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The (Ab)Uses of *Gender Trouble* in Feminist Drag King Activism in Sweden in the Early 2000s

From Bad Readings to Good Politics

It has been one of the most gratifying experiences for me that the text continues to move outside the academy to this day. (Butler 1999, xvii)

IN THE 1999 preface to the 10th anniversary edition of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler writes that she is pleased that the book has generated an interest outside the academy, but she also points to the fact that the use of drag to illustrate the performativity of gender in *Gender Trouble* (1990), has caused her a lot of unwanted (theoretical) trouble. The “bad readings” of *Gender Trouble* as proposing that gender is something taken on by will, like a garment from the closet – a voluntarist notion of gender performativity – (Butler 1993, x) is theoretically problematic. However, it is also used productively, I posit, by the drag kings I interviewed in my study. In this article I take these “bad readings” as a point of departure for discussing how a failure to read “properly” can become an impetus for doing drag as feminist politics.

In the article “Mackdaddy, Superfly, Rapper: Gender, Race, and Masculinity in the Drag King scene” (1997), queer Cultural Studies scholar Judith Jack Halberstam concludes that the voluntarist interpre-

tation of gender performativity was an interpretation of gender in *Gender Trouble* used by the drag kings he interviewed in the United States (New York) in the mid-1990s. Halberstam (1997, 108–9) describes how some of the drag kings used the bad readings of Butler as a “rationale for drag, performance, and identity,” readings that “ran counter to the much more prescribed notion of gender performance that Butler laid out so carefully.” Halberstam (1997, 109) continues to discuss how the voluntarist notion of gender described by drag kings contradicts Butler’s notion of performativity but also “confirms in a perverse way Butler’s premise that gender is a construction that looks natural and sometimes feels chosen.”

I explore the bad readings of gender and drag as well as gender *as* drag in *Gender Trouble* as useful starting points for drag king activism. What happens when drag kinging is used in the service of feminism, and what effects do theories of drag and gender have on (queer) feminist drag kinging?

This article describes and analyzes an ethnographic study of drag kinging in Sweden based on interviews with drag kings and participant observations in drag king contexts between 2004 and 2009.¹ The aim of the study was to explore drag kinging as lived experience at the crossroads of masculinity, the body, and feminist politics. Theoretically, the study takes a feminist and queer phenomenological perspective as a point of departure. In particular, it draws on Sara Ahmed (2004; 2006) and Iris Marion Young’s (2005) work on the gendered and queer body and its orientation in space. My material shows that through the practice of drag kinging, participants experience moments of “wonder” (Ahmed 2004) that expand and deepen their feminist understandings. In this article I will compare the moment of wonder with what could be described as Butler’s “drag moment” – the moment when one recognizes that gender, rather than being natural, is naturalized (Butler 1999, 175). I will discuss the orientation of the wonder moment and the drag moment in connection with drag king activism and its implications for drag as a method of gender/feminist activism. I use *Gender Trouble* not only as a point of departure for discussing drag but also as an inspiration for the outline of this article.

Subjects of (Queer) Feminism

In Sweden queer (as theory and activism) has been situated within a feminist framework – as a new kind of feminism (Rosenberg 2002; Dahl 2011). When queer and theatre scholar Tiina Rosenberg (2002) introduced queer theory, and especially Butler's theories, to a Swedish audience, she situated Butler's theories in a lesbian feminist tradition of critiques of compulsory heterosexuality and the heterocentrism of the women's movement.² Other theoretical points of departure, like Butler's critical interventions into psychoanalytical theories of subjectification, were continually de-emphasized in her introduction and application of Butler's theories (Rosenberg 2000; 2002) – a critique offered by historian Sara Edenheim (2009). In her exposé of the uses of "queer" in the Nordic region, queer *femme-inist* scholar Ulrika Dahl (2011) concludes that the field of queer studies in Sweden has been described as characterized by a strong presence of feminist scholars and a feminist orientation. In Swedish introductory texts to queer theory, "queer" is presented as "either (feminist) progress or (queer) loss" – either a positive development of feminism (as theory and activism) or as a loss of queer's (sex) radical potential and male homosexual sex-radical roots through its incorporation in feminist theory and activism (Dahl 2011, 153).

Queer feminist drag king activism is, just like other kinds of queer feminist activism in Sweden, theoretically oriented, with a close connection to academia and especially departments of Gender Studies (Ambjörnsson 2006). In Sweden, the relationship between queer and feminism has been at the center of discussions about queer, and gender transgression has been at the center of queer feminist activism (Dahl 2011). When I asked interviewees about the use of drag kinging in feminist activism and reactions by other feminists, I realized that drag kinging was a controversial way of doing feminist politics. This was especially true when drag kinging was interpreted as a "queer" practice (and therefore not feminist) by lesbian feminists. My interviews show that drag kinging was at the center of conflicts about the relationship between queer and feminism in Sweden in the early 2000s.

