standing between two poles throughout the competition, as on the one hand she is the one that is the most supportive of competing, while on the other hand, she exposes neoliberalism.

Privacy

The final key element of homonormativity that is listed by Antonia Anna Ferrante is privacy. In her analysis of *Uomini e Donne*, she noticed how in the show, the gay contestants refused to explicitly mention words that are part of the LGBTQIA+ dictionary, “nelle prime esterne i corteggiatori continuavano a parlare del loro coming out, raramente pronunciato in questi termini: molto più spesso si utilizzava l’espressione ‘Come hai detto quella cosa lì’ (30).³² *Uomini e Donne* is a show that presents a voyeuristic approach to the relationships that develop during its course, thus, its way of depicting the gay contestants in a sanitised way is extremely significant. For instance, of the main participants refused to kiss another:

L’argomento utilizzato da Claudio in trasmissione, osannato dagli applausi del pubblico in studio (vera e propria tifoseria del tronista) è esattamente lo stesso che in modo rabbioso hanno utilizzato gli omofobi per commentare la trasmissione: ‘Certe cose le fai a casa tua’. Dentro e fuori la trasmissione, protagonisti, fan e detrattori si sono allineati nella ricostruzione di un muro invalicabile tra il pubblico e il privato, e la costruzione di uno spazio appropriato per la manifestazione dell’affettività (Ferrante 31).³³

In this case, *Drag Race Italia* differentiates itself from homonormative representations in the matter of privacy, as it does not shy away from depicting the private life of its contestants. Not only multiple same-sex kisses are portrayed when the partners of the drag queens appear in the fifth episode, but the contestants are also able to openly talk about their coming out to their families in the second one. One of the strengths of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is precisely the mixing of competition and reality aspects during the show, which is present in the Italian version.

Arguably, the most important personal matter that came out during the show is Enorma Jean’s disclosure of her HIV-positive status. In an emotional scene of the second episode (unfortunately intermixed with over-the-top slow motions and melancholic piano music), Enorma explains that after the death of her father, she started engaging in dangerous practices:

Io ho tentato di mantenere la calma, ma per la prima volta nella mia vita, ho perso completamente l’equilibrio. [...] Mi odio. E ho incominciato a fare sesso non protetto. Perché dicevo, me lo merito, io devo fare quella fine lì. Incomincio a sudare la notte. E dico, no, cioè, non è quello che stai pensando tu, pensa un’altra roba. Hai preso un raffreddore. I sudori aumentano. Mi si gonfiano le ghiandole. Non sto bene, sono giovane. Cosa sta succedendo? No, Davide, non è quello che stai pensando tu. O mio Dio, cosa faccio? Sono andato in ospedale. Ho fatto le analisi del sangue, da solo. Mi chiamano dopo due giorni e mi dicono, “Abbiamo una busta per lei, però deve passare da noi, abbiamo anche lo psicologo per parlare.” E mi arriva la bomba. Che quello che io pensavo fosse un gioco, era una cosa verissima, era una diagnosi di sieropositività. Sono sieropositivo, l’ho scoperto nel 2008. In un periodo in cui c’era la terapia. E quindi io non sarò mai grato abbastanza alla scienza, perché io dovrei essere morto o dovrei stare malissimo. E invece ho carica virale zero, ho tutti i parametri ad hoc, sono una persona sanissima. Se io dico una cosa di questo tipo, non lo voglio dire perché voglio sentirmi dire “Poverino,” perché non sono un poverino, sono uno che ce l’ha fatta. Sono uno dei tanti che ce la sta facendo, sono uno dei tanti che ce la farà (“Divas” 33:36-37:25).³⁴

Enorma’s speech is momentous due to the stigma that still surrounds people affected by HIV/AIDS. By sharing her experience, she is able to demystify the condition and to disseminate information that contrasts long-held assumptions. For instance, she informs the audience of the ‘undetectable equals untransmissible’ point. In this way, Enorma challenges the need for members of the LGBTQIA+ community to be sanitised and tamed, and she actively helps people in her same situation.

