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Article (Accepted Version)

O'Connell, Rachel (2020) 'Labouring in the image': celebrity, femininity, and the fully commodified self in the drag of Willam Belli. *Celebrity Studies*, 11 (4). pp. 1-17. ISSN 1939-2397

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“Labouring in the Image”: Celebrity, Femininity, and the Fully Commodified Self in the Drag of Willam Belli

“[Reality television participants] labour *as* the image of their insecure selves *for* an image, or viable self-brand. They also labour *in* the image, inside the precarious and unstable world of reality television production.”

Alison Hearn, “Insecure: Narratives and Economies of the Branded Self in Transformation Television” (p. 502)

“Unscripted television is really just a springboard for whatever you want to brand yourself as. Most people figuratively jump off that springboard and are like, ‘Ooooh, this water is lovely’ and float up to the pool bar. If I were lifeguarding, I’d yell, ‘Do laps, bitch. *Swim*. It’s time to work.’”

Willam Belli, *Suck Less: Where There’s a Willam, There’s a Way* (p. 52).

Introduction: Celebrity’s Demotic Turn and the Labour of Visibility

Willam Belli, a contestant on Season 4 of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2012), introduces himself, in the first episode of his season, with the statement, “I’m an actor. I’ve done TV, I’ve done film ... I’m a successful drag queen and not some bitch who has to show for a dollar.”¹ This statement immediately opens up questions of professional status in the entertainment industry and is haunted by anxieties about fame, remuneration, and precarity.² It foregrounds the work (labour) that lies behind the “werq” on *Drag Race*. Following Willam’s cue, I explore this theme in this essay. Media scholar Alison Hearn’s statement quoted above conjures the idea of an image displayed on a television or computer screen. Within the frame of the screen, the people pictured are struggling and labouring, even if they make what they are doing look nothing like work. They are *labouring in the image*. In this essay I read Willam’s drag as an exploration of the way in which contemporary femme/feminine/feminised subjects labour “in the image,” that is, in the economies of reality television and social media. Judith Butler has argued that drag reveals the processes by which gendered identities are constructed (Butler, 1990). I argue here that Willam’s drag reveals how a certain feminised “labour of visibility” (Duffy’s coinage; more on this below) is constructing contemporary femininities. Willam’s output, I suggest, constitutes an embedded, enmeshed, and complicit commentary on the construction of a commodified, hypersexualised version of white femininity in the current attention economy of social media and digital self-entrepreneurship. His drag reveals how femininities, and feminine/femme subjectivities, are emerging at the nexus of postfeminism, precarity, neoliberalism, and mediation.

Put another way, I read Willam’s drag in the context of the “demotic turn” in celebrity. The “demotic turn,” as conceptualised by Graeme Turner, describes “the increasing visibility of the ‘ordinary person’ as they turn themselves into media content through celebrity culture, reality television, DIY websites, talk radio and the like” (2006, p. 153).³ Importantly, the demotic turn does not constitute a democratisation of celebrity. Rather, Turner argues that it is characterised by an rapid,

¹ Willam has stated that his pronouns are he/him. By “bitch who has to show for a dollar” he refers to drag queens that perform live in clubs for tips.

² These anxieties surface more openly in later comments about his career. In his book *Suck Less*, he describes his acting career in Hollywood as “a decade of obscurity” and declares that he “didn’t even make has-been. I’m a never-was” (p. 52).

³ By “ordinary person” Turner means, not people who are “normal” or “average,” but people who do not have access to the circuits of traditional fame.

exploitative “industrial cycle of use and disposal” of quasi-celebrified individuals who ultimately gain little remuneration or lasting fame. Structurally, the demotic turn is driven by “the pursuit of profit by large internationalised media conglomerates who ... still control the symbolic economy” (2014, p. 93). While “positive byproducts” include greater diversity in representation, this diversity seems superficial given the absence of structural change (Turner, 2014, p. 92). Similarly, in the realm of digital culture, internet scholar Alice Marwick argues that “while social media tools may have opened up spaces of visibility for people outside broadcast media or politics, these opportunities are typically limited, fleeting, and unaccompanied by the financial resources available to the traditionally famous” (2015b, p. 141). Ultimately, then, despite the demotic turn, “celebrity remains an hierarchical and exclusive phenomenon” (Turner, 2014, p. 94).

I read Willam’s drag as a performance that comments on the dilemmas of navigating the demotic turn, that is, of navigating the precarious economies, both material and representational, of contemporary reality television and digital culture. The central concept through which I approach Willam’s drag is *visibility*. Marwick, in her analysis of self-branding in digital economies, argues that in contemporary society, “status is predicated on the cultural logic of celebrity, according to which the highest value is given to mediation, visibility and attention” (2015a, p. 14). The attention economy of social media has produced a context in which subjects strive for mediated visibility as an entrepreneurial investment in themselves, under neoliberal conditions of precarity. Moreover, this imperative for visibility weighs in a specific way on girls and women (and, I would add, all feminine/feminised/femme subjects), as scholars such as Shields Dobson, Banet-Weiser, and Duffy argue. The “ascension of social media” interlocks seamlessly with “post-feminist logics of self-branding and entrepreneurialism” that “recast self-expression and mediated visibility as conduits to female empowerment” (Duffy, 2015). Thus the contemporary digital economy becomes the locus of a *feminised “labour of visibility”* (Duffy, 2015, my italics). Like much of the “free labour” that drives the digital media economy (Terranova, 2000), this labour of visibility is largely precarious and uncompensated. Thus, according to Duffy, the labour of visibility is a new form of “gendered unpaid work” that “increasingly structures activity in the social media imaginary” (2015). I read Willam’s drag as a *performance of the feminised labour of visibility*. His drag, in this sense, seems to be *about mediation* – about reality television, social media, and their central problem of visibility. As such, his performance constitutes an archive of some of the pathologies of both contemporary neoliberalism and postfeminist discourse.