One of the interviewees, Joan, was a member of a lesbian feminist community when she started doing drag. She describes how drag kinging was perceived as a “queer” practice by lesbian feminists. Queer was associated with a positive attitude toward prostitution and the pornography industry (a positive attitude not shared by “lesbian feminists”). She says:

[L]esbian feminists, oh ... um, people who have a lot of difficulty with the idea of queer because it somehow is interpreted as involving sex workers and legitimizing prostitution and the porn industry, and therefore there's a group here who have a lot of animosity toward the term queer.³

Joan also told of how she sensed that the bringing together of drag kinging and the lesbian feminist community would have negative consequences for her and others who do drag:

I probably knew when I talked to Mika that when we would try to grow to [laughs] increase in number, it would get a little backlash in lesbian feminist circles. So I was somewhat prepared but at the same time sad that there were conflicts. And that they were not handled better. But I understand that it is very provocative.⁴

The conflicts seem to have started in connection with a performance where one of my interviewees, Sam, and her drag group won the competition *Drag King of the Year*, a contest that I observed from the audience. Several interviewees describe how the group's performance was met with strong criticism from lesbian feminists. The group was criticized for adopting a male gender role without being aware of women's social realities and for performing sexual violence on stage. I ask Sam what they were thinking when they planned the performance. She explains:

The idea was, well, mostly to really play with gender and play with accessories and show that it's all so damn much about how you dress, your appearance. That it is not so damn much about cock and pussy and stuff.⁵

Sam describes how the performance aimed to convey how gender is flexible, mutable, performed, and dependent on attributes and the body's gender-coded movements. They wished to convey this insight by "playing" with, and changing, between attributes and expressions of femininity and masculinity. However, the performance was interpreted in a completely different way.

And during the show, we change too, so we become, from girls to guys, and then they thought that we had a strip show in between. When we really just changed clothes. It was like I'd have a strip show every time I change into my suit at the beach, which I don't. But it turned out like this, it was just read wrong. We threw confetti and then... in their eyes, it was an ejaculation in their faces. And the only thing we thought was just, "God, what fun with glitter, it's a blast to throw this stuff!" We didn't think something like, "What should we do? Should we pretend that we ejaculate in their faces?" But yes, it was like this, it went way too far and it was almost physical, or like this: fights and mudslinging and they wanted me out of town.⁶

Mika who was in the audience during the performance told me that when Sam got on stage and shifted from girl to guy she stuck a hole in her balloon breasts with a needle. Mika claims that this was interpreted as Sam sticking needles in her nipples.⁷ From their descriptions of the reactions, the lesbian feminists interpreted their performance as an expression of an aggressive pornography-influenced male (hetero)sexuality, as an ejaculation in the faces of the audience, and as a performance of/expressions of violence against the female body – needles through the nipples. The conflict within the lesbian feminist community was based on different understandings of gender and emancipation, which have an impact on the interpretation of drag kinging and kings. Sam continues:

When we did this, we just fell down on their list in a way because we took on the male role and we hadn't thought about it. And they had arguments like, "Have you never been exposed? Don't you see what's

going on in the women's shelters?" and that we were fascists and we were sexists, and that we advocated for queer and all this stuff, and there was a hysteria of concepts and everything else, but they didn't actually try to find out what we meant by it.⁸

Performances of masculinity turn out to be complex practices to use in a feminist struggle, which also creates an ambiguity when considering what constitutes the political in the drag king practice. Sam, who explained that the purpose of the performance at the contest was to find ways of queering gender, is surprised when the glitter throwing is interpreted as ejaculation. The reactions could be interpreted as a "resistant" reading from the audience (Hall 2006, 173), where they refuse to go along with the queer feminist premise underlying the impression that the group wanted to convey in relation to gender.

Whether drag kinging is an appropriation of masculinity that undermines or reinforces male superiority and female subordination becomes a central issue when drag kinging is interpreted. This question is in turn related to the question of what can be considered an imitation, the impact of drag, and how the relationship between representation and reality should be conceptualized. In Butler (1993) and bell hooks' (1992) readings of drag (queens) in the documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990, dir. Jennie Livingstone) various positions in this debate are outlined. The focus of their discussion is the relationship between reality, imitation, and subversion in relation to gender, race, and class. *Paris is Burning* portrays drag balls in New York where black and Latino participants are members of different houses with families who compete in different categories. Butler (1993, 128) reads drag queen performances of white femininity as performances which appropriate and undermine racist, misogynistic, and homophobic oppressive norms, while hooks (1992, 150) asserts that they are imitations of the ruling class and power elite, that is the main reason for their oppression and exploitation. For hooks there is no evidence for the assumption that the drag queen performances would be a subversive use of the dominant culture. Coco Fusco (1995, 72) is critical of Butler's interpretation and argues: "Butler's

fashion of analysis abstracts the issue of appropriation from its context, thereby eliding the ghosts of history that might temper her claims of transgression.” Fusco (1995, 72) says that Butler’s dismissal of hooks’ arguments as essentialist, heterosexist, and wrong is an expression of “deconstructionist distaste for social and historical forces.” In my research performances of masculinity constitute practices that give rise to discussions on how precisely the relationship between appropriation and subversion is to be conceptualized and where informants’ understandings of drag kinging as queer feminist activism is not shared by all feminists. Sam’s surprise at the interpretation of their performance could be seen as a difficulty in understanding “the [radical feminist] ghosts of history” (Fusco 1995, 72) that haunt (the performance of) masculinity in feminist movements and the focus on deconstructing gender makes the negative reactions hard to understand and handle. At the core of this conflict is, as stated earlier, the conceptualization of drag as imitation or performance and the difficult question of the relationship between representation and reality.

Subversive Bodily Acts

In this part of the article I will start by using two texts by two different queer scholars in Sweden to situate the uses of a Butlerian notion of drag in the drag king field in the early 2000s in a Swedish queer theoretical context. The scholars and texts are the following: queer and theatre scholar Tiina Rosenberg’s book *Byxbegär* [*The Desire for Breeches*] (2000), and historian Sara Edenheim’s article “Jakten på det ‘queera ögonblicket’: Om det subversivas (o)möjligheter” [“The Quest for the ‘Queer Moment’: On the (Im)Possibilities of Subversion”] (2003). The texts were published during the early 2000s, during the time when my field study and interviews were conducted. The texts are a part of a discourse production around queer (theory and activism) at the turn of the millennium, and I take them as a point of departure for sketching an image of the queer (theoretical) field at the time. I continue by giving examples of how drag kinging is experienced as an epiphany when people do drag themselves, rather than watching a drag performance or

seeing a drag king. Drag kinging can be an “aha-moment” – a moment of “wonder” (Ahmed 2004) which is the effect of a bodily act.

