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**“I would say:  
You Are not Transgender but Part of it!”**

A Qualitative Study Tracing Practices of Gendered  
Self-Reflective Positioning and their Negotiation

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## Abstract

This research traces positive entry points of how its participants build standpoints and live sex/gender in ways that challenge their own perceptions of gender and strive to create space for multiplicity, ambivalence and gendered difference within their own and others' lives. It does so by asking how gendered markers of identity and difference are experienced, understood and negotiated, rather than taking the experiences connected to one particular identity category as a focal point.

I conducted interviews with ten participants who relate to the notion of drag in their lives and are connected to trans\*/feminist/queer communities in and around Utrecht, the Netherlands, and Berlin, Germany. The participants identified across a multiplicity of gendered notions. One participant for instance was considering whether 'feminine man' is possibly a label he can be comfortable with, another identified as a hard femme drag queen, one described himself as a trans\*guy, one as a woman, but framing being a woman differently than a lot of people do.

Transgender studies is the key point of orientation for this thesis. I work with mainly transgender theory, theories on drag and theories on gendered/sexual differences. I approach the interviews as well as the theories as narratives on (trans)gender, sex, embodiment and difference and trace how they resonate, link and differ. The objective of this thesis is to highlight resemblances and contingencies across different (trans)gendered forms of embodiment by, for instance analysing points of connection between the participants' narratives and concepts such as the body image as theorised in transgender theory. Taking drag as a lens highlights moments of change, experimentation with and the rebuilding of participants' gendered embodiment and their relationship to it. This research points out that how participants self-position themselves with regard to gender, sexuality and other markers of difference is decisive and exemplary as to how power relations are negotiated.

## Resumen

Esta investigación señala puntos de partida positivos en relación a la forma en la que las/os participantes construyen y viven su sexo/género desafiando sus propias percepciones del género y luchando para crear espacios para el pluralismo, la ambivalencia y las diferencias de género en sus vidas en las de las/os demás. Todo ello preguntándose cómo son experimentados, entendidos y negociados los indicadores de género de identidad y diferencia en lugar de conectar las experiencias a una sola categoría identitaria y centrarse en ella.

He realizado entrevistas a diez participantes que se relacionan en sus vidas con la noción de *drag* y que están conectadas/os con comunidades trans\*/feministas/queer en Utrecht (Netherlands) y Berlin (Alemania). Las/os participantes se identifican con múltiples categorías de género. Por ejemplo, un participante se preguntaba si podía sentirse cómodo en la categoría de hombre femenino; otra participante en ese momento se identificaba como una *hard femme drag queen*; otro se describía como un chico trans; otra como mujer, pero una mujer distinta a lo que las demás personas piensan.

Los estudios transgenero son el punto clave de partida para esta tesis. Trabajo principalmente con teoría transgenero, teoría *drag* y teorías de la diferencia sexo/género. Tomo las entrevistas como teorías y como relatos de (trans)genero, sexo, corporalidad y diferencia. También analizo como estas teorías y relatos resuenan, conectan y difieren. El objetivo de esta tesis es destacar las semejanzas y disparidades entre diferentes formas transgénero de corporalidad, a través -por ejemplo- del análisis de las conexiones entre los relatos de las/os participantes y conceptos como la imagen del cuerpo presentada en la teoría transgenero. Usando *drag* como un lugar desde el que mirar, aparecen momentos de cambio, experimentación y reconstrucción de cada participante con la corporalidad de su género. Esta investigación plantea cómo el posicionamiento de las/os participantes -en relación al género, sexualidad y otros indicadores de la diferencia- es decisivo y ejemplifica la negociación de las relaciones de poder.

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# 1. Introduction

“It was nice now to talk about my story, it is also because sometimes we do not talk about this kind of thing in ... in more social spaces... you know because if you were not interviewing me, you would have told me your story as well, if we were in a bar, like... in a more typical environment, and it hardly happens.. you know... maybe next time I meet someone in a pub I am going to be like, so how do you experience your gender?” (Nic, at the end of our interview)

What gender feels like, how we experience it, is a question that is posed to transgender people all too often, and not seldom in intrusive, inappropriate ways. Curiosity about one's sexual organs from people you are meeting for the first time or psychiatric assessment as to whether you really feel part of the gender you claim to, investigations by social scientists into the exotic phenomenon of transgenderism or investigations of journalists aiming to write a sensationalist article occasion these questions. The other extreme side of the story is that many people who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth are not used to being asked to reflect about their gender, particularly their gender identity and embodiment. How one feels about and experiences gender is then rather taken for granted. In most contexts there is no culture of reflecting about one's position with regard to gender. How one experiences embodiment, body imageries, relates to notions such as masculinity and femininity and is not something people usually question or exchange ideas about.

