

Exploring Power and Prejudice through Dragkinging

Lööv, Anna Olovsdottor *Maskulinitet i feminismens tjänst: Dragkingande som praktik, politik och begär. [Masculinity in the Service of Feminism: Dragkinging as Practice, Politics, and Desire]* (diss.). Lunds Universitet: Genusvetenskapliga institutionen 2014 (201 pages)

ONE OF THE most frequent questions dragkings are asked is why women have to be like men in order to better the conditions for women (Lööv 2014, 14). Both in Sweden and internationally, dragkinging has at times been heavily criticised from a viewpoint, which can be summed up by the formulation of black feminist poet Audre Lorde (2007, 111), "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change." In many ways Anna Olovsdottor Lööv's thesis about queer feminist activists' dragkinging practices in Sweden during the first decade of the 21st century, confirms Lorde's claim. But it also shows that for many women to dress up as a man, practice masculine body language, and explore a dragkinging character through performances at workshops and on stage, as well as in various public and private spaces, has been a way to transform the self and extend their range of possible gender expressions through an embodied practice rather than theoretical and political discussions. However, this turns out to be a complex process full of ambiguities and pleasant, as well as unpleasant, surprises. The analysing chapters of Lööv's thesis make it

clear both how and why theoretical insights are extremely difficult to embody, and also how difficult it is to transform knowledge of power relations into subversive practices, even within norm-critical communities.

An aim with the thesis is to link the abstract points of queer theory with lived experience, and in order to do this Lööv uses Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology as a theoretical framework to analyse interviews with twenty-seven dragkings. The central question ze raises is what happens when performances of masculinity is used in the service of feminism? This question is entangled with other questions about what feminist activism can be, how and why feminist fights should be performed, who is regarded as being a political subject able to perform this fight, and, as a consequence of this, who feels at home in the feminist movement (14, 18). The thesis thus analyses a very specific practice performed for a limited time in feminist communities throughout Sweden, and the focus is rarely broadened by comparisons and discussions of international practices of dragkinging or other forms of activism and/or performance. In this way it may seem of limited interest for some researchers and the general public, but for persons involved in feminist research and activism, and for people with experiences of dragging to the masculine side (like Lööv herself and I), the dragkings' accounts and argumentations are in turn thrilling, exciting, funny, and upsetting to read.

In Sweden, dragkinging as an activist practice has been closely related to the introduction of queer theory in academia, especially in Judith Butler's version, and many of the informants of the thesis present their activities as being "Butler's theory in practice." They claim dragkinging demonstrates that there is no natural connection between men and masculinity, and is a subversive bodily action aiming at creating confusion in a rigid gender system and teaching women to take up more space, be more active and self-assertive like men, and thereby transform and emancipate themselves (14, 108–9). Drawing on Butler, Lööv points out that acts of performing gender cannot easily be evaluated to be either subversive or reinforcing of heterosexual and gender binary norms, and ze explores many different aspects of the dragkings' experiences that

may be interpreted as having effects that are both challenging and reinforcing of established gender norms. Through their embodied experiences and own affective reactions when dragkinging, the informants often realise that bodies, genders, and power relations between people are way more complex than they had thought initially. It is striking how often they find themselves facing their own, hitherto unacknowledged, quite traditional expectations and prejudices regarding gender, sexuality, race, and class among other things that structure their ways of feeling, thinking, and acting in everyday life, as well as in the dragkinging practices. Many of them report how, as soon as they put on a beard and men's clothes and imagine themselves as men, they start acting out cultural imaginaries of how "a silly gay man," "a sexist man" or "an uneducated man" are, and stop acting as "good and sexually responsible lesbians" and instead throw themselves into "gay men's" lustful sexual experiments with games of domination and subversion which, as some of them explicitly acknowledges, are normally taboo in their lesbian feminist communities (113–4, 138–40, 160).

What is especially interesting with and in my view the greatest strength of Lööv's ethnographical study is that although ze does not make a point of this himself in the conclusions, the thesis can be read as a mapping of processes of reconfigurations of privilege, dichotomous stereotypes, and hierarchical positions within Swedish society in general and also as crucial problems to work with within feminist activism as well as academia. One of the most worrying, but also important points which appear time and again in the interviews are accounts of how the dragkinging informants expect to be able to control the reactions of others and teach them through their performances "how gender and power really works," and how they think that they can predict how others will react to them. This turns out to be very difficult to manifest in practice; numerous examples show how the dragkings' performances are understood by other feminists and people in public spaces as genuine expressions of identification with a male – sometimes sexist – identity, how they are surprised at being chased by lustful young heterosexual women in a straight nightclub, how a masculine woman finds herself

passing unexpectedly and unwillingly as a man at the doctors, or how a black female dragking cannot pass as a woman by showing her ID like her white friends and is thus refused access to a girls' night party in the LGBT-community (91, 141, 144, 165–7). An interesting point, which is not made in the thesis, is that this lack of control can be seen as fitting well with the parts of Butler's reasoning which the informants have omitted in their interpretation of performativity theory, e.g. that gender is not to be regarded as a role or an outfit you can change as you please, but is an inextricable part of social relations, the context it is performed in, and the discourses made manifest, all of which subjectivate persons in specific situations (Butler 1993).

Another uncomfortable, but equally important problem is that a strong motivation for many informants for dragkinging in public heterosexualised spaces turns out to be connected to their identifying as and desiring to be recognised as subversive feminist subjects, and that they often rely on negative "heteronormative" reactions from others to get this recognition. An example is an informant who is disappointed when she is not being stopped in the passport control line when in drag, because she misses a chance to react against discrimination of trans people (163). Most trans persons would have been extremely relieved not to have been stopped and outed in this situation, and taking this into account, the informant's discontent at not getting a chance to appear as a radical queer subject disturbing the gender order and fighting transphobia at the airport, appears self-centred and pointing to the privilege of a person who most often is able to pass without being discriminated against.

However difficult it may be for queer feminist activists (and academics) to face such self-indulgent motivations and one's own reproduction of deep-rooted cultural stereotypes, it might be immensely important to do so and take it as a point of departure for discussing how we thus are not only policed by non-feminist heteronormativity, but also police and keep ourselves and each other in specific positions. Furthermore, as Lorde (2007, 114) has also made a point of, it is necessary to do this in order to understand how it affects our ways of doing activism as well

as research: how we deal with the differences between people and their needs, and how we might find ourselves speaking and fighting on behalf of others while ignoring their experiences and points of view. Only then, might we have a chance to stop doing that and find other ways. Lööv's thesis points out dragkinging and other performative experiments as some of the methods we can use to explore our expectations and prejudices, even though they do not seem to be the tools with which patriarchy will be dismantled.

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