In a discussion of the subversive possibilities of drag (queen) performances, Butler writes:

Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary. (Butler 1999, 175)

As I understand Butler, she describes the moment when an audience watching a drag performance realizes that gender is a naturalized unity, not a natural one. This is what I call the “drag moment,” and this is taken as a point of departure when the informants use drag kinging to make a queer feminist point or conduct queer feminist activism.

Butler’s theories of desire and performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990) are at the center of the theoretical disagreement between Rosenberg and Edenheim in their respective interpretations of Butler’s “drag moment.”

Rosenberg’s book is on the “breeches role” in opera performances; the role where a woman appears in men’s clothing in the performance. Rosenberg (2000, 12–3) emphasizes the pleasure in watching gender transgression and writes about the breeches role that “she does not imitate a man, rather, the point is that she in men’s clothing steps into an actively desiring position toward another woman/other women.” The “special allure of the transvestitic” is that it offers a “vision of more flexible gender positions and, through that, other patterns of desire than those that are regulated by the heterosexual matrix.”⁹

Performing arts “show performative acts by clearly making the process of construction visible”, but despite Rosenberg’s (2000, 12–3) emphasis on how gender is not “role playing,” but “performative acts where the emphasis is not on *being* but on *doing*,” the focus on women in men’s clothing on stage runs the risk of reducing the doing to a conscious act. Like Butler’s use of drag queens to make a point about gender, Rosenberg’s use of the breeches role to illustrate gender performativity runs

the risk of reducing the process of subjectification to a performance. "Homosexual desire" is described as a "tabooed desire outside of the heterosexual matrix" (Rosenberg 2000, 15). Rosenberg's interpretation of the heterosexual matrix does not contain homosexual desire. Her conclusion at the end of the book is:

The woman in men's clothing as well as the man in women's clothing illustrate how woman and man are cultural signs that are possible to manipulate. Nature appears as an instrument of power in the creation and legitimization of heteronormatively regulated positions of gender and desire. This is the subversive potential of the breeches role. (Rosenberg 2000, 173-4)

In "Jakten på det 'queera ögonblicket': Om det subversivas (o)möjlighet" (2003), Edenheim discusses Rosenberg's interpretation of breeches roles and Butler's heterosexual matrix. Edenheim focuses mainly on the term "queer dissonance," which Rosenberg emphasizes as the breeches role's subversive potential. Edenheim (2003, 30) describes queer dissonance as the "queer moment" when the spectator becomes aware of the existence of non-heterosexual desires and that a specific sex does not have to be followed by a specific gender.

Edenheim (2003, 35) disagrees with Rosenberg and describes how women in men's clothing are often used as what Butler calls "high het(ero) entertainment" where heterosexuality's normative position is never threatened. In the article she says that Rosenberg, in her understanding of the heterosexual matrix, ignores how Butler makes a crucial difference between homosexuality (as an identity and a category) and same-sex desire, where the former is "repressed" and the latter is "rejected." It is homosexuality as a category that is repressed and homosexual desire that is rejected. This implies that homosexuality as a category is repressed but present as heterosexuality's necessary other, while homosexual desire is rejected, which means that it can only be defined in terms of heteronormative language, which manifests itself in the heterosexual melancholy that occurs when the loss of homosexual

desires cannot be recognized or grieved (Edenheim 2005, 59).¹⁰ It is the “specific and gender-specific positions that cause heterosexual desire” (Edenheim 2005 58).¹¹ Rejecting same-sex desire is a necessity to be able to experience oneself as male or female, which, according to Edenheim, has consequences for the spectator’s possible subversive interpretations of the breeches roles on stage as that described by Rosenberg.

Rosenberg describes queer desires as something that may “seep in” [*sippa in*], while they also are constantly present, which makes the location of queer desire unclear. “What is it that would leak through the cracks, without interpretation tools, yet can be understood and embraced by a heteronormatively (re)produced subject?” (Edenheim 2003, 31) Edenheim (2003, 31) writes that everything that makes the non-normative visible in the presence of the heterosexual norm is “rendered harmless by the presence of the heteronormative” in which the heterosexual matrix embraces the threats to it and “make(s) them its own.” Edenheim also says that the reason for the fascination with women in men’s clothing should be located in the spectator rather than in the female body in men’s clothing and her relationships on stage, as these can be glossed over on the basis of heteronormative models of explanation. The subversive is more fruitfully located at the moment when the spectators use men’s clothing for their own purposes, purposes stemming from dissatisfaction with the heterosexual regime of sex and gender.

The discussion between Rosenberg and Edenheim of the queer moment (the drag moment) is basically a debate about what a subversive act is and under what conditions emancipation is possible. Edenheim agrees with Rosenberg’s analysis of the link between gender transgression and challenging norms but provides a more Foucauldian-inspired understanding of resistance. For Rosenberg desire is authentic and clear, while for Edenheim queer desire is an ambivalent position that does not follow the order of the heterosexual matrix but which nevertheless cannot be understood as outside of it. Resistance is only possible within the limits of its own existence, and queer desire is conditioned by the heterosexual matrix.