In so being, his drag ultimately becomes an exploration of self-commodification, self-objectification, and abjection. These central themes of Willam’s drag are best captured, perhaps, by his identificatory responses to certain abject feminine/femme/feminised subjects in his YouTube video series “The Beatdown.” In this series, Willam is filmed watching other YouTube videos and commenting on them; this humour format is known as the “reaction video.” Due to Willam’s dedication to “ironically” phobic humour (more on this below), “The Beatdown” is at the harsher end of the reaction video spectrum, and Willam has himself described it as “cyber-bullying” (2016a, 223). Interestingly, though, he expresses identification with some of the most abject subjects that he views. For instance, in “Beatdown” S3E26 (27 November 2016), he watches reportage footage of a 22-year old woman named Maria Louise Del Rosario, who is naked except for crosses taped over her breasts, getting her buttohole tattooed in public at a crowded South Florida Tattoo Expo. Reporter Liz Tracy discusses the spectacle with a woman onlooker; they laugh. Willam takes exception to the exclusivity of these two, less marginal women. He states, “Oh no, I don’t like this. Jill’s being a bitch.” (It is unclear here if he means the reporter, whom he has perhaps misnamed, or the woman she is speaking to; or if he is using slang.) He continues, “Like, I love this girl and she’s trash and she’s me. But Jill’s like, ‘ha, no.’ Fuck you, Jill. Don’t judge my butt tattoo.” Here Willam identifies with Del Rosario, taking on her tattoo as his own. He further states, “She’s looking for her big break. I see her. I’ve been

her and we have all been her. Need anything else from me for the camera? Oooh [he makes a sexual groan].” Identifying with Del Rosario’s struggle for visibility, a struggle that she is waging on the territory of her own body, femininity, and sexuality, Willam seems to reveal here, I would suggest, the kernel of his own drag. His seems to be a drag rooted in identification with the femme/feminine/feminised subjects whom he embodies: *subjects abjected in/by mediation*.

In the first section below I offer some context about Willam’s drag and career. I then explore, in the second section, Willam’s exposés of exploitative production practices in reality television and consider how, in his performances and commentaries, the sexual positionality of the “bottom” becomes a figuration of the precarious predicament of the reality television participant. In my third section, I discuss Willam’s exploration of femininity, showing how we can trace, in his work, the ways in which the precarities of mediation and digital culture are generating new, hyper-sexualised and hyper-commodified, femininities and femme/feminine subjectivities. In my final section, I consider some of the implications of Willam’s performance of a commodified, self-objectified femininity through Ros Gill’s (2007) frame of “sexual subjectification,” suggesting that his figuration of femininity expresses the terror of contemporary digital precarity.

“Not a Ru-Girl”: The Career and Works of Willam Belli

Willam participated in Season 4 of *Drag Race* and, notoriously, was disqualified in Episode 8 for, according to the show, breaking the rules by having his spouse visit him when the contestants were meant to be secluded. His disqualification was in line with the show’s presentation of him as a “villain” figure. He is the only queen ever to be disqualified from the American version of the show. An exiled and rejected *Drag Race* daughter, Willam sings, in “Read Her,” the promotional video for his parodic self-help book *Suck Less*, “You tried to make me behave / You shooshed and shushed all the fun away / But fuck you, I’m not a Ru-Girl who’s some cliché / In here [his book] I’ll make it clear / Why I’m a superstar that will go far / On my own, suck my bone as I walk away.” However, Willam does not walk away. Rather, he has engaged in an ongoing feud with the *Drag Race* franchise ever since he appeared on the show, frequently criticising its production practices.⁴ Willam has, however, managed to “go far” independently of *Drag Race*. As his quote at the head of this article suggests, he was one of the earliest media-savvy queens to use the short-lived spike in visibility provided by a reality television appearance to move into digital content creation, in an entrepreneurial attempt to generate a sustained and materially remunerative celebrity status for himself. He parlayed his appearance on *Drag Race* into a YouTube career focusing on humour (“The Beatdown”), makeup videos, and parodies of pop songs (such as “Read Her,” a parody of Sia’s “Reaper”). He has, at the time of writing, over 900,000 subscribers on YouTube. Outside of YouTube, his ventures include his book *Suck Less*; an international schedule of live performances; and acting appearances including Netflix’s *Eastsiders* and the Lady Gaga vehicle *A Star is Born*.

Willam’s “fishy,” sexy, glamorous drag (which has developed significantly since his stint on *Drag Race*) falls outside the twin poles that dominate *Drag Race*: “pageant” on the one hand, and “comedy” or “freak” on the other.⁵ His drag aesthetic zones in on a Playboy Bunny/softcore porn ideal of feminine “hotness,” referencing Hollywood starlets and the Spring Break fantasy of the show *Girls Gone Wild*. He typically presents himself sporting tousled blonde hair, revealing clothing, and youthful fashion styling, his white skin lightly tanned and his body slim and toned. Staple wardrobe

⁴ In *Suck Less*, see pp. 56-7, “Pop Up Quiz! Are You Right for a Reality TV Show?”, which I discuss below. Willam’s complaints about *Drag Race* have been widely reported online; for one example, see <https://www.gaystarnews.com/article/willam-tells-all-drag-race-disqualification/#gs.149my4>

⁵ “Fishy” is a drag slang term that means extremely feminine and/or passing as cis-female.

items include mini-skirts, hot-pants, midriff-revealing tops, and a lot of denim. He very faithfully reproduces a certain softcore allure, symptomatizing a wider “pornification” of culture, in which “texts citing pornographic styles, gestures and aesthetics ... have become staple features of popular media cultures in Western societies” (Paasonen et al, p. 1).

