

NELSON GABRIEL RODRÍGUEZ

AVILEZ:

*At war with normality. Drag kings: when the centre becomes “the other” and the otherway round.*



46

**Resumen:** ¿Qué tipo de amenaza supone imitar al poder? ¿Qué implica traspasar las barreras del poder masculino y utilizarlo para burlarse del heterosexismo presente en la sociedad? Estamos condenadas a ser parias? El sexo y el género han sido tradicionalmente relacionados por los mecanismos de poder. Desde las religiones a los estados, a través de la historia se han delimitado formas para regular nuestro género. Merece la pena prestar atención a las políticas drag como forma de desdibujar las barreras de género entre las que vivimos. Las drag kings, mujeres que actúan como hombres, invierten de una manera especial estas barreras y las resitúan de una nueva manera, desafiando las formas tradicionales de poder, la heter[r]o[r]norma y las definiciones reguladoras. En este artículo intentaré analizar las consecuencias de cruzar las barreras de género utilizando el modelo de las drag kings como forma de disidencia.

**Palabras clave:** Políticas drag, normas, disidencia de género, disgénero.

**Abstract:** What is the real threat of mimicking power? What are the implications of crossing the borders, relocating the masculine power and use it to mock the heterosexist axis of society? Are we damned to be outcasts? Sex and gender have been traditionally intertwined by means of the dominant powers of the time. From Religion to the State, regulatory forms of what our gender has to be have been marked through history, resulting in the artificial construction of sex as marker. The politics of drag demand a special attention as it defies the borders of gender our lives are built on. Drag kings, women who perform as men, specially subvert these borders and relocate its space in a new one, defying traditional powers, heter[r]o[r]norm and regulatory definitions. I will try to make an analysis on the implications of crossing the borders of gender using the drag kings as models in terms of gender dissidence.

**Keywords:** Politics of drags, norms, gender dissidence, disgender.

SEMIOSFERA

Segunda época. Julio 2013. N°1  
[www.uc3m.es/semiosfera](http://www.uc3m.es/semiosfera)

# AT WAR WITH NORMALITY. DRAG KINGS: WHEN THE CENTRE BECOMES “THE OTHER” AND THE OTHER WAY ROUND

Nelson Gabriel Rodríguez Avilez

Universidade da Coruña

Fecha de recibido: 13/06/2013

Fecha de aceptado: 26/06/2013

47

The earliest section of the Judaic code of sex morality prohibited the wearing of the attire of the opposite sex in unequivocal terms: ‘A woman shall not wear that which pertaineth to a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment; for all that do so are an abomination unto the Lord their God (Collier 1995: 111).

Drag kings are women who perform as men. I remember what I felt in the exact moment I saw a drag king for the first time. It was a cross reference on a record of a band I knew I would fall in love with and finally fell when heard those angry queerpunk tunes coming out my plate screaming: “I love hardcore boys. I love boys hardcore!!!” (Limpwrist, 2000) which I still enjoy everytime I flip the sides of that record. Thanks Limpwrist! Of course I couldn’t help but realize that it was more interesting –meaning shocking and intriguing– for me than the drag queen thing and that is what this story is about: to understand the implications, the meaning –if any-, the importance of a mimicking form that always strikes as something new, diminished and ignored by the heteropatriarcal view.

Sex and gender<sup>1</sup> have been traditionally intertwined by means of the dominant power(s) of the time. From Religion to State, regulatory forms of what our gender has to be have been marked through history, and sex comes to be a matter of an artificial construction instead of the natural characteristic we have been made to believe it is. The question that arises is an

<sup>1</sup> I understand sex as the external organs that mark the relation between the individual and what has been socially constructed as man or woman.

ontological one, can we consider drag kings part of the existence sphere in the Arandtean sense?:

Vivir una vida privada por completo significa por encima de todo estar privado de cosas esenciales a una verdadera vida humana: estar privado de la realidad que proviene de ser visto y oído por los demás, estar privado de una «objetiva» relación con los otros que proviene de hallarse relacionado y separado de ellos a través del intermediario de un mundo común de cosas, estar privado de realizar algo más permanente que la propia vida (67).

We may admit that existence, following this idea, is the result of a sensitive process based on the perception of the other as part of the world. A physical experience that has been articulated by means of such categories like sex and gender, their creation as categories and the necessity of belonging to one or the other. In this sense, the representation in the physical world, not just as physical presence but as pictures or other sensitive manifestations is what poses a threat to the common conceptions of the heteropatriarchal society, and can be adopted and re-adapted within it as long as it takes the form of something the power can cope with: “Se puede respetar la transgresión siempre que esta tienda a la norma” (Ayllón, 36). But how can the norm cope with the drag king figure as it involves the existence of a resistant capacity that steals the masculine power of mimicking?