Is Edenheim’s critique of the queer moment also a critique of Butler’s drag moment? Or is it Rosenberg’s interpretation of this that she op-

poses? I would say the latter. My criticism revolves around the question of orientation. The queer or drag moment is directed from the spectator toward the breeches role/the drag queen on stage, and it is from this direction that subversion is discussed. Edenheim (2003, 43) also takes this direction as a starting point but focuses on the possible identification with the woman in men's clothing and the desires that can be directed at her as the place for potential subversion. The queer moment occurs not at the sight of a woman in men's clothing and cannot be localized in either the breeches role or the context itself; she situates the queer moment at the time the spectators use men's clothing for their own purposes: "The questioning of sex-gender as a determined effect of one another is not in the breeches role or the context but in a specific spectator's (un)conscious dissatisfaction with this order." (Edenheim 2003, 43)

Rosenberg and Edenheim's discussions of breeches roles take the position of the spectator and the (double) vision toward the stage as a starting point. It is on this basis that the subversive is (im)possible. By changing orientation, the discussion of subversion also changes. Taking women in men's clothing as "lived bodies" (Young 2005) as a starting point puts the (drag) experience at the center, not the gaze or the intent. Taking the lived body as a point of departure results in a different analysis than both Rosenberg and Edenheim's discussions of the queer moment. The subversive possibilities of the gaze, in my case, the gaze of the audience viewing a drag king, is a point of departure for drag king activism in public spaces. When the drag moment, as based on vision – watching/seeing – is used as a point of departure for drag king activism in public spaces, this is often experienced as an anticlimax. Subversion is instead located in the bodily experience of doing drag.

Butler's (2005, 92) drag moment is the moment when a drag practice reveals the radical unpredictability of the relationship between body and gender, as they are no longer perceived as causal units. The drag moment can be compared to Ahmed's (2004, 180) "wonder" moment: "Wonder is about learning to see the world as something that does not have to be, and as something that came to be over time and with work," and the ability to experience a feeling of wonder is part of the emotional politics of

feminism. Experiencing a moment of wonder is seeing the world “as if for the first time” (Ahmed 2004, 179). Wonder has been described as transcending the body, but for Ahmed (2004, 180) wonder moves and expands bodies; “the expansion of wonder is bodily,” she concludes. Both the drag moment and the wonder moment imply understanding “the surfaces of the world as made” – as something that “came to be, over time, and with work” (Ahmed 2004, 179–80) – and to “see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity” (Butler 1990, 137).

In short, Butler privileges seeing, while Ahmed privileges doing.

I interpret Butler and Ahmed as describing similar moments of insight. However, a difference between Butler’s drag moment and Ahmed’s wonder moment is their respective orientations – from what position and in what direction the epiphany appears. Butler takes the audience’s gaze at the drag queen as a point of departure while I interpret Ahmed as taking the body’s own lived experience (in this case the drag experience) as a point of departure. The wonder moment happens when you do something, have a bodily experience, while the drag moment happens when you watch a drag performance. The subversive wonder moment is thus located in the experiencing body, which distinguishes it from the drag moment, which is located in the interpretational gaze. This also has implications for drag kinging as a political practice, where the potential for (social) change, according to this interpretation, is located in the experiencing body. Whether you think insights are gained from watching or performing/doing drag affects what kinds of political action you think will be efficient.

In this section I will focus on interviewees’ experiences of drag kinging as “aha-moments” that made them see themselves and the world “as if for the first time” (Ahmed 2004, 179). Many of the informants identified as feminists, but they felt that their already acquired feminist insights made a bigger impression when they experienced new opportunities through a physically oriented practice.

In Julie Hanson’s (2007, 63) study of the effects on women when doing drag, it is described as a positive, erotic, and confirmatory bodily

experience; these experiences often feel like bodily insight, i.e., an insight located in the body. This becomes evident in Elian's story. Elian did drag kinging for the first time in a workshop that another of my interviewees, Karin, organized. She told me that the drag king practice has given her new feminist insights, even though she was brought up by feminist parents. Although she identifies herself as a feminist, several of her feminist insights have deepened by doing drag. Elian tells me how drag kinging clarified the role of women for her:

I was fed feminism from the time that I was tiny, tiny, tiny. [...] But ever since I started with drag, there are a lot of things that have become much more apparent. You know things in your head and, yet, as soon as I do drag, I do a lot of things I would never do as a woman. That I can be closer to my skin in a completely different way than before, so it is very feminist. Getting to know yourself, getting to know the parts that I cannot access within the role that I have been assigned.¹²

Elian knows things in her "head," but when she does drag, her intellectual understandings are deepened through a bodily experience. Elian says that she experiences how she is limited due to the female role she has been assigned. Drag kinging highlights her everyday constraints through a bodily practice that enables activities/practices that she would not otherwise do – and has not even reflected on. As I mentioned earlier she expresses that she is "closer to (her) skin" when she does drag. She distinguishes between knowing things in your "head" and being "close to (one's) skin," and the latter is perceived as a changed feminist insight. The interviewee Karin describes drag kinging as a kind of experiential learning where theories are "embodied":

I think it is very exploratory and investigative somehow, though quite real, and that's what's fun, trying to embody something ... concrete. Doing what one might otherwise give more thought to. Much of this is the kind of thing you can connect to a lot of theory, but it is something, it is a true experiential learning or an exploration of these things.¹³

Karin puts the focus on the body and links the body to something concrete, where the concrete is in contrast to theory. She makes a distinction between body and mind but believes they are linked through drag kinging as embodied practice. The majority of interviewees identify themselves in one way or another with Karin's basic arguments.

My study confirms previous research on drag kinging (see Hanson 2007). Drag kinging is a method of immersing feminist impressions by physically experiencing new/other possibilities. The drag king practice could be understood as a kind of consciousness-raising on both a political and personal level. The personal becomes political when the body experiences a moment of "wonder" (Ahmed 2006).