In terms of content, Willam’s oeuvre constitutes a space of rage, abuse, and contumely – a zone of multidirectional verbal and representational violence. He is notorious for his controversial humour – a kind of humour often described as “ironic,” which essentially involves repeating misogynistic, transphobic, racist, classist, and ableist tropes. Two incidents have been particularly notorious. He performed in blackface in the 2011 film *Blubberella*, and in 2017, on his internet Q&A show *Suck Less* (named after, but different from, his self-help book), he made a series of blatantly transphobic comments. He has apologised for both incidents, for whatever this is worth.⁶ Willam also routinely abjects himself, although I am not suggesting that this justifies his phobic humour in any way. One obvious example of this is his song, *Boy is a Bottom*, performed with fellow drag queens Detox and Vicki Vox. This parody of “Girl On Fire” by Alicia Keys mocks a fictional gay man for being sexually receptive. Willam sings, “This boy is a bottom / A gutbucket bottom / He’s a ratchet-ass bottom.”⁷ And yet Willam defines himself as sexually receptive as part of his self-brand and humour. For instance, he states in *Suck Less*, “there’s no bigger bottom than me,” and includes a whole section on “How to Suck Less at Anal” (2016a, p. 52; pp. 131-139). His constant stream of objectifying self-characterisations implicate both his gay male identity and his pornified drag persona, establishing the defiantly self-abjecting position that he adopts throughout his oeuvre.

“I’m just like WikiLeaks / But my dick is up in my ass cheeks”: Revealing the Work Behind the “Werq” on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*

Alison Hearn, in her analyses of reality television, asks, “What is the nature of the labour performed by the individuals whose bodies and senses of self are fodder for [reality television] programmes?” (2008a, p. 495). This is a question that I explore in this section, by considering Willam’s *Drag Race* related materials – both his appearance on the show, and his subsequent commentaries about it. Willam’s ambivalent and uncomfortable participation in reality television, I suggest, tends to reveal reality television as a *scene of labour*, indeed, as “the paradigmatic productive post-Fordist workplace” of the entertainment industry (Hearn 2008a, p. 498) – and he reveals this against the grain of the show itself, as reality television always wants to erase participants’ labour. Willam’s *Drag Race* materials reveal and critique the “shafting” to which those involved with reality television are subjected, ultimately linking the “bottom line” that drives reality television to the defiant abjection of the sexually receptive “bottom.”

In the “Career” section of *Suck Less*, Willam states:

Finding out what you’re good at and then figuring out how to get paid to do it is the easiest way to a solvent and happy future. (I took that from a magazine with Oprah on the cover.) ... The proper job will allow you growth while at the same time self-discovery. That sounds right, right? (p. 186).

⁶ There is a wealth of online and media reportage and comment on these incidents, particularly the 2017 one. See, for instance: <https://www.gaystarnews.com/article/willam-apology-transphobic/>
<https://www.out.com/news-opinion/2017/9/30/willam-belli-transphobic-shocking-no-one>
<https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2017/09/28/rupauls-drag-race-star-willam-belli-shocks-fans-with-transphobic-comments/>

⁷ “Ratchet” is a slang term with racialised and feminised connotations; it suggests something is despised, tacky, or low.

Willam here mocks neoliberal ideology's strategic intertwining of work and self-actualisation. This neoliberal sleight of hand is a central strategy within reality television. Reality television persistently presents participation in its shows as self-actualisation, not labour – that is, as therapy, apotheosis, transformation, and “doing what you love,” rather than as performing on a television show. This erasure of participants' labour is ultimately a strategy to “escape from labour” by de-realising it (2008a, p. 503). That is to say, “reality television is a representational expression, and ideological legitimisation, of television's own economic rationalisations” (Hearn, 2014, p. 450). Reality television generates an image-world in which “producers and networks position themselves as benign corporate benefactors” (not employers) and participants are expected to receive their exploitation “as a gift” (2008a, p. 503). To put this another way, to the extent that reality television constitutes a legitimisation of precarity and labour intensification under neoliberalism, it requires its contestants to participate in the obscuring of their own work.

However, subsequent to his *Drag Race* appearance, Willam has persistently highlighted the material labour practices entailed in producing the show – to the chagrin of the *Drag Race* franchise, according to him. For instance, in “Read Her,” his promotional song for *Suck Less*, he sells the book by describing it as an exposé in which he will “spill some tea” about *Drag Race* and describes himself as “just like WikiLeaks.”⁸ *Suck Less* does deliver on this promise, as it includes a “pop quiz” entitled “Are you right for a reality show?” (pp. 56-7). This quiz presents a series of questions and multiple choice answers that, while avoiding open accusations, hint at practices that Willam alleges were used by *Drag Race* during the filming for his season. A show is invoked in which production staff are paid “salaries that, after taxes and divided by the sixty hours a week they worked, come to be less than minimum wage and thereby technically illegal” (p. 56). In this show, a contestant might get restive due to his/her unsatisfactory treatment, for instance “refusing to get into a van at ten p.m. after a fourteen-hour day and after being handed \$75.00 for you and eleven other contestants to eat (\$6.25 each)” (p. 56). Willam also invokes exploitative practices regarding intellectual property, suggesting that if this hypothetical show were to invite a past contestant back on, she/he might choose to “have a lawyer review the contract in case it gave the production company 100 percent career control over all media, future works, and licensing” (p. 57).