For the purposes of this thesis, I interviewed 10 people: Goda, Nic, Ona, Alice, Calvin, Pablo, Robyn, Jan Sophia, Kay and Maddison. One of these, Robyn, identified as partially trans\* in transition from something to something and Kay is a trans guy. The majority of the participants (8 out of 10) are not trans\* identified. In the call for participants, I had asked for people who somehow relate to the notion of drag or the crossing of conventional gender lines. Some participants engage in drag/queer performances on stage or drag up for parties, whereas others feel like they live a multiplicity of gendered roles in their everyday lives and happen to find themselves in situations that resemble drag performances. For one participant being a drag queen is a point of identification and provides a way of understanding oneself. All of the interviewees somewhat connected to trans\*/feminist/queer subcultures.

Additionally, I had explicitly encouraged non-trans\* identified respondents to reply to my call so that I could later reflect on ways of gendered self-positioning taking into consideration the positions of people who are not trans\* identified, but likely to have some affinities with trans\*issues. I expected this to be an interesting entry point for investigating the ways notions such as trans\*gender, cis\*gender or drag are used and negotiated. During the interviews people described a wide range of gendered positions and experiences. Someone wondered whether it is an option to think about himself as a “feminine man” (Jan Sophia), another described herself as a “feminine feminist” (Alice) and yet another as a “hard femme drag queen” (Maddison).

Participants were conscious about their gendered position as at times 'different' whether through their practices of drag on stage or everyday life practices and identifications. Additionally participants are involved in trans\*/feminist&/queer scenes and actively question and challenge themselves and their positioning with regards to gender. In this sense the group of participants whose narratives are being investigated here is specific and in difference to norms of embodiment and gender.

Nic, who I quoted above, and three other participants also mentioned how this interview about their experience of gender was an exceptional experience because we talked about gender in such a personal way which they usually do not. Participants also used words as 'intimate' and 'personal' to describe the interviews. Other participants found ways of communicating about this topic of their personal way of experiencing gender. Pablo said that he does not discuss gender identity so directly with his friends, but that they do talk about gendered roles and that he brings up the topic for instance by being very unconventional through knitting at a dinner party. Another participant, Maddison, said that she is very bold and direct stating how she is a drag queen in a style that suits a drag queen. Participants also named some trans\*, feminist or queer activist places as ones where the experience of gender is intentionally made a topic and people are for instance asked to position themselves in order to signal gendered privileges.

Talking about one's experience of gender, one's autobiography in relation to gender is not an 'innocent' genre. What we talk about, consider relevant or not to our own biography and experience is a political matter. Sandy Stone's (2006) text 'The Empire Strikes Back. A Posttranssexual Manifesto' which was first published in 1991 is considered one of the first texts that opened up the field of transgender studies. Stone (2006, p.224ff) investigated which kinds of transsexual subjects are constituted in (auto)biographical texts. She traced how (auto)biographical writing in the 1960s and 70s reproduces traditional discourses on gender such as a binary mode of gender identification, heterosexuality and purity, as well as the idea that there is one body that is right per gendered subject and that there is one precise moment of transition coinciding with sex-readjustment surgery at which the sexual identity changes. Stone (2006, p.224) writes "this paper is about morality tales and origin myths, about telling the truth of gender" and points out how talking about gender identity is not always useful for understanding the complexities of transsexual embodiment and needs to be critically considered. Talking or writing about the self is never neutral and does not reflect the 'truth' about oneself and gender. Stone points out how power relations such as those between transsexual 'patients' and doctors as well as traditional cultural scripts about gender play a role in transsexual (auto)biography and the way gender is narrated.

Nic, who I already cited above, illustrated how different scripts on gender compete and power dynamics play a role in how one's gender is narrated and understood.