Theorizing and Doing Drag

It feels like [it has] a feminist foundation, or it is one of the foundations. That I like doing it, that it's fun... and one foundation is very politically feminist... with the whole queer Butler thing... performative analysis... performativity in practice. It feels like it proves that her theory is true... that you can shift around and act out what you want. (Mio)¹⁴

In an interview from 2004 Mio explicitly links drag to Butler's concept of performativity and understands drag kinging as "performativity in practice." In many of the narratives, similar understandings of gender as a characteristic that involves choice, as voluntarist, are expressed. Gender becomes a conscious choice, not the involuntary reiteration of norms that Butler describes. The voluntarist interpretation of gender that is present in the interviewees' understandings of gender as drag is a notion of gender they understand as based in queer theory.

I understand the interviewees' uses of "gender" and "performativity" as wanting to convey the messages that gender is a social construction, gender is flexible and unstable, gender is a doing and is dependent on external attributes and body language, and that gender is performed consciously and without much difficulty. Gender becomes a role to play or something we do, and gender transgression is described as associated with pleasure and a sense of freedom rather than as a painful and difficult act.

This reading of Butler creates an incentive for interviewees to do drag kinging in order to experience a freedom in relation to gender expression and a potential to change both gender expression and gender identity. The interviewees tend to describe it as something easy – that gender transgression is primarily something pleasurable for themselves and something that can illustrate, both to themselves and to others who watch them, how gender works. This understanding creates problems for them in dealing with painful experiences related to gender transgression.

That our everyday gender is a kind of drag performance is a recurrent explanation in my material. It is a kind of everyday understanding of Butler's use of drag that also manifests itself in well-known drag queen RuPaul's famous statement, "We're born naked, and the rest is drag,"¹⁵ a formulation that is sometimes used by interviewees to make it clear that gender is drag. Another interviewee, Mika, and I had just talked about how he, when he began to identify himself as a guy, no longer wanted to paint on a mustache when he would perform as a king. This was because it signaled that what he did was a kind of theater rather than an expression of gender identity, and that felt "weird." I asked him what he thinks drag is in light of his own changing experience of drag:

Mika: Yes, when is it not drag? I think in some way, everyone does drag, all the time. But somehow ... well...

Anna: At the same time...

Mika: When you do it consciously. That's what drag is, I think. When you do it because you want to create some kind of reaction ... or...¹⁶

Mika points out that he still makes a distinction between doing gender in everyday life and drag, where drag is a conscious doing – and a doing that aims at reactions.

The kings move like their drag personae (or in drag, but without being a specific character) in different arenas, sometimes as part of staged performances, sometimes as part of the ending of a drag king workshop they had participated in or organized, and sometimes as part of their private lives. To do drag in public spaces is an important part of drag

kinging and has great significance in the politics of the practice. Many of those I interviewed talk about the will and the desire to awaken reactions in other people. The reactions were sometimes even considered to be one of the things that characterized drag. This was the case when Mika described drag kinging.

The desire to get reactions, and to be stopped in public spaces, is central and recurs in several of the interviewees' narratives. Elian states that by drag kinging in public spaces she wants:

[To] turn all gender roles on their heads because they're stupid, to make people think. Provoke people. That people get angry over something that really is so terribly innocent, it shows you it's needed. If no one reacts then we can stop.¹⁷

Public spaces emerge as central arenas for the politics of drag kinging in the narratives of the informants. These are arenas where drag kinging is supposed to be able to contribute to changing society's heteronormative understandings of gender. Mio describes how she wants to be awkward/difficult in public spaces. For her, the visibility in public spaces is not about provocation but, rather, an opportunity to expand the boundaries of the normal by confusing and confounding others. The queer visibility functions as a kind of consciousness-raising. She believes that her drag kinging can enable others to "dare to be a little more weird."

So it feels like when you are out, part of it is that people need to think a little bit, it's a little difficult... Maybe it widens the boundaries for others because you are so extremely weird yourself... So that others might dare to be a little more weird.¹⁸

Mio's desire to be difficult and weird can be understood as a desire for the queer subject's disorientation to also create a (temporary) disorienting feeling for (heterosexual) others – a queer effect of bodies "out of place" (Ahmed 2006, 134), which will lead to a reassessment of the others' understandings of gender and the possibility of a reconstruction of

the self. The assumption that drag kings, by deviating from the “straight line” (Ahmed 2006) of public space, can provoke but also help others, making the reactions of others into an important part of the political project that drag kinging in public spaces represents. Reactions become a measure of the efficiency of drag kinging as intervention.

Ahmed (2006, 139) writes that in the “economy of stopping,” stopping is unequally distributed between bodies, where some bodies to a higher degree than others are stopped in their orientation in space. For the interviewees, reactions represent the most obvious signs of the unequal stopping of bodies.

The kings imagine what will happen when they do drag kinging in public spaces such as the street or in heterosexual clubs: that they will get (negative) reactions. Public spaces offer possible reactions, suggesting the political potential of drag kinging to change people’s perceptions of gender by getting them, as Mio puts it, “to think a little bit.” Karin tells me that she has traveled in drag as her drag king character/persona Miron. Travelling as her character/drag king persona was part of a performance she did during a period of time. She looked forward to the trip and wondered what reactions she would get.

And one thing I’ve done a lot is airports, which I think have been very interesting places. These “airportformances”, I think it’s really interesting because there’s so much [...] symbolism with all, yes, with different trans and yes, borders, crossing borders. [...] I looked very much forward to travelling with Miron, and this with the passport control and the whole thing. For that, yes, I think I had hoped for some sort of... issue, that it would become something.¹⁹

Karin expresses a desire not to pass but instead be stopped. I interpret this performance piece as taking the analogy between national borders and gender boundaries as a point of departure where trans* people’s transgressions of gender “borders” also represents a “stopping device” (Ahmed 2006, 139) at other borders, in this case national borders. Karin has a longing for Miron not to pass but instead to get reactions associ-

ated with identity and passport control. For the person in passport control, Karin's intention is not known. Instead of interpreting the passport controller as not wanting to recognize her or that something is out of the ordinary, s/he could instead be interpreted as recognizing the person as trans*, wanting to pass, or as just being uninterested. Being able to pass, not being noticed, is interpreted differently depending on what intention the person passing has.