Conclusion

As a final remark, it is worth investigating who is made visible during *Drag Race Italia*. The show celebrates different Italian icons, such as Moira Orfei and Sophia Loren. However, the most celebrated diva is Raffaella Carrà, to whom the fifth episode (“Night of a Thousand Raffaella Carràs”) is dedicated. Carrà is celebrated as a gay icon, as a feminist, and as a trailblazer in the episode’s mini- and maxi- challenges. Hence, *Drag Race Italia* brings to light a side of the diva that is well-known in international settings (Beaumont-Thomas), but was completely overlooked on Italy’s most prestigious stage; the tribute to Carrà during the 2022 Sanremo Music Festival completely ignored her political side and only focused on her career in the entertainment industry.

At the same time, with the notable exception of Vladimir Luxuria, a trans woman and ex-Parliamentarian, the show only includes members of the LGBTQIA+ community as guests who are white cisgender gay men, such as Tiziano Ferro, the famous pop singer, and Enzo Miccio. They correspond to Lisa Duggan’s description of homonormative subjectivities (55). As stated by Ferrante regarding the ‘gay editions’ of *Uomini e Donne*, “la parte più interessante dei discorsi intorno al trono girano intorno alle contraddizioni di questo regime di visibilità omonormativo italiano, fondato per lo più su ciò che può entrare nello schermo della rappresentazione, producendo una regola su ciò che deve invece restare invisibile” (Ferrante 30).³⁵ While the show contributed positively to LGBTQIA+ discourses in Italy, nonetheless, the selection of guest judges allows a further confirmation of the show’s part in the “regime di visibilità omonormativo.”

Moreover, while the show embraces a nationalist pride, it also critically engages with Italian stereotypes. Similarly, while it promotes the queer tradition of extended kinships, it also celebrates the legal recognition of same-sex couples. The queens, and Enorma Jean in particular, both challenge and align themselves to a neoliberal paradigm. *Drag Race Italia* demonstrates how little Italy has changed since the analyses of 2011 and 2016, as exemplified by its oscillation between a more normative and a more queer pole. It highlights Italy’s “omonazionalismo anticipatorio” (Acquistapace et al. 60). However, the show also depicts a queer horizon (Muñoz 2019), rooted in the drag queen’s mutual care and solidarity. Their support to each other promotes a different, and disruptive, relationality, especially in a time of neoliberal individualism. As stated by Ferrante, “finché ci saranno una normalità e una disciplina degli affetti, mettere attenzione, desiderio, e soprattutto cura, nelle relazioni in cui sceglieremo di crescere sarà un atto di ribellione rivoluzionaria” (137).³⁶ While feeble, *Drag Race Italia* presents a queer trace, showing a way out of the homonationalist and homonormative paradigm. Indeed, while homonationalism is anticipated, queerness is on the horizon.