"In the questions 'do you wear high heels?' that there is this sense that I have a problem with my femininity, that I do not inhabit my femininity enough and that maybe it is a pity. So it is more that kind of thing, come

on try to put on these more feminine clothes or behave more feminine.. or whatever... ehm... (...) unless they are really embedded in a feminist or queer activist environment, people have it very clear, or I mean, I have it very clear too, what normative femininity and masculinity is, so sometimes these kind of comments just come out like that. Yeah, you are uncomfortable with your femininity, you have a problem. Did you have bad experiences with men? That is what you get sometimes. Like you know, .. just that kind of normative femininity I have tried and I did not really like it, so I am trying something else... yeah..” (Nic, Utrecht)

Here at the end of the quote Nic introduced the perspective that she wants to adopt by saying she has tried certain femininities and has just not liked them, but did not present this as a problem or a pathological issue. This quote simultaneously illustrates how also today the social image within dominant, Eurocentric modernity of what it means to occupy masculinity and femininity, what being a woman and a man can entail, does not grasp, but pathologizes many people's experiences especially when thinking from a transgender perspective (Stryker 2006a, p.3).

At the same time participants described moments of positive surprise when being called for instance gender queer, transgender or a drag queen and how other people have challenged and validated their self conceptions.

“Then something happened and he was like, why would I even be hanging out with you, you are obviously, you are gender queer. Which was really great for me. cause I was like, yeah, I am fucking gender queer, like this is ..not your typical gender presentations,(...)Yeah, even though, the assumed gender of the way that I am presenting myself is also hegemonically associated with the sex I was assigned at birth, you know. that does not mean I am not gender queer, that does not mean... so that was actually a pretty influential thing for me that kind of, you know having other people.. validate and or recognize and or point out that stuff helped, but I think there is a lot of people that I find inspiring and I don't even think about it, I just fucking love them.” (Maddison)

Such instances highlight how community and exchanging viewpoints and perspectives on (trans-)gender issues can challenge and affirm ones perspectives in fruitful ways and is central to building new approaches and ways of narrating gender.

Throughout this research I want to give space to critically reflect on ways of narrating and understanding one's gender which have been denied in dominant discourses. Stone pointed out how negotiations of gender identity and embodiment take place and need to be reflected on critically. Participants in this research did identify across a wide spectrum of gendered notions, but all were somewhat aware that they do not fall completely into dominant imaginaries of sex/gender which are characterized by thinking sex/gender as 'natural', given, unchanging and notions such as feminine and masculine as incompatible and exclusive. Talking about these personal experiences is important to explore and affirm the various ways of relating to gender/sex categories. Translating these into a written text and furthermore putting them in touch with the written and academic realm inevitably simplifies these narratives as well as that it is a practice of expanding horizons and possibilities (Järviluoma, Moisala & Vilkkö 2003, p.114).

## Antecedents

The words transvestite and transsexual have been used to label a category of gendered 'others' since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The term transvestite was first shaped by Dr Magnus Hirschfeld in 1910 and the term transsexual was popularised by Dr Harry Benjamin in the 1950s. These were the linguistic signposts of a tradition in medicine and psychology which has, since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, taken transsexuals as objects of study, pathologising transsexuals as mentally ill and positing sex reassignment surgery as a treatment (Stryker 2006a, p.4). However, only in 1980 was transsexualism first listed as an 'official disorder' in the *American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (Stone 2006, p.223).

Leslie Feinberg's (2006) pamphlet *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come*, first published in 1992, coined the term transgender as a call for activism and positive self-definition. She announced that it was time to struggle together in an alliance of people who experience oppression because of their deviance from the norms of gendered embodiment. In this way, transgender became an imagined community of cross-dressers, sissies, tomboys, drag queens, transsexuals and others who felt connected to this call for mobilisation. Her call was answered. Since the 1990s, transgender has become a widely chosen word for personal self-identification, for use in activism and academia. By tallying the number of publications using the term, Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (2013, p.2) have illustrated the rapid rise of the term transgender. Since 1992, it has been used in published books scanned by the Google books project significantly more often than terms such as transsexual, transvestite or gender queer.

The term cis-gender was introduced in 1994 by Dana Leland Defosse to talk about the practice of staying within the birth-assigned sex. Activists and scholars have recognised its advantage when it comes to signalling privileges. The term, has however come under criticism for reimposing a binary and oppositional way of framing bodies (Enke 2013, p.234ff).

This text primarily utilises the term transgender to talk about gender non-conforming practices because of the term's history of activist aspirations, as a means to distance this research from the on-going pathologisation and discrimination of differently gendered people, and because of the common usage of the term by the interview participants.<sup>1</sup> How transgender identity is negotiated and how the term itself is used by the participants will be analysed in detail in the final chapter of this thesis. There I will also pay closer attention to the use of the term cis-gender by the participants .