In the symbolic sphere we come to be linguistic constructs translated into reality. By means of the Althusserian interpellation<sup>2</sup>, we are named, addressed and designed a place in the so-called “normal society” which means the biopolitical construct that constricts our personal freedom imposing the roles we must fulfill. As Judith Butler points out, “In Althusser’s notion of interpellation, it is the police<sup>3</sup> who initiate the call or address by which a subject becomes

<sup>2</sup> According to Bertens: “[...] Althusser’s definition of ideology and his concept of *interpellation*, which explains how ideology addresses us in a certain role and draws us into a conspiracy that is ultimately aimed at ourselves, proved useful for feminist literary studies and film studies. [...] for Althusser, we only experience ourselves as complete individuals (‘concrete subjects’) through the internalization of ideology. Ideology is inescapable because it is what actually gives us what we experience as our individuality” (Bertens 2001: 103).

<sup>3</sup> I use/agree with this term in its broader sense, thus “police” also refers to religion, tradition, law, the State and any other organism that constrict freedom.

socially constructed” (Butler 1990, 121). Power thus, clearly defines what we must be by means of naming us.

To transgrede what has been assigned by the power that interpellates, to ignore such interpellation means to subvert those imposed order marked by power and its devices of biopolitical control –let's consider Law, State, Religion, Medicine or technology. “In this sense, then, drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality” (Butler 1990, 125). Having this into account, we may think of the figure of the drag king as doubly subversive: first as defier of the hegemonic construction of gender by adopting the gender it is forbidden to, and second, as gender terrorist as it defies the heterosexist order since it is a woman –the biopolitical construct traditionally considered the other- who steals the identity of the centre of the above mentioned heterosexist society– namely the biopolitical construct known as men.

Dealing with the politics of drags, it is interesting to see how the same heterosexist pattern followed in the so-called “normal society” repeats itself when dealing with the visibility and perception the majority of the population has on drags. Drag queens –men who perform as women– are widely known and even culturally accepted by traditionally macho cultures as is the case of Spain where contests are held to select the best drag for the Carnival festivity. On the contrary, drag kings remain ignored, unknown for and by the public opinion. They are even considered eccentric within the eccentric. Actually, even those definitions coming from “independent” sources –those considered to be underground or free from prejudices– come to be marked definitions in which drag kings are defined in opposition to the male-dominant drag queens: DRAG KING: opposite of DRAG QUEEN in that in this case it’s women taking on a male/masculine look (Limpwrist 2001: Lp booklet).

These sort of definitions come to be very significant since they prove how, even when trying to break with the imposed rules of the compulsory heterosexual society, we are determined by tradition and the presuppositions passed by historically. Drag Kings, thus, subvert the assumed-as-natural masculine centre by proving it to be a cultural construction and

defy gender roles as proving them as performative constructions product of the mimetic social assumptions.

As for the subversive aspect of drag, it is the whole performativity of gender<sup>4</sup> what subverts, transforms and provokes social repudiation. As marked above, many are the factors – either social, political, religious or whatever– that have determined the immobility of gender and gender roles historically using the labelling technique. The label of “normal/normality” helps to differentiate between what actually means “socially obedient or not”. In this sense, it is in Foucauldian terms that we come to the concept of normality as a social construction of the apparatus formed by power and its tentacles, law. Thus we can consider drag kings as part of those “abnormals” mentioned in Foucault’s *Los Anormales*. Where he deals with “Las tres figuras que constituye el ámbito de la anomalía: el monstruo humano; el individuo a corregir; el niño masturbador” (Foucault, 57).

As part of such abnormality, we may first take into account what Foucault establishes as monsters: “Digamos que el monstruo es lo que combina lo imposible y lo prohibido” (Foucault , 58). We can consider drag kings as those monsters; they embody “lo imposible” as they personify two different genders, something linked with “lo prohibido”, that is to identify and perform as the other gender, to cross the lines that mark how a person shall perform – A.K.A be. To mix both male and female gender brings about a new category, a new gender breaks those categories, disgendered bodies that confront biopolitical constructs. This comes to be impossible since power and heterosexual hegemony mark male and female as the two only possible genders. Thus defining the whole population categorization in terms of binary opposition namely man and woman: a woman is what is not a man and this, at the same time,

<sup>4</sup> The whole concept of *performativity of gender* is well defined in Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990): “[...] *gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. [...] within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed” (*Gender Trouble* 1990, 24-25).

raises the question of pertaining to a continuum<sup>5</sup>, a forbidden category which blurs the borders of heteropatriarchy

Drag kings, then, cross the lines between borders and relocate the centre on women, stealing the hegemonic masculinity. “Lo prohibido” then is to cross the same borderlands<sup>6</sup> referred to by Gloria Anzaldúa. In this case the crossing of the borderline means to adopt a different attitude, to make some sort of rebirth by means of which a woman enters the forbidden sphere, that which belongs to the centre exposing “that drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender, but that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations” (Butler, 125).