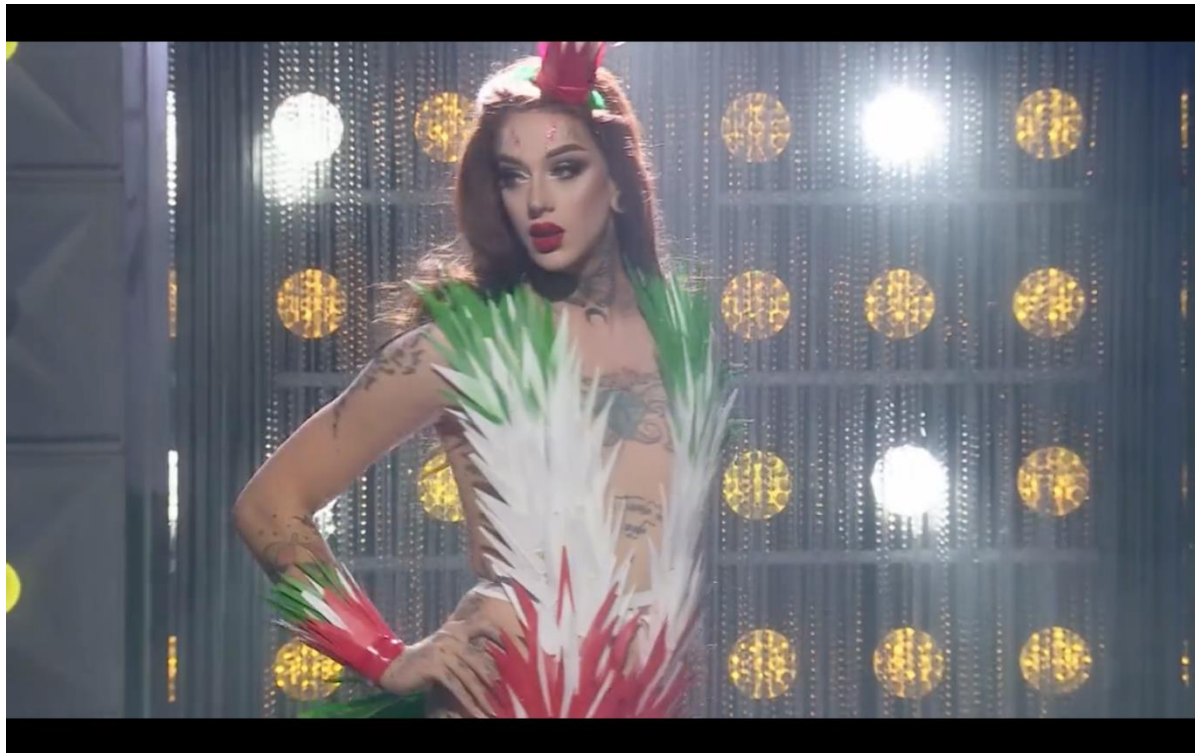


Fig. 1, Elektra Bionic as the Italian flag



Fig. 2 Enorma Jean's advertisement

¹ The show is a competition to crown the best drag queens among several participants. Each episode features a mini- and a maxi-challenge as well as a catwalk. The two worst queens of the episode compete against each other in a Lip Synch for Your Life, by, indeed, lip-synching to a popular song.

² The choice of Zorzi as judge was highly criticised by members of the LGBTQIA+ community to the point that a petition on change.org gained traction and that described him as an insult to the entire LGBTQIA+ community, by stating that he is “Quello che flirta con la Meloni che rinnega ogni diritto alla comunità, quello che parla delle persone del Sud Italia come inferiori, quello che pratica bi-erasure, quello che porta avanti i concetti di machismo tossico e definisce “casi umani” le persone più basse di lui e che simpatizza con la destra estremista” (Buratti, “The one who flirts with Meloni, who denies any right to the community, the one who describes the people of southern Italy as inferior, the one who practices bi-erasure, the one who advances the concepts of toxic machismo and calls people shorter than him 'human cases', and the one who sympathises with the far-right”).

³ Drusilla Foer is the character of a rich woman widow, created by Gianluca Gori following the cross-dressing tradition, and she co-hosted the third Sanremo night, causing scandal (“Chi È Drusilla Foer”).

⁴ “The answer [...] to the shameful applause in the Senate [...] We represent an Italy that is worth applauding [...] let's show the world that we can do it.”

⁵ “It affirms itself as well in Italy in a context marked by the lack of civil rights for lgbtiq people.”

⁶ “A kind of homonationalist push from below that promotes the classification of the gay and lesbian subject as a national subject. A peculiar form of anticipatory homonationalism, which produces homosexual patriotism in the absence, or even before, of inclusion.”

⁷ “Like a hopeful lover, the Italian homosexual promises eternal love and faithfulness, not always necessarily receiving the desired rewards. This is how love for the nation puts the new homonormed citizen to work, subsumed into the new order of post-colonial capitalism. The homosexual, having introjected his subordinate status, wears its expectations, like a mask: a white mask, a straight mask.”

⁸ “The emergence of homonormationalism is not, therefore, part of a linear trajectory that envisages, as its necessary condition, the disappearance of heteronormativity. Rather, it is a contingent articulation between even contradictory elements.”