This research builds on transgender, feminist and queer studies that have dealt with questions of gendered embodiment and difference. Susan Stryker's writing and methodology as well as her outspoken ambitions for change are an inspiration to this thesis. She brings together theoretical analysis with life narrative writing by reflecting on her own life in an inspiring and fruitful way. She uses her own story and theory to explore

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<sup>1</sup> At times the short form of trans is used. The \* is a reminder of the multiplicity of trans\* people.

ways of thinking gender embodiment and she also explicitly calls for critical self-positioning and explorations of gender and embodiment at a personal level by her readers, regardless of the way they are positioned in relation to gender (Stryker 2006b, 2008).<sup>2</sup>

Transgender scholar Gayle Salamon (2010) turns towards feminism, psychoanalysis and the philosophy of embodiment, criticising and reworking them from a specifically transgender perspective. This thesis builds in particular on her argument that sexual difference must be understood as having multiple locations and on her outlook that there are differences on the levels of bodily inhabitation, sense of self, desires and other gender-connoted levels for instance between a trans\* man and a man, a butch and a woman, a butch and a trans guy or any two people.

Gender theorists such as Judith Butler (1990, 2004), introduced the performative turn in thinking about gender, most of all with her theory of all gender as drag. She posits gender as performative, as creating that which it only claims to name. Such a framework provides a theoretical understanding of the possibility of changing cultural gender categories and of diverse gender identifications, and provides a background to the wider framework of this thesis.<sup>3</sup>

Performance artist Diane Torr (2010) investigates gender as a performance. She writes about the 'Drag King' and 'Man for a Day' workshops she has been giving in different formats since 1990. She has talked with people who speak from a diversity of gendered perspectives about their experiences at these workshops as well as with drag beyond this setting. She reflects on the multiple ways in which drag can have a potential for empowering people with all kinds of identities and ambitions regarding gender. This thesis systematically takes up the approach of talking with people about their experiences connected to the concept of drag. However, in contrast to Torr the notion of drag is investigated because of the way it is used by participants and is not predefined as an act of temporarily dressing up in the clothes of another gender as Torr does.

A. Finn Enke (2013) whose work focuses on feminist, queer, and transgender social movements and theory, has reflected on the history of the term cis-gender and its disciplining effects of fitting bodies into binary conceptions of cis versus trans and reducing trans to the medical and the exceptional. Transfeminist perspectives, according to Enke, should point to the present impossibility of containing all bodies and transitions. This thesis builds on the approach of critically investigating how certain terms, concepts and practices have positive as well as negative disciplining effects. It does so in the context of interviews which allows me to contextualise the way participants use certain terms in their personal life histories.

This thesis investigates how notions such as drag, embodiment, cis-gender, transgender and difference are framed and negotiated in the way participants describe their experiences of gender. It takes up Sandy Stone's perspective of critically investigating forms of self-narration for how these are useful in understanding the complexity of

<sup>2</sup> Her thinking of gendered embodiment is a central building stone of the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter.

<sup>3</sup> Butler is critically discussed in Chapter 4 of this thesis specifically with regard to her discussion of gender drag.

transsexual and transgender experiences. It does so in a different socio-political situation to that of Stone's analysis and using a different methodology. This thesis works with narrative interviews in the time of a strengthening transgender studies where the interaction between trans\*/feminist/queer cultures and academia is a relevant topic, subcultures are interwoven with academic projects and terms and practices that emerged in activism and academia over the last two decades are being explored and utilised.

### **Objectives and Research Questions**

What drove me to write this thesis is a concern with the possibilities of a self-reflective positioning with regard to sex and gender. This thesis aims to establish points of contingency and relationships between experiences understood as cis\*- and trans\*gender. It questions such neat distinctions and separations of bodies and experiences. Transgender movements tend to work for the recognition of differences. There is however a distinction to be made between recognising differences, romanticising/pathologising and othering. This thesis is built on the potential of seeing and living similarities and contingencies between different forms of embodiment. In this thesis I explore how participants understand and negotiate their own gendered/sexual location, the notion of gender drag and difference. I asked participants questions about the way they relate to the concept of drag and crossing conventional binary gender distinctions, how they use the word drag in their lives, about their gender expression, how they experiment with gender, sex and their body, and what kind of body images they have and the ways in which they negotiate how to identify themselves.