What is forbidden, then, is to show the instability of the socially accepted rules, to show in the last term that heterosexuality on the whole –both genders and both sexes– is a mere invention repeated once and again to establish a rule that has nothing to do with reality but with power, and the transmission of a determined ideology<sup>7</sup> through history. Contrary to the biopolitical set of beliefs we have been made to believe as ‘natural’.

There is another important fact to have into account dealing with drags which is the relation of the politics of drag, (gender) norms and socialization. Although this appears to be a crucial aspect in both cases, it is in the case of the drag kings that come to be different and more radical aspects. As for the drag queens, the mimic is directed to the socially-established female gender. Curiously enough, it is this type of drag which is widely known and accepted by almost everybody in society, and this fact rises the question of whether it is permitted as an expression of male superiority, a superiority which permits men to dress and adopt the figure of the other as long as they don't lose their hegemonic status, and also “[...] calls into question whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them; indeed, whether

<sup>5</sup> The whole concept of *performativity of gender* is well defined in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*: “[...] *gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. [...] within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed” (*Gender Trouble*, 24-25).

<sup>6</sup> Idem.

<sup>7</sup> As for this term I think it is useful: “[...] Althusser's first thesis regarding ideology [which] is that ‘ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.’” (qtd. In Bertens, 85)

the denaturalization of gender cannot be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms” (Butler, 125). Actually, in feminist terms we don’t see a disempowerment of any bio-man when he performs as a drag king, we can even think of a continuation of the typical dominant role of the male, he can adopt whatever the role he wants as he is still the character in control:

[...] vemos en estos procesos que ‘ser un hombre’ se basa en ‘no ser’ otras cosas: no ser mujer, no ser homosexual. Es una identidad generada por oposición, por negación o por la repetición de unos gestos estéticos o de conducta que carecen de original, es una noción sin un contenido preciso. El poder de los hombres, el poder patriarcal y machista, se construye, por una parte, por medio de ese desprecio hacia las mujeres y, por otra parte, por el odio hacia los hombres considerados como menos masculinos, los gays (Sáez, 118-119).

Contrary to the above mentioned double interpretation of masculine drags, drag kings embody the whole subversive mechanism. In other words, while men perform as ‘the other’, women assume the hegemonic centre and parody it by exaggerating the masculine construction and thus dismantling it. Their whole performativity violates the hegemonic rules because it steals that masculine centre and transform it through a feminine/female/womanly (who cares?!) interpretation. In a way, we can consider that the system based on binary oppositions which controls social life, develops itself also inside what is thought to be the subversive manifestations of gender. Imitation works for the heteropatriarchal order.

Many are the examples of such different attitudes in relation to drags and the performativity of gender. An interesting one is that of the film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001, John Cameron Mitchell). In this case Hansel, a boy from Berlin, falls in love with an American official who tells him if he wants to marry him and go to the States Hansel must undergo surgery to change his genitalia into a vagina. But “the sex change operation gets botched leaving one inch of genitalia and Hansel now Hedwig (using his mother’s name), is left to be neither man nor woman”( Hedwig In A Box). What is important here is the fact that Hedwig decides to be a rock musician –traditionally a masculine world- and s/he decides to become

the head of the band, the referent and the face of it. What seems to be a typical glam rock movie mixed with some gender issues, turns out to be the story of a group of misfits that occupy a fixed position in the movie, which comes to be the reflection of real society. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* reflects the Foucauldian monster which mixes the impossible and the forbidden, but also the heterosexist order that impregnates society, to the extent that it is the drag king character of the movie the one who is always diminished behind the figure of Hedwig. Yitzhak, the guitarist always plays the role of 'the other', s/he is 'the other' side of Hedwig and the one who remains enclosed into a masculine role that is not even allowed to reclaim. Thus, Yitzhak appears as Hedwig's lover once, and the camera emphasizes the silenced and nearly painful encounter between them. To such an extent is his/her figure markedly silenced that it can be considered some sort of "subaltern" as described by Gayatri Spivak:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the "third-world woman" caught between tradition and modernization (Spivak, 306).

