

We're Here: The Queer Labor of Empathy, Allyship, and Drag in Reality Television

Candice D. Roberts

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Queer visibility in media is often conflated with representation, and media scholars along with the wider LGBTQ community grapple with this distinction. HBO's *We're Here* offers a popular culture case study illustrative of the tensions between visibility and representation for queer identities. Using the framework established by Jenkins, Peters-Lazaro, & Shresthova (2020), this paper situates *We're Here* as an exemplar of engagement with the civic imagination on both the dimensions of social connection within a larger community and forging solidarity with others of different experiential backgrounds. This work also argues that the potential for sociocultural conversation through reality television can be understood using lenses of trans theory and rhetorical empathy (Blankenship, 2019).

In *We're Here* three drag queens travel to various rural locations across the United States working with residents to stage a drag show. Some participants identify as members of the LGBTQ community while others are straight allies; each expresses a personal reason for participation— generally tied to either their own identity expression or desire to connect to queer loved ones or the LGBTQ community more generally. Keegan (2016) claims that theorizing the queer image in media requires a reconfiguration of the queer subject in contrast to prior iterations of queer media analysis focusing on the reception of straight audiences. Trans theory combined with the notion of rhetorical empathy as understood in the onscreen labor of the hosts and participants in *We're Here* provides an analytical perspective for understanding civic engagement through reality television as cultural object.

This paper focuses on the United States but offers future avenues for international case studies. The relationship between *We're Here* and parent global media franchise *Drag Race* (with spin-offs in ten countries including Chile, France, Italy, Netherlands, Philippines, Spain, and Thailand) provides evidence of global relevance.

References

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