Willam here describes run of the mill labour and intellectual property practices in reality television, which, Hearn argues, is essentially a euphemistic name for “a set of cost-cutting measures in mainstream television production enacted by management” as an “attempt to extract as much unregulated labour as possible from workers,” by which she means both performers and production staff (2014, pp. 439-440). These measures involve “lowering production costs by producing programming ‘just in time’ – quickly, cheaply, and avoiding unionized actors and writers in favour of flexible, low-paid, multi-tasking workers” (2014, pp. 439). Production staff on short-term contracts work long hours without breaks, overtime pay, or workplace benefits (2014, p. 440). Meanwhile, on-screen participants' appearances on the shows as (some version of) themselves means that their labour can be excluded from the category of acting, thus avoiding unionized labour contracts in favour of “minimal ‘appearance fees’” (2014, p. 440). Ultimately reality television's participants and production workers are bound into “a capitalist logic that actively extracts value wherever it can in whatever way possible” (2014, p. 449).

Of particular relevance to reality television is the category of affective labour, a form of immaterial labour. Immaterial labour produces intangible phenomena such as knowledge, images, and feelings, and requires the worker to bring her creativity, communicative capacities, and sense of self into the work (see Hardt and Negri, pp. 108-113). Immaterial labourers include, for instance, “software designers to waitresses and sex-trade workers to academics” (Hearn, 2014, p. 445). A

⁸ “Tea” or “T” is drag slang for “truth,” often meaning gossip or frank opinion.

subset of this, affective labour produces an experience or emotion in the consumer (in the case of reality television, the viewer). Reality television participants perform affective labour by being themselves for the camera, presenting themselves for the viewer's consumption. This requires them to perform to the format. Their display of personality is "closer to the fulfilment of a task specification than a process of expression" (King, qtd in Hearn, 2014, 448), as any display of self is "highly disciplined, anticipating the demands or expectations of its producers" (Hearn, p. 448). Willam himself notes this in *Suck Less*, stating, "You won't be shocked to know that in eight seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Pisces, Cancers, and Sagittariuses showed up with the most frequency because those signs frequently are emotional and like attention" (2016a, p. 54). Importantly, in affective labour, such as that performed by reality television participants, the distinctions between working and nonworking life, between existence and capital, between self and service, collapse, such that "'being' is labour" (Hearn, 2014, p. 444).

Willam's refusal or perhaps inability to contribute the required affective labour on *Drag Race* means that his presence on the show is notably awkward, inharmonious, and destabilising of the show's representational equilibrium. The most notable instance of this takes place on the runway – the culminating moment of each episode, in which is revealed which contestant will be eliminated. In Episode 5, during the runway review, judge Michelle Visage requests that Willam reveal his personality more openly, stating "I feel like I don't know you yet." Here Visage performs the role of the judge, which, in reality television, is that of extracting a specific kind of affective labour from the participant: the money shot. The money shot, as Laura Grindstaff has argued in her work on talk shows, is the emotional breakdown: a climactic moment of heightened emotion, "joy, sorrow, rage, or remorse expressed in visible, bodily terms" (p. 19).⁹ Grindstaff, through her use of the term "money shot," analogises the talk show's climactic moment to that of pornography. The most notorious example on *Drag Race* would be Roxxy Andrews' "bus stop" breakdown in Season 5. When Visage requests a money shot from Willam, his much-memed response is, "I tend to think that emotions are for ugly people." In deflecting her request, Willam engages in a behavioural non-sequitur that, in the reality television context, is equivalent to a porn star refusing to climax for the camera.

Later in the same episode, however, just before the cast will be told who will be eliminated, Willam suddenly starts to cry, as though to belatedly deliver the requested money shot. However, his delayed compliance turns out to be even more disruptive than his initial refusal. Weeping, he states:

I've never had, like, girlfriends. I've never really been friends with other drag queens. I've always been an actor on television. I was on *Boston Public* with you [addressed to guest judge Loretta Devine] and um I'm getting to know these girls and they're awesome and it sucks to know that one of them is going to have to go home so I can win. It's hard ... So yeah. That's it ... And I'm not acting. Swear to god.

In this excruciatingly awkward moment, Willam presents a statement that starts as an expression of affection for the other contestants but rapidly switches direction, turning into an insult to the other queens and an expression of his own self-aggrandisement and competitiveness. Moreover, he inserts, into this supposedly disinterested outburst, a self-promoting gesture of connection to Loretta Devine and *Boston Public*. He concludes his jarring lament with a perky full stop, "That's it," abruptly switching off the emotion as though to flaunt its inauthenticity. This inauthenticity is further emphasised by his closing claim, "I'm not acting," which of course raises the possibility that he is.

We could read this confusing and unstable moment through James C. Scott's concept of the "weapons of the weak." This concept excavates the agency of subjugated populations, arguing that

⁹ Here I quote Grindstaff's book about daytime television talk shows; however she extends the concept of the money shot to reality television in Laura Grindstaff and Susan Murray (2015), "Reality Celebrity: Branded Affect and the Emotion Economy," *Public Culture*, 27(1), pp.109-135.

resistance can take form in everyday activities that are not always read politically, for instance, at work, foot-dragging, evasion, and false compliance (1985, pp. xv-xxii). Willam complies here, but only partially and sullenly; he drags his feet in the affective labour demanded of him. In so doing, he disrupts the smooth surface of the representation, a representation that, when it is working fluently, renders participants' work invisible, that is, renders their affective labour of emotionally breaking down on camera as spontaneous and as therapeutic.