In contrast to those trans* people who wish to pass and not be stopped in public spaces (see e.g., Bremer 2011, 142–5), Miron's orientation in space is waiting to be stopped, as the stopping confirms the strength/fixedness/power of borders and the difficulty in crossing them. The reaction – that it becomes an “issue” – can therefore be understood as an expression of the message getting through. The political project seems to demand stopping. If Miron is not stopped at the national border, the fact that gender transgression represents a stopping device is not clarified, which makes the analogy between different borders into a faulty analogy. Thus, the political project fails. However, Karin did not get any reaction at passport control. She describes this as unpleasant and annoying since it makes responding difficult. It is easier when people react. “It's almost easier if people in cases like this show a total ignorance: ‘Yes, but what are you doing?’ or ‘What is this?’ [...] Then you at least have something to relate to. It is out there for discussion.”²⁰

A reaction – not being stopped – that by other trans* people can be a desirable reaction is here interpreted as a sign of ignorance and becomes an obstacle in the actualization of the trans political project. However, the wish to provoke is paradoxical since it is based on the privilege of belonging to the nation (in relationship to passport control) where most non-white and undocumented migrants want to be invisible to be able to move without being stopped.

Drag kinging in public hetero-sexualized spaces is experienced as having a subversive potential. The political potential is located in the provocation or confusing of (heterosexual) others, getting them to reflect on and re-evaluate their heteronormative assumptions. The kings express an expectation of a normative gaze and articulate a notion of

public spaces as places of resistance and thereby opportunities to undermine norms. The reactions kings received when they did drag in public spaces were often, as becomes clear in the example of Karin at the passport control above, not what they had expected. Gender confusion, when directed toward others, is often a source of disappointment.

Ahmed (2004, 166, note 6) describes how the presence of queer bodies can be disorienting for heterosexuals, and this is part of queer's painful political potential. This is an assumption that kings base their activism on. However, public spaces are ambivalent spaces where a king's conscious visible queerness and desire can cause disorientation. But the effects of disorientation on (heterosexual) others are not always easy to determine, and the political potential, as it is located in these effects, is often anticlimactic.

A story that stands out is Linda's. She both passes and is stopped. Linda says that she often passes as a guy, both in everyday life and as a drag king. "[O]ften it doesn't bother me, it... it's fine like that sometimes,"²¹ she says. But sometimes it bothers her. She talks about when she went as a drag king with some friends to the local monthly "Girl Party"²² and was almost not let in. For her passing as a guy has forced her to experience what it is like to be stopped in a public space. Her story is different from many of the other kings who often tell stories of how drag kinging was a liberating experience that made them able to take up space [*ta plats*], and do things, and go places, that they otherwise did not feel they were able to. Linda says:

At the Girl Party I suddenly almost wasn't let in, even though I had my ID with me. They just said, "No, but you're a guy, no, but it's a women's party today," so then I showed my ID. "No, this seems fishy," so then they would not let me in. That, on the other hand, bothered me a lot.²³

Linda's non-white body in drag was stopped at the entrance of the LGBT premises. The stopping of her seems to depend on her performing the "wrong" kind of masculinity, and she was therefore not recognized as a woman. For her, drag kinging is not experienced as a device that extends

the body's reach but, rather, as a device that stops the body in its orientation. Linda is stopped in a space that should allow her to extend herself as a king, the Girl Party. Here it becomes clear that queer spaces are not shaped by/for all queers: "Whilst being queer may feel uncomfortable within heterosexual space, it does not then follow that queers always feel comfortable in queer spaces," Ahmed (2004, 151) writes. If queer spaces are spaces where queers feel at home, that is, spaces that are shaped by queer bodies, Linda's story illustrates that they are not shaped by all queer bodies. Ahmed (2004, 151) asks: "How does defining a queer ideal rely on the existence of others who fail the ideal? Who can and cannot embody the queer ideal?"

Linda was in the company of other kings that night. Their IDs succeeded in separating masculinity from maleness (i.e., a male body), but the documents fail to fulfill the same function for the kings who Linda describes as "non-white." For the non-white kings masculinity "sticks" (Ahmed 2006) to maleness, resulting in them being interpreted as male, so they are stopped at the entrance of the Girl Party. "[S]ome spaces extend certain bodies and simply do not leave room for others," Ahmed (2006, 11) writes. In this case whiteness is an orientation device that straightens masculinity. Men become kings through their possibilities of embodying whiteness, and Linda's non-white body in drag is stopped in the queer space.

In the drag king narratives drag kinging is often described as enabling interviewees to take up space. However, taking up space could be understood as an emancipatory strategy and objective that may have an impact on other bodies in space: "Movement for some involves blocking the movement for others." (Ahmed 2006, 141) When some bodies can move comfortably in space, the space is inhibited/limited/minimized for other bodies that may have difficulty in moving. Linda says she has spoken with others who have had similar experiences:

[A]lmost everyone you've talked to who is not white has some sort of similar experience or exactly the same. So it's... still some sort of pattern. And it may well be at different clubs and various places, but it's still basically the same thing.²⁴

The white kings who were in the same group at the club that night did not have the same problem. Drag kinging in public spaces makes Linda realize that some masculinities are stopped in the same way that some femininities can be stopped (see Skeggs 2006). Linda's story shows how not only gender transgression but also some kinds of masculinities can have a stopping effect. Linda was not stopped as a drag king but stopped because she was interpreted as a black man.