Thus, this subaltern drag king is the impersonation of that 'female other' –which appropriates another post-colonial term– that is kept on the borders and marginal to the centre even in the disguise of a masculine central character. Despite this, it is interesting to note that both characters are determined by external social factors that constrict their lives and relations. The movie, thus, is a journey through their story of suffering provoked by the same constrictions that determine them to be part of a fixed gender. Both Hansel/Hedwig and Yitzhak are forced to represent a role they cannot stand freely until the end of the film, when both admit themselves as a part of that continuum, far beyond deterministic definitions of gender, and proving those behavioural patterns imposed are no more immutable:



Identifying with a gender under contemporary regimes of power involves identifying with a set of norms that are not realizable, and whose power and status precede the identifications by which they are insistently approximated. This ‘being a man’ and this ‘being a woman’ are internally unstable affairs. They are always beset by ambivalence precisely because there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identifications, the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses, but which we occupy, reversed, resignified to the extent that the norm fails to determine us completely (Butler, 126-27).

It seems clear then that the threat posed by drag kings is the one marked in the context of the colonized and the colonizer. Thus as long as it is the colonizer –man– the one who performs as the colonized –woman– it looks like correct. On the contrary, when it is the colonized the one who adopts the centre’s look, it is still left in the margins. The threat then, comes from the possibility of a post-colonial revolution in which the other reclaims and proves the performativity of the values by which we were once colonized not only in terms of gender, but in terms of sex and mind:

Pero si el estado y el sistema legal tienen un interés por mantener un sistema sexual bipartito, se están oponiendo a la naturaleza. Porque, biológicamente hablando, hay una enorme gradación que va de varón [considered as the socially constructed man] a mujer [the construct]; y dependiendo de cómo llamemos a los diferentes estadios, podemos afirmar que a lo largo de tal espectro subyacen al menos cinco sexos – y quizá incluso más (Fausto-Sterling, 81).

As Fausto-Sterling suggests, it is the State and the Legal system what has colonized our personalities, coming together with Michel Foucault and biopower, “[...] la organización de los controles de anomalía, como técnica de poder y saber [...]” (Foucault, 63) has been traditionally the way of ordering the normal society because it is “[...] el monstruo el que constituye un problema, el monstruo quien interroga el sistema médico y el sistema judicial” (63). Such condition works as a way of measuring abnormality. Abnormality is, then, what crosses the border that divides the construction of normal life and places itself beyond the

rules, creating new ones. It is transgression what means a real threat: “Transgresión, por consiguiente, de los límites naturales, transgresión de las clasificaciones, transgresión del marco, transgresión de la ley como marco: en la monstruosidad, en efecto, se trata realmente de eso” (64).

It can be concluded, then, that it is drag itself what transgrede this and creates a subversive order in which the transgression of borders is, on the whole, threatening as a disgender subject attacks biopolitical power directly. As Cristina Garaizabal points out in her article *La transgresión del género. Transexualidades, un reto apasionante*: “No obstante, intuyo que si su existencia resulta tan inquietante en sociedades como las nuestras, es porque establece un continuum entre lo femenino y lo masculino en unas sociedades estructuradas, también, sobre la base de la dicotomía entre lo uno y lo otro” (Garaizabal, 43). Even more, if drag queens constitute a subversive act, drag kings pose a real threat to the established order by means of creating the possibility of a revolt inside the core of the concept of gender and sexuality, marked historically and traditionally as a universal truth. The possibility of a revolution by means of which the centre would be relocated or even worse –for who?– destroyed to restore a continuum that would led the heter[r]o[r]sexist system fall apart.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anzaldúa, Gloria, *Borderlands/La Frontera, The New Mestiza*, San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 1999.
- Ayllón, Maite (comp.), *Transexualidad, Transgeneridad y feminismo*, Madrid, Genera-COGAM- Mujeres y Teología de Madrid, 2004.
- Bertens, Hans, *Literary Theory, The Basics*, London, Routledge, 2001.
- Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London, Routledge, 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Bodies that Matter*, London, Routledge, 1993.
- Collier, Richard, *Masculinity, Law and the Family*, London, Routledge, 1995.
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne, “Los cinco sexos”, *Transexualidad, transgenerismo y cultura. Antropología, identidad y género*, José Antonio Nieto ed., Madrid, Talasa Ediciones, 1998, págs. 79-90.
- Foucault, Michel, *Los anormales*, Madrid, Ediciones Akal, 2001.
- Garaizabal, Cristina, “La transgresión del género. Transexualidades, un reto apasionante” *Transexualidad, transgenerismo y cultura. Antropología, identidad y género*, José Antonio Nieto ed., Madrid, Talasa Ediciones, 1998, págs. 39-62.
- Sáez, Javier, *Por el culo. Políticas anales*, Madrid, Egales, 2011.
- Chakravorty Spivak, Gayatri, *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988.

## INTERNET REFERENCES

www.hendigina.com: [www.hedwiginabox.com](http://www.hedwiginabox.com) (access 10 June 2013).



Segunda época. Julio 2013. N°1  
[www.uc3m.es/semiosfera](http://www.uc3m.es/semiosfera)