In his subsequent parody songs about the show, Willam generates a sexual register of discourse that seems to speak to the impasse of the reality television participant in this situation. This sexual register revolves around the figure of an unnamed executive producer with whom Willam claims to have had a sexual encounter during the filming of the show. The shadowy figure of this producer appears repeatedly in Willam's statements about the show. The pop up quiz in *Suck Less*, for instance, has a whole question devoted to him. The multiple choices answers constitute, seemingly, a list of rageful things that Willam would like to say to him. Response A, for instance, is, "I sucked your dick from the back, raw-dogged AND kept my mouth shut about it, and you're gonna act like how your work buddies try to treat me and others is OK?" (p. 56). Moreover, Willam repeatedly emphasises the producer's apparently prodigious penis size. Response C, for instance, is, "How is it you have the backbone of a scoliosis patient when it comes to doing what's right but you're able to support that two-hander of a cock?" (p. 56).

In reality television, the one figure that is understood to enjoy power and material gain is the executive producer. Thus this producer, with his huge penis and his power to sexually use Willam, seems to be both an actual person, and also an image, a figure that gives Willam a vocabulary to speak about the position of the reality television participant. In another of Willam's protest songs about *Drag Race*, "Too Late to RuPaulogise," all the various kinds of "shafting"¹⁰ to which Willam feels he has been subjected by the show seem to coalesce when he sings the lyric, "Whose dick I gotta suck to get my ass back on the tube?" Here he directly links sexual service with media visibility. Making the same link, Willam has elsewhere stated that "getting to the top of the fame game is a race to the bottom, and there's no bigger bottom than me" (2016a, p. 52). In the sexual register through which Willam describes the predicament of the reality television participant, that of being shafted by the executive producer, the participant, in search of fame, comes to inhabit precisely the ambivalently abject, defiantly ironic position of the "ratchet-ass bottom" that Willam has elsewhere immortalised in song. In his presentation of his own sexuality, Willam has styled himself as the "poster girl" for the bottoming "movement." Meanwhile, Gill and Pratt have stated that creative workers "have been identified as the poster boys and girls of the new 'precariat'" (p. 3). Within the complex of associations developed in Willam's oeuvre, these two very different "poster girls," for bottoming, and for the creative precariat, begin to merge.

"Thigh gaps are a currency where I'm from": Contemporary Femininities and "Entrepewhorial Endeavours"

In a "Beatdown" episode from 2014, Willam pours contempt on fellow YouTuber Levi Bernhardt's body positivity video. Bernhardt, in this video, takes it upon himself to tell women how to feel about our bodies, in a clumsy attempt to combat body-shaming. Willam reacts to Bernhardt's video by defending normative body standards. For instance, when Bernhardt states that women don't need to shave our forearms, Willam responds, "Nobody wants to fuck a hairy girl," and calls

¹⁰ Willam was (according to him) excluded from the official *Drag Race* tour. Thereafter he developed a solo performance that showed after the *Drag Race* show at venues that the *Drag Race* tour visited. He named his tour "Shafterparty."

Bernhardt's comments "dangerous propaganda" and "hate speech." When Bernhardt proposes that women shouldn't worry whether we have gaps between our thighs, Willam reaches a climax of outrage and states, "Thigh gaps are a currency where I'm from in Hollywood." He continues, as though to substantiate this claim, "You must not be on Instagram because there's a tag for it." Willam's conception of thigh gaps as "currency" because there is a "tag" for them signals an interconnection between labour, gender, embodiment, and the digital economy, and it is this that I unpack in this section. I explore here the type of femininity that shapes Willam's drag: his commitment, that is, to a glamorous, "hot," fishy drag. I read "hot" femininity in relation to the feminised labour of visibility that drives the digital economy, largely moving away from Willam's *Drag Race* material to consider his work as a YouTuber. Willam's drag, I suggest, reveals how the labour of visibility generates a hypersexualised, commodified version of white femininity that is optimised for the attention economy of social media and digital self-entrepreneurship. Occupying the space where femininity and mediation intermesh, his drag presents a "cyber-femininity," as defined by Abidin and Thompson: "the portrayal and performance of female gender as mediated via the Internet and digital technologies" (p. 467). In showing how digital precarity is generating new femininities, and new feminine/femme subjectivities, Willam's drag explores, as Shields Dobson puts it, "the conditions and experience of inhabiting femininity in the digitally mediated post-feminist context" (p. 97).

The economic structures of digital content creation do indeed shape the impasses of femininity that form the subject matter of Willam's drag. Duffy has coined the term "aspirational labour" to describe the "forward-looking, carefully orchestrated, and entrepreneurial form of creative cultural production" (2016, p. 446) in which digital content creators such as YouTube performers engage. Producing a range of often feminised YouTube content such as makeup tutorials, vlogs, product reviews, and shopping haul videos, these "emotional laborers for the social media age" (2016, p. 449) engage mostly in uncompensated work, taking on risk and investment themselves, in the hope of getting "discovered." This "manic rhetoric" of getting "discovered," Duffy claims, fuels the digital economy's "vast system of unpaid internships, freelance work, and user-generated content" (2016, p. 454). Media scholars have argued that this "visibility culture" (Duffy, 2017, p. 229) is ultimately disciplinary, in the Foucauldian sense: it forms the self along the lines designed by neoliberalism, moulding the subject in a process that Wendy Brown has described as "neoliberal governmentality" (2003). Thus, Alice Marwick argues, Web 2.0 "idealise[s] and reward[s] a particular persona: highly visible, entrepreneurial, and self-configured to be watched and consumed by others" (2015a, p. 13). Ultimately, Web 2.0 forms as much as it reflects behaviours and subjectivities: it is "a neoliberal technology of subjectivity that teaches users how to succeed in postmodern American consumer capitalism," thus forming the user into neoliberalism's "ideal subject" (Marwick, 2015a, p. 14).