I asked Linda if her negative experiences of passing as a guy in public spaces have not deterred her from doing drag, but she says that it is instead the opposite: "Then I think that people need to be more exposed to these things so they don't get too comfortable. [...] it's always better to be seen ... than to hide."²⁵ That she was stopped does not lead her to stop doing drag; instead she politicizes the experience, which makes her want to continue creating disorientation in public spaces. The belief that social change can be accomplished by others getting new knowledge is maintained, despite Linda's past experiences.

When interviewees are stopped in situations where this is not the intent, it can lead to a sense of disorientation and discomfort. Disorientation is not limited to heterosexual cultural spaces but can also occur in queer spaces that turn out to be white spaces where the non-white body's movements are restricted.

Although the experiences of reactions to doing drag in public spaces are an important part of my interviewees' stories (see also Wasshede 2010, 209), the absence of reactions is also central. This highlights the vulnerability of a politics, which locates the political potential in the reactions of others and treats them as an expression of drag kinging's subversive potential.

Conclusion: From (Queer) Theory to the Politics of (Lived) Experience

The narratives of the political potential of drag kinging are based on a queer theoretical understanding of drag (Butler). Queer theory is the basis of what kind of (future) world and (future) understandings of gender the interviewees can envision. The interviewees' readings of Butler

are selective and limited to arguments about gender as performative. The understanding of gender as performative is a point of departure for their understandings of drag as a gendering performance and as a subversive practice that can denaturalize gender. Despite the kings' identifications with a radical queer feminist project, theory also limits what becomes visible. Deconstruction puts focus on certain forms of oppression but makes other kinds invisible. The theoretical understanding makes the kings unequipped to articulate and deal with other forms of marginalization they experience in drag (such as racism in Linda's case) and also to identify other unequal power relations (like Karin's wish to be stopped at passport control).

The bad readings of Butler's theories of gender are a strength in their explorations of new subject positions and interpretations of their own experiences of drag kinging, and these readings strengthen their beliefs that societal change is possible. At the same time as the interviewees' theoretical understandings of drag are a strength, these also make them vulnerable. The lived experience of theories of gender performativity run counter to what they had expected. The lived experience of drag kinging as the transgression of norms is not always as pleasurable and easy as the drag kings, according to their theoretical understandings of the practice, want to claim. The intimate relationship between theory and practice in the drag king field thus represents a strength for interviewees but it also makes them vulnerable. The vulnerability lies in two ideas: first the inability to articulate painful experiences of marginalization, as a focus on deconstruction and how easy it is to transgress gender norms makes invisible, and second because they embody a political debate on subversion. The proximity between theory and activism, where theoretical models are used as the basis for activism, makes theoretical debates about what constitutes a subject of resistance (and if drag kinging is subversive or not) unfold not only in the vicinity of the interviewees but actually on/through their bodies. Drag kinging is part of an ongoing feminist politicization of the body and its situated experience. The body has been seen as the basis for emancipation and knowledge production within feminism. This is also a crucial aspect of the practice of drag

kinging. But with this continuity feminist conflict lines are also reproduced. In the lesbian feminist community, the kings' use of masculinity in the service of feminism results in them being interpreted as queer and male-identified – they become unintelligible feminist subjects. The body is not just the venue for debates on drag as a subversive practice, but the body is also the seat of resistance when doing drag in public spaces with the intention of getting reactions. That makes both the individual and the political project in public spaces vulnerable and dependent on the readings of others. Embodying a theoretical debate, but also using the body as the seat of resistance makes the kings into vulnerable subjects.

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NOTES

1. This article I base on my dissertation "Masculinity in the Service of Feminism: Drag Kinging as Practice, Politics and Desire" (Lööv 2014). My material contains of 30 semi-structured interviews with 27 people and field-notes from participant observation in drag king contexts.
2. Rosenberg emphasizes continuity rather than breaks in the telling of feminist stories (see Hemmings 2005).
3. All the quotes from interviewees are my translations from Swedish. Lesbiska feminister åh... åh, folk som har väldigt svårt för queer för att det skulle på nåt sätt innefatta sexarbetare och legitimera prostitution och porrindustri, och därför så har det varit en grupp här som har tyckt väldigt illa om begreppet queer.
4. Jag visste nog när jag pratade med Mika om att vi skulle föröka oss att [skratt], bli fler, att det skulle få lite svallvågor in i lesbiska feministiska kretsar. Så att jag var lite beredd, men samtidigt ledsen att det blev konflikter. Och att de inte hanterades bättre. Men jag förstår att det är väldigt provocerande.
5. Tanken där var väl mest att verkligen leka med könen och leka med accessoarer och visa att det handlar ju så jävla mycket om hur du klär dig, din appearance. Att det handlar inte så jäkla mycket om kuken och fittan eller grejer.
6. Och under den showen så byter vi ju också, så vi blir, från tjejer till killar, och då tyckte de att vi hade en stripshow emellan. När vi egentligen bara byter kläder. Det är ungefär som att jag skulle strippa varje gång jag är på stranden, och det gör jag inte. Men att det blev så här, att det bara lästes fel. Vi kastade ut konfetti och då... i deras ögon var det en utlösning i ansiktet på dem. Och det enda vi tänkte var bara, "Gud va' kul med glitter, det är skitkul att kasta ut!" Vi hade ju inte nånstans tänkt typ, "Vad ska vi göra? Ska vi låtsas att vi får utlösning i deras ansikte?" Men ja, det blev så här, det gick jättelångt och det blev nästan fysiska aktiviteter, eller så här, bråk och smutskastning och de ville ha bort mig från stan.
7. I want to emphasize that I am here analyzing Sam and Mika's stories about other people's reactions.
8. Åh, att när vi gjorde det så tyckte de ju då att vi bara föll på deras lista på nåt sätt för att vi tog på oss mansrollen och att vi inte hade tänkt. Och de hade argument som, "Har ni aldrig blivit utsatta? Fattar ni inte vad som pågår på kvinnojourerna?", och att vi var fascister och vi var sexister, och att vi förespråkade queer och allt sånt här, eller det blev en hysteri i massa begrepp och allt annat, utan att de egentligen tog reda på vad vi menar.
9. All quotes from the book are my translations from Swedish.
10. In the discussion I also use parts of Edenhiems dissertation *Begärets lagar* (2005) to clarify the relationship between desire and melancholia.
11. All quotes from the texts are my translations from Swedish.