The objective of this research is to explore how 'trans\*gender-respectful' ways of thinking and self-positioning can be further opened up in theory as well as in cultural ways of understanding sex/gender. With 'trans\*gender-respectful' I mean taking transgender experiences seriously as a challenge to one's perception and experiences, and not only tolerating them. I am looking for ways of investigating and questioning one's own gendered position and rethinking it as well as the way in which one understands gender more generally. This thesis investigates which alternative imaginaries/narratives for gender, sex, sexual difference are lived by participants and brings them together with transgender, queer, feminist and performance theory.

The research question of this thesis is how positive ways of self-reflective positioning with regard to the gendered difference of oneself and others are being built by the lives of participants. More specifically in Chapter One, this thesis asks how contingencies in ways of understanding gendered embodiment are opened up within participants' narratives when reading them together with transgender theory on embodiment, focusing especially on the concept of the body image. Chapter Two asks how specifically the concept of drag is connected in participants' narratives to points of experimentation, change, alliance building, empowerment and agency with regard to gendered embodiment. In the third chapter, the question is how (sexual) difference is conceptualised in theory and the participants' life narratives; which role participants assign

to sexual difference in the way they narrate their own gendered position and how they establish space for contingencies and relations with differently gendered people in comparison to their own specifically understood position.

The first chapter of this thesis delves in more detail into the methodology of this thesis. In this chapter I point to the way I understand experience and life narratives as crucial to the way they can inform theories on sex and gender and why I focused on interviewing people who do not clearly identify as transgender, engage in drag and are linked to trans\*/feminist/queer spaces. At the same time, I will discuss how I theorise experience in line with Joan W. Scott (1991) and how this research asks how identity and difference are experienced, made sense of and negotiated, rather than taking experience as a given category and uncomplicated evidence for research. I will also spell out the way I approach both theory and the interview data as narratives, and try to trace their resemblances, differences and connection points. I see my own role as collecting and connecting narratives and not as 'liberating' voices. This thesis is a contribution to a wider collective political effort of building standpoints, experiences and subjectivities in which participants and theorists take an active part. At the end of the methodology chapter I will reflect on the research process and its social context as well as that of the participants and theories. Here I will, for instance, point to the importance of the participants' language background or the way that concepts such as drag are taken up and the way that participants made me rethink some of the questions I asked them.

After the methodology chapter, this thesis will consist of three chapters in which the interview narratives and theory will be read together. Each of these chapters will focus on a specific theme. The first on embodiment, the next on drag and the last on difference. In the chapter on embodiment, I will trace resemblances and connections between the narratives of transgender theorists Gayle Salamon and Susan Stryker concerning embodiment and gender, and the life narratives of the interviewees. Stryker and Salamon both write in an aspiring and challenging way about how embodiment and gender can be thought from a transgender perspective. They challenge not only gender/feminist studies assumptions, but also those of a wide range of disciplines in which the body and embodiment play a role. They are both part of a growing transgender studies discipline in a US context, where transgender studies has been on the rise for a couple of decades. I will read these theories together with the life narratives especially on the notions of the body image and a sense of the body and self, which are central to both Stryker's and Salamon's accounts. In this way I will try to trace what these theoretical concepts, developed to challenge thinking in the academia and beyond, can mean when used in connection to the participants' narratives. This is an attempt to make them more tangible and manifold while situated in the life context of different narratives. Notions by Salamon such as a gap between the materiality one lives and the body image one has, a difference in how one is seen and how one feels, immediately reminds the reader of a transsexual experience of people who are 'born in the wrong body.' Salamon claims that this gap however exists for all gendered embodiment. In this chapter (number 3) I will trace how

this notion can be understood in the lives of mainly non-trans participants beyond the idea of the transsexual's wish for body modification by exploring the multiplicity in body images and 'impossible' bodily desires in the lives of participants. This is a step towards recognizing the sameness in difference, to not exoticise transgender experiences, but to be able to see the 'seams and sutures' (Stryker 2006b, p.247) in any one's experience.

The following chapter will revolve around the concept of drag. In it, I will bring together various strands of theory and writing on drag with the participants' ways of thinking, living and experiencing drag. I will compare and contrast understandings of drag as subversive and its critiques in the understanding of the interviewees as well as that of the theorists Viviane Namaste, Roderick Ferguson and Judith Butler. In a second section, drag as a practice from a performers' perspective will be the focus as will the ways in which it can function as a tool and a form of empowerment. There I will again draw on the interviewees' perspectives as well as on those of writers such as Nina Schuster, Diane Torr, Del LaGrace Volcano and Judith Jack Halberstam. In a third section, I will bring together ways of thinking and living drag beyond the stage context. Analysing drag using the