The demands of this visibility culture fall in specific ways on girls, women, and feminine/feminised/femme subjects in the context of contemporary postfeminism. Banet-Weiser argues that the girl internet performer/entrepreneur is an exemplar of how the postfeminist subject is entangled with the interactive subject of contemporary media (p. 56-7), proposing that "a desire to be noticed or recognized is perhaps the quintessential element to the branded postfeminist self" (p. 77). Moreover, Banet-Weiser notes how "self-production online can position girls and women as specific kinds of products for consumption" (p. 80), as their projects of self-branding collapse the distinction between self and brand, self and labour, leading to the commodification of self, and the infiltration of business models into all areas of life. Thus both reality television and social media are sites where the whole self is consumed by, and made to be the material of, entrepreneurial labour. This is the essence of the feminized "labour of visibility."

This labour of visibility is reproduced in Willam's drag, which generates a representation of a world in which the female body is relentlessly scrutinised, the pursuit of visibility is paramount, and

public and private continuously collapse into one another – a world populated by blonde, white starlets clad in yoga pants and huge sunglasses, struggling with substance abuse problems and having nervous breakdowns on social media (see for instance his YouTube song “Blurred Bynes,” performed with Detox and Vicki Vox, which lampoons the former child star Amanda Bynes). The kind of labour that his drag explores is most exactly defined, perhaps, by Wissinger’s concept of “glamour labour”: aspirational labour as it manifests itself in the work of models, who are increasingly expected to brand themselves on social media. Wissinger argues that the speeded up attention economy, which she refers to as “the regime of the blink” (p. 16-19), combines with neoliberalism to create a context in which models become “manic workers” that “traffic the volatile forces of affectivity and total self-maximization” (p. 5). “Glamour labour,” Wissinger states, emerges “when life, work, and body management bleed together” (p. 3); it encourages “an embodied entanglement with technology,” combining “bodily potential and connectivity” (p. 5).

Wissinger’s emphasis on embodiment is particularly useful here, as Willam is heavily invested in the bodily aspects of feminised visibility labour. Banet Weiser, discussing self-branding in social media, notes that “the hypersexualized female body is particularly brandable in the current economy of visibility” (p. 85). In this context, the emergent category of “hotness” can come to represent a “right” to visibility” (Banet-Weiser, p. 83). It is important to note the restrictions here: the postfeminist sensibility that frames this “hot” female body is “by definition a reinstatement of white femininity as the ideal” (Banet-Weiser, p. 84). In the “Beatdown” video in which Willam lampoons fellow YouTuber Bernhardt’s body positivity message, Willam’s blonde wig, slim, white body, and exposed midriff, all conform to precisely this exacting body culture of “hotness” (precisely the body culture Bernhardt is trying to critique). Willam’s choice of top in this video is also telling. It bears the slogan “more tequila.” This evokes the Spring Break party fantasy showcased by the television show *Girls Gone Wild*, in which young women in alcohol-fuelled nightlife venues are encouraged to reveal their bodies for the camera; Willam’s look here is exactly on brand for *Girls Gone Wild*. As a contestant on *Drag Race*, Willam also signals his expertise in performing to this format. In Season 4, Episode 6, the queens are tasked with participating in a wet t-shirt competition, in a parody of *Girls Gone Wild*. Willam confidently describes this challenge as “money in the bank.” He adeptly performs the required porn-aesthetic moves, showing up on stage in huge sunglasses, blonde wig, and a tiny skirt that he then strips; “ejaculating” sun lotion all over himself; and kneeling on the floor, head thrown back, guzzling streams of water poured on him from above by muscled male models. Gaining the “biggest reaction” from the shouting crowd, Willam wins the wet t-shirt competition.

Girls Gone Wild mimics, in grotesque fashion, the feminised labour of visibility, turning it into the image of an inebriated girl raising her top for the camera. But *Girls Gone Wild* is also part of the network of visibility. Pitcher states that the “potential for one’s famous 15 minutes is an effective tactic the series uses to perpetuate itself” (p. 208-9). Thus, “one young woman ... explained her rationale for flashing a crowd at a GGW event: ‘We’re looking to be famous!’” (p. 209). Further, in the digital world, this kind of pornographised/reality femininity has an algorithmic advantage in the struggle for visibility. Carah and Dobson, in their article “Algorithmic Hotness,” study the labour of young women employed to promote night life venues via “ambient marketing” on social media, by posting images of themselves in the venues. Carah and Dobson point out that social media platforms’ content is structured by algorithms “based on predilections of value generation,” and that particular kinds of bodies are most likely to be prioritised by these algorithms (p. 3). These bodies are “mostly female” and are described as “hot.” “Hot” body presentations aim to generate “affective engagement” – to create zones of attention on social media, spikes in connectivity that Carah and Dobson refer to as “body heat.” Willam’s drag, then, replicates the kind of femininity that is optimised to produce online “body heat,” the kind of femininity that, in Wissinger’s terms, brings together “bodily potential and connectivity” (p. 5).