12. Jag har fått feminismen itutad så stenhårt sen jag var pytte, pytte, pytte. [...] Men ändå sen jag började med dragen så är det massa saker som blir mycket mera påtagligt. Att man vet saker i huvudet och ändå så fort jag gör drag så gör jag massa saker som jag aldrig skulle göra som kvinna. Att jag får vara inpå huden på ett helt annat sätt än tidigare så det är mycket feministiskt. Lära känna själv, lära känna de sidor som jag inte får tillgång till inom den roll som man är tilldelad.
13. Jag tycker att det är mycket ett utforskande och undersökande på nåt sätt, fast ganska konkret, och det är det som är det roliga, att försöka förkroppsliga då... konkret. Göra det som man kanske annars mer tänker omkring. Mycket av det här är ju sånt man kopplar jättemycket teori till, med det är nånting, det är ett sånt upplevelsebaserat lärande, eller utforskande av de här sakerna.
14. Det känns som [att det har] en feministisk grund, eller en grund känns som det. Att jag trivs att göra det, att det är roligt... och en grund är väldigt politisk feministisk... med hela queer Butler så där... performativ analys... performativitet i praktiken. Det känns som det bevisar att hennes teori är sann... att det går att växla och agera vad man vill.
15. The documentary *Dragkingdom of Sweden* (2002, dir. Åsa Ekman and Ingrid Ryberg) begins with this quote.
16. Mika: Ja, när är det inte drag? Jag tänker på nåt sätt, alla dagar, hela tiden. Men på nåt sätt... ja... / Anna: Samtidigt som... / Mika: När man gör det medvetet. Det är väl det som är drag, tänker jag. När man gör det för att man vill väcka nån slags... reaktion, eller...
17. [S]tälla alla könsroller på huvudet för dom är dumma, få folk att tänka. Provocera folk. Att folk blir arga över nånting som egentligen är så fruktansvärt oskyldigt, det visar ju att det behövs. Om ingen längre reagerar då kan vi ju sluta.
18. Så det känns som att när man är ute, så en del av det är att folk måste tänka till lite, man är lite besvärlig... Man kanske vidgar gränserna för andra för att man är så extremt konstig själv... Så att andra vågar vara lite mer konstiga kanske.
19. Och en grej jag gjort mycket är just flygplatser som jag tycker har varit ett så jätteintressant rum. De här "airportformance". Alltså jag tycker att det är jätteintressant för att det är så mycket, ja men den här symboliken med alla, med olika ja trans och ja, borders, crossing borders. [...] Det såg jag fram emot väldigt mycket, resa med Miron, och det här med passkontroll och hela den grejen. För det, ja jag tror att jag hade hoppats lite på nån sorts... issue, att det skulle blivit nånting.
20. Det är nästan lättare om folk så här markerar totalt oförstånd, "Ja, men vad håller du på med?" eller "Vad är det här?"[...] Då har man ju ändå nånting att förhålla sig till. Det ligger uppe där för diskussion.
21. [O]fta så stör det mig inte, utan det... det får gärna vara så ibland.
22. The "Girl Party" [*tjejfesten*] was organized by the local branch of the national LGBT organization.

23. På tjeffesten höll jag plötsligt på att inte bli insläppt fast jag hade mitt leg med mig. De bara sa, "Nej, men du är ju kille, nej, men det är ju tjeffest idag", så då visade jag mitt leg. "Nej det verkar vara skumt det här", så då ville de inte släppa in mig. Det däremot störde mig mycket.
24. [N]ästan alla man har pratat med som inte är vita har nån form av liknande, eller exakt samma erfarenheter. Så det är ju... ändå nån sorts mönster. Och det kan ju vara på olika klubbar, och olika ställen, men ändå är det samma stil i det.
25. Att då tycker jag att då behöver folk utsättas mer för såna här saker så att de inte blir för bekväma. Att det, det är alltid bättre att synas... än gömma sig.

SAMMANFATTNING

Judith Butlers användning av drag som ett exempel på genusperformativitet i *Gender Trouble* (1990) utgjorde teoretisk motivation för dragkingande som feministisk aktivism i Sverige under tidigt 2000-tal. I artikeln tas detta som utgångspunkt för en undersökning av relationen mellan Butlers "dragögonblick" och kungars feministiska aktivism. Författaren reflekterar över detta med hjälp av Sara Ahmeds (2004; 2006) diskussioner om "förundran" som något centralt i feministisk känslopolitik. Enligt författarens intervjuer med kungar går teoretiskt grundade föreställningar om politisk drag ofta emot kungarnas levda erfarenheter av dragkingande. Dragkingandet visar sig erbjuda oväntade upplevelser och utgör en grund för erfarenheter av både sårbarhet och styrka.

Keywords: drag kinging, Sweden, "drag moment," wonder, feminist activism, vulnerability, *Gender Trouble*