

Keep On Trollin’:

Contemporary heterosexual struggles with female gender presentation: two examples of drag juxtaposed in a popular YouTube video.

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A short and popular video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-IuU3S9tQ8>

Ray William Johnson (RWJ) is a comedian with more than 200 YouTube videos, each with millions of views. His format is simple: each episode discusses three videos which have become very popular (“gone viral”), or otherwise interest him. His commentary tends to be deeply self-referential, “low brow” (fart jokes, sex jokes, self-deprecation, etc), and generally indulges in stereotypes. Blatant but self-conscious sexism/racism (making racist comments and then admitting that they’re racist), “your mother” jokes... whatever will entertain people enough to make them watch his videos. He’s also highly tuned in to internet culture, dropping casual references to internet memes both popular and obscure. Because of this, and particularly because of his astounding popularity, I consider him to be as close to an embodiment of the young, cool mainstream as exists. By seeking out and surrounding himself with everything that fascinates people, and by indulging in every stereotype, he serves as a screen for the state of our¹ culture.

Not all of his videos are primarily about sex and gender; I’m just lucky that way: this came out when I was sitting down to write this assignment. That said, this video is almost entirely focused on gender construction, and because of RWJ’s willingness to indulge in stereotypes, it’s very revealing of the current mainstream discourse on gender among plugged-in youth. Here’s a “quick” roundup of some of the sex/gender representations in the film.

¹ By “our” I mean young people on the internet (prototypically but not exclusively the North American, English speaking internet – he’s also very popular in Russia, Japan and elsewhere).

The title is “GIRLS ARE CRAZY” (often, a man’s behaviour is seen as due to him and a woman’s as due to her gender). The audience is referred to as “guys” and generally assumed to be male. An unusually animated expression on a man is a “rapeface” and signifies him as a molester and/or rapist. Because the man in question is black, his likely victims are “white bitches.” Typical internet behaviour for guys is “Lookin’ for beatin’ material.” A man is initially identified as a girl based on clothing, movement, and serving as an object for male enjoyment. Guys who enjoyed this mimicry prior to knowing the performer’s biological sex are called “so gay.” Being gay is assumed to be something that guys are afraid to be, and of which “having a boner” is evidence (“body... regarded as access to unmediated truth” (MacKinnon, 1989)). Viewers think everyone is either a “douche” or a “fag” (gendered insults used in other than explicitly gendered ways). Our prototype of cool would enjoy the visual stimulation regardless of the actual gender of the performer, but uses the gendered insult “bitch” to demand the subservience and continued subjecthood of anyone performing female gender traits. A penis is the default “weirdest part” of a man in drag. Reference to a “tranny bar” (bars are seen as the appropriate place for drag, despite the moustache which makes it highly unlikely that Steve is a “tranny”). RWJ speaks “for everyone” in complimenting Steve’s ass. If a young girl lacks a boyfriend, she feels something must be wrong with her. What guys want is lots of makeup, for her to be tan, to dance for them and to pose in ways that exaggerate sexual characteristics. RWJ calls her “sweetheart,” and suggests she “do the dishes.” Guys are easy to attract. Having a penis is an impediment to this, but it’s still easy. An appropriate response to stupid behaviour is violence directed at male

genitalia (note that one of the pictured people when he says this is a woman). “Anywhore” replaces “anyway” and is used as a transition. The girl is recognised as giving a satirical “socio-political performance,” and Johnson compliments her on doing a great job. He then refers to the viewing guys from earlier as gay.

That’s a lot of gender and sexuality for just over 5 minutes worth of video. What I find interesting here is the parallelism between the two instances of drag, by which I mean conscious performance of gender presentation.² We have here a juxtaposition of two very similar behaviours: a biological male and a biological female performing certain elements of female gender presentation to a male audience as a form of “trolling” (internet behaviour in which you trick somebody to provoke some form of desired response). And, notably, both are complimented on doing so effectively, although the man is complimented on his ability to be sexually desirable (“nice ass”), and the woman is complimented on the “socio-political” statement she has made. That the man’s performance is also a socio-political statement is not considered, though in the words of Judith Butler, he is certainly “working sexuality against identity.” (Butler, 1993) The contemporary fluctuation in appropriate female gender presentation is revealed in both as inconsistent and tied in with oppression. The binary is assumed, as is men’s desire to watch women show off their bodies and dance. Particular traits – lack of body hair, revealing clothing, makeup, willingness to engage in sexual performance, facial hair – are highlighted as gender markers. (Tauches, 2011)

² I would argue that presentation becomes drag when it is consciously, rather than tacitly, chosen

The way heterosexual males grapple with the implications of incidental attraction to men is also interesting. The manly response here is to recognise the drag as a joke and play it off, presenting as savvy and tolerant. Note that the viewing guys in the video say “very nice” after seeing Steve’s moustache, but RWJ still assumes they will now question their sexuality, and later calls them gay. By implying that, unlike them, he is certain of his heterosexuality and therefore can get sexual enjoyment out of a man in drag without questioning it, he gains status. Thus, homosexuality is experienced as a challenge to heterosexual identity (Butler, 1993), but not being bothered by that has become a mandatory part of masculine identity. The success of drag performances in rendering this mandatory, in particular via trolling as a cultural mode, demonstrates the relevance and effectiveness of Butler’s strategies for the undermining of identity, and the discursive changes they can bring about in a relatively short period of time. RWJ therefore succinctly echoes Butler’s politics: “keep on trollin’.”

Bibliography:

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