In this sense, to return to Willam's rant about Bernhardt, thigh gaps genuinely do, where Willam comes from, operate as a kind of currency – a currency of visibility. As Willam's comment on thigh gaps suggests, Willam's drag does offer its own internal theorisation of the feminised labour of visibility that it both embodies and caricatures. Willam, who has stated that he has taken part in sex work, appears to view drag on a continuum with stripping and pornographic performance.¹¹ He refers to the two interchangeably, for instance when he states: "a lot of audience members want to have their favourite porn star's or drag queen's attention for that one second and a brief skin-on-skin dollar exchange" (2016a, p. 183). In an even more expansive melding of different occupations, he states that, "When people tip a stripper, bartender, performer, or bouncer, they're not tipping for their health. They're tipping to buy someone's undivided attention for a split second, whether it's to lightly graze a taint with a dollar or to communicate 'There's more where that came from' to a security guard to overlook the giant line and let you in" (2016a, p. 181). While clearly these forms of labour are varied, Willam identifies a link between them in their quality of being *affective labour*: labour that provides a consumer with the experience of "undivided attention," the "graze" of communication, the real or metaphorical "skin on skin exchange," which produces a sensation or feeling in the consumer. All of these forms of work present themselves, in the context in which Willam places them, as service work (often denigrated or abjected), as labour that is determined by "the rise of what some scholars term an 'affect economy,' in which the circulation of bodily, interpersonal, emotional and affective energies is being calibrated for profit" as a result of "the shift from a product-based economy to an experience-based one" (Wissinger, p. 165).

We could, by this logic, describe Willam's entire oeuvre in terms of his own coinage, "entrepewhorial endeavours" (2016a, p. 104). He means sex work by this, but I am suggesting the phrase has a wider application in his work. It is striking that Willam's coinage "entrepewhorial" plays on the keyword of neoliberalism, "entrepreneurial." I would argue that what "entrepewhorial endeavours" comes to denote, in his performance, is the idea of a *fully commodified self* that emerges under neoliberalism. Hearn argues that the forms of self-branding demanded by neoliberal entrepreneurialism, "illustrate the erosion of any meaningful distinction between notions of the self and capitalist processes of production and consumption" (2008b, p. 197). Through his allegiance to/fascination with sex work (a form of labour that has often been stigmatised because it is perceived to transgress the supposed boundaries between private and public, personal and commercial) Willam seems to allegorise the "entrepewhorial"/entrepreneurial femininity that emerges where the whole self is consumed by capitalist processes. As I noted earlier, Tsianos and Papadopoulos' (2006) suggest that "new social subjectivities do not so much mirror the characteristics of immaterial production but the precarious modes of exploitation proliferating in them." Willam's drag, I suggest, reveals how digital precarities are generating this fully commodified self that is, specifically, feminine. A staple of Willam's wardrobe, he says, is the "chicken bucket dress" (2016a, p. 213). This is any dress that "displays all of one's legs and breasts like that of a KFC Family Meal" (2016a, 213). Here he reads his body as joints of meat, precisely inasmuch as he perceives his body as having or presenting (through drag) feminine parts. This "self as meat" conception proposes a contemporary "thigh gap femininity," a fully commodified self that emerges at the nexus of the interlocking forces of precarity, postfeminism, entrepreneurial neoliberalism, digital economies, and social media.

¹¹ Strikingly, *Girls Gone Wild* also straddles the boundary between reality television and pornography. Mayer has stated that it is "a video series that its observers call 'soft-core pornography' and its producers call 'reality television'" (p. 303), suggesting the emergence of a "reality pornography/documentary industry" (p. 310). Seen in this context, the proximity of Willam's drag to pornography also suggests an implicit commentary on reality television.

This whole scenario seems to be captured visually by a sequence in the video for Willam's song "Read Her." The video includes footage of Willam's image being edited in Photoshop. In the Photoshop window, Willam sings the lyrics, "I might just spill some tea / About this dude [RuPaul] who's on TV / His producer's dick is huge / And I know because I tasted his splooge." As he sings about his troubled encounter with reality television, a mouse cursor, operated by an invisible hand, moves across his image, adjusting and manipulating it. The alterations made by the cursor suggest hyper-feminisation and hyper-sexualisation, as they increase the size of the lips and the hair. The moving image of his singing mouth appears to have been enlarged and floats slightly above the visual surface. This Photoshop footage is intercut with shots of Willam walking up and down a night-time street, styled in a typical *Girls Gone Wild* look, waving at passers-by that catcall him. These shots clearly characterise him as a streetwalker. He calls out, "Wanna cum on my tits?" This sequence of the "Read Her" video thus interlaces images of feminine sexual availability and embodied self-commodification with footage that explicitly references mediation, again conjuring the idea of a fully commodified self that emerges in and through digital mediation.

"Wanna Cum on My Tits?": Concluding Thoughts

Willam declares in *Suck Less*, "I credit a lot of hard work along with hundreds of pounds of hair, makeup, and tape for truly making me a 'thing'" (p. 52). By making himself a "thing," he means, becoming notable or current, becoming famous. Given the nature of his drag, though, his phraseology queries the distinction between being *a thing* (visible, current, a celebrity) versus being a *thing* (an object) – and are they both the same thing? That is, when Willam describes his career in this way, we could read him not only as stating that he has pursued visibility and celebrity, but also as stating that he has rendered himself as an object; and there may, in this context, be little distinction between the two. Indeed, they seem to fold together when he states that in order to be visible you must, "stay current and stay cunt" (2016a, p. 54). Rosalind Gill coins the phrase "sexual subjectification" to refer to self-imposed sexual objectification – making oneself a thing/perceiving oneself as a thing. "Sexual subjectification," she argues, describes a postfeminist process in which "women are not straightforwardly objectified but are portrayed as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so" (2007, p. 151). Gill does not see this as a successful reversal or reframing of objectification, but rather as another ruse of power. Sexual subjectification constitutes "a shift in the way that power operates: from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing, narcissistic gaze" (2007, p. 151). In his drag Willam seems to embody one subjected to such power, to ostentatiously partake of and explore the subjectivity of sexual subjectification. I explore, in this final section, the dynamics of self-objectification in Willam's performance, framing my discussion through Gill's concept of sexual subjectification.