⁹ “Based on these considerations, I believe that the gay *Uomini e Donne* has been the show that has contributed most in recent years to the production of what I call here a homonormative visibility regime. If the visibility regime is the set of norms that regulate the representation of certain subjects, this can be defined as homonormative, describing the trajectory of assimilation of the homosexual into the mainstream, into a culturally and politically hegemonic regime. Gays and lesbians, once among the most destabilising 'eccentric subjects' for the order of society, are now assimilated, because they are functional, into the project of re-founding the West in the neo-liberal system. The regime of homonormative visibility in Italy, and in this sense of the gay throne, is evidently part of the project of normalisation of the LGBT community in the Europeanist rhetoric of liberal values.”

¹⁰ “A new discourse is imposed in which the public sphere for gays and lesbians is a perimeter drawn by the homeland, the family, the free market and an abuse of the concept of privacy.”

¹¹ “You show that you are from Milan, but also from Naples, but also from Sicily, but above all, you are Italian.”

¹² “By emphasising the familiarity and distinctiveness of Parmesan cheese, wine and ham, the poster aims to make the bodies of the lesbians and their kiss familiar and domesticated. The *performance* of middle-class society - embodied by gestures and clothing - and the whiteness of these two bodies weakens the 'threatening' aspect of the kiss between two women, making it worthy of the Italian flag.”

¹³ “We look back at the image, and what captures us this time is that very *tricolore*: what does it mean to cover oneself with that *tricolore*, to project oneself into the nation, for people who have never been recognised as having rights? [...] So we wonder why [...] it is gays and lesbians who are once again the standard-bearers of this nationalist rhetoric.”

¹⁴ “The representation of traditional practices of drag subculture already seems congenial to bending to the lexicon of television language in the neoliberal hegemony. It is in this same perspective that I speak of the evolution of a regime of homonormative visibility to describe the techniques of discipline that intervene.”

¹⁵ “We decided to Neapolitanise many phrases, for example with the 'nun facite stronzate“, translated from a sentence by RuPaul, who in a video message wanted to greet the Italian edition of his talent with a “buona fortuna e non fate stronzate”, said in Italian while blowing a kiss.”

¹⁶ “They are not parodies, or grotesque imitations, they are real ties between people, mutual bonds built through voluntary affiliation [...] it is rather a bond based on reciprocity and the possibility of recognising oneself in a particular style of performance.”

¹⁷ “An audience to whom the ideal of family mirrors the ideal of LGBTQ extended family, it is an audience that sees their existence represented in the programme, sees the celebration of their way of life. Drag Race is about making community, it is about installing a sense of perspective and belonging, you are the roots of pride. Learn your history, meet your heroes, tell your stories, and then pass the torch, just like you do in a family.”

¹⁸ “Marriage becomes not only a way of kicking disturbing sexualities out of the home, but also an institution for rewriting a new citizenship pact with new members of the national community.”

¹⁹ Miccio also played the part of the wedding planner in the film *My Big Gay Italian Wedding* (2018). The film is post-civil unions take on the canonical *commedia all'italiana*, as it narrates the misadventures of a young gay couple trying to organise their wedding. Antonio and Paolo have respected the metronormative gay imagery and moved to Berlin, embracing the idea that Germany is a part of the progressive strand of Europe. However, once they travel back to Italy to share the news of their engagement with Antonio's parents, they are forced to set the ceremony in Civita di Bagnoregio, a characteristic Italian town that serves to promote the value of old traditions. Even if the film does present itself as an instance of progress, having finally a canonical *commedia* featuring a gay couple, there are various homonormative tones that take a hold of the narrative.

²⁰ “I found it over the top, combining this look with the sanctity of marriage.”

²¹ “Nella situazione italiana, dove l'egemonia culturale della Chiesa Cattolica sulle ‘questioni di società’ è preponderante soprattutto nella sfera più strettamente politica, tanto da aver impedito per più di quindici anni un qualunque progresso legislativo di riconoscimento delle unioni omosessuali da parte dello stato, i gruppi e i movimenti politici che si sono dati come obiettivo una critica radicale della società eteronormativa hanno investito le politiche dei diritti e la laicità come principale terreno di scontro” (Rebucini 2015, 71, “In the Italian situation, where the cultural hegemony of the Catholic Church on 'questions of society' is predominant, especially in the more strictly political sphere, so much so as to have prevented for more than fifteen years any legislative progress in the recognition of same-sex unions by the State, the groups and political movements that have taken as their goal a radical critique of the heteronormative society have invested the rights policies and secularism as their main battleground”)

²² “What we drag queens do on stage is also to shock a little.”

²³ “It is not for everybody to be part of such an important project for a country like ours.”

²⁴ “I am disgusted by the message that will get through at home,” “to finally present through a show an art, lives.”

²⁵ “The very idea of competition is in tune with the market ideology which manifests itself in terms of the annihilation of competition.”

²⁶ It should not come as a surprise that the lyrics of her first song that came out after the show, “Oops!”, state “lavoro, guadagno, spendo pretendo” (“I work, I earn, I spend, I pretend”).

²⁷ “It is not over yet. You have to eat the cameras up, you have to eat the stage up, and you have to eat up, I hope, the opponent.”

²⁸ “It is not the spirit of drag, going on by defeating the other one.”

²⁹ “I do not believe that you care for one another, because we are competing.”

³⁰ “The homonormative discourse builds the respectability of gays and lesbians on the fact that they are people who work, who take out mortgages, who consume, who pay taxes.”

³¹ “Ladies, gentlemen, friends, but most of all enemies, I know that not one of you is asking, “Enorma, but how did you get here?” Like you, I started from scratch and my climb to nothingness was hard, but also easy, but also harder, but also easier. Do you dream of being a fashion designer, but you do not even know how to spell it? What is the big deal! I made this (dress) out of nothing. Ladies and gentlemen, Enorma is not here to sell concrete reality, she is here to sell nothing! Metaphysics? Philosophy? Books? Death to the contents! Call, friend, and remember, he who risks nothing, achieves nothing. But above all, if you buy nothing, you lose nothing.”

³² “In the first outings the suitors kept talking about their coming out, which was rarely pronounced in these terms: much more often the expression 'How did you say that thing there' was used.”

³³ “The argument used by Claudio in the show, applauded by the audience in the studio (their hooligans) is exactly the same that the homophobes have angrily used to comment the show: 'You do these things at home.' Inside and outside the programme, contestants, fans and detractors have aligned themselves

in the reconstruction of an insurmountable wall between public and private, and the construction of an appropriate space for the manifestation of affectivity.”

³⁴ “I tried to keep calm, but for the first time in my life, I completely lost my balance. [...] I hate myself. And I started having unprotected sex. Because I said, I deserve it, I have to end up like that. I start sweating at night. And I say, no, I mean, it is not what you're thinking, you should think it is something else. You have caught a cold. The sweats increase. My glands swell up. I am not fine. I am young. What is happening? No, Davide, it is not what you're thinking. Oh my God, what do I do? I went to the hospital. I took a blood test, alone. They called me after two days and say, “We have an envelope for you, but you have to come by, we also have a psychologist to talk to.” And I got the bombshell. What I thought was a game was real, it was an HIV diagnosis. I am HIV positive, I found out in 2008. At a time when there was treatment. So I will never be grateful enough to science, because I should be dead or I should be very sick. And instead I have zero viral load, I have perfect parameters, I am a very healthy person. If I say something like that, I do not want to say it because I want to be told “Poor guy,” because I am not a poor guy, I am someone who has made it. I am one of the many who is making it, I am one of the many who will make it.”

³⁵ “The most interesting part of the discourses around *Uomini e Donne* revolve around the contradictions of this regime of Italian homonormative visibility, based mostly on what can enter the screen of representation, producing a rule on what must instead remain invisible.”

³⁶ “As long as there is a normativity and a discipline of affection, putting attention, desire, and above all care, into the relationships we choose to grow up in will be an act of revolutionary rebellion.”

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