As Gill points out, the culture of sexual subjectification presents dilemmas for the feminist critic. How are we to come to terms with Del Rosario's buttock tattoo, with the way in which participants on *Girls Gone Wild* "revel as objects of a consuming gaze" (Pitcher, p. 208)? Shields Dobson, analysing young women's "heterosexy" selfie culture, has turned to the work of Rebecca Schneider, who theorises women's explicit bodily performance art. Shields Dobson states, "Schneider's work suggests that a purposeful construction by a female artist of her specific, individual body in the object's role can be understood as disruptive to object-subject binaries by making visible the object's own 'eye' and 'showing the show' of her own objectification and commodification" (p. 58). What is helpful here in the case of Willam is not the rather predictable, recuperative suggestion that the object might return the gaze, turning the tables on the viewer and thus claiming her own agency. Rather, what is useful is the idea of the "showing of the show" of objectification. Willam's

performances do indeed foreground the showing and the show, endlessly indulging and exploring the self-objectifying subject's desire to be seen and consumed. What occurs when this desire is repeatedly, obsessively represented, as in Willam's drag? We could say that what Willam achieves – as Schneider suggests women's explicit bodily performance art can do – is “marking the historical terms of her commodification across her own body” (Shields Dobson, p. 58, paraphrasing Schneider). Regardless of who “she” is (Maria Del Rosario, any/all femme/feminine/feminised subjects labouring in the image and/or abjected in/by mediation), the “historical terms” that Willam's drag marks are the contemporary gendered contexts created by postfeminism, precarity, neoliberal self-entrepreneurialism, and the digital economy. His drag is in a sense an artefact of this moment.

Banet-Weiser asks, “What, exactly, does it mean to be free in the current moment, amid the market-driven promises of postfeminism, within the seemingly limitless spaces of media interactivity?” (p. 58). If we seek an answer to this question through Willam's drag of sexual subjectification, I suspect that this answer would be an intimation of freefall, terror, and disaster. Susan Lepselter, discussing reality television shows about hoarders, argues that we can read “public spheres as ‘affective worlds,’ worlds that express ‘public feelings’” that could include, for instance, “depression, free-floating disturbance, or an ambience of apprehension and nervousness” (p. 260). She thus finds that the meanings of reality television hoarding narratives “extend far beyond the crises of the individuals they feature; they are “symptomatic of a public feeling: a feeling of disaster” (p. 260). Might Willam's performance communicate a feeling about femininity in the struggle for visibility, about femininity as train wreck, as celebrity damage, as party disaster? Throughout this essay I have neglected to touch upon Willam's most notorious action on *Drag Race*. He vomits on the runway at the moment when he is to be told that he has been disqualified – an experience that is likely to be particularly traumatic for somebody that has publicly disclosed that he struggles with bulimia. Willam has offered an explanation for this incident, stating that his corset was too tight; but when I watch this footage I'm reminded of something Sara Ahmed says about queer lives in *The Promise of Happiness*. She talks about “moments where it is all ‘too much,’ when a body, a life, a world becomes unbearable” (p. 97). This moment of vomiting on the runway strikes me as an example of too muchness, a kind of throwing up of the disgrace of disqualification; of the precarious struggle for visibility that emerges from the conditions of mediation and neoliberalism; of the unbearable requirements placed on the femme or feminine body.

In “RuPaulogize,” Willam describes his complaints about *Drag Race* as “first world problems.” To the extent that his drag focuses on the impasses of a specific media-optimised white femininity, they are also white girl problems. To consider how race intertwines with the struggle of “labouring in the image” for racialised femme/feminine/feminised subjects, we could turn to The Vixen, a far more explicitly political figure than Willam, but one whose presence on *Drag Race* is equally rageful, non-compliant, and excessive, and whose trajectory, like Willam's, is deeply entwined with digital culture and social media. Debra Ferreday, in this special issue, explores the Vixen's embodiment of rage and her strategic withdrawal from the show, which exposes the racialised frames of *Drag Race*. In the meantime, I have suggested that Willam's drag presents us with a set of insights about celebrity's demotic turn and the feminised labour of visibility. Ridout and Schneider pose the question, “How do we pay attention to precarity – economic precarity, neoliberal precarity – through a close reading of the performing body?” (2012, p. 6). I propose that reality television and digital content creation are key forms in which precarity is profoundly embedded in the bodily performance of participants. Under neoliberal precarity, Ridout and Schneider argue, “creativity and terror, art and structural insecurity, become structural affiliates” (p. 8). As Willam prowls down a darkened street calling out, “Wanna cum on my tits?”, I certainly find that his performance tends to point to the “terror” and “structural insecurity” in the art – if the art is, the performances that reality television and social media elicit.

Cristina Morini, discussing the feminisation of labour under cognitive capitalism, has stated that “the figure of social precariousness today is woman” (p. 43). When we imagine the many images of female precarity that might attend this statement, Willam probably isn’t our go-to example; and I don’t want to trivialise the material struggles that Morini foregrounds. But I would suggest that Willam’s drag generates figurations, not exactly of “woman,” but of a femininity that emerges in response to the demands of the “blink economy,” as Wissinger calls it. His is a drag of digital precarity. In tracing the contours of the fully commodified self, he reveals some of the contemporary femininities and femme/feminine subjectivities that emerge through the feminised labour of visibility, at this nexus where postfeminism, neoliberalism, precarity, and mediation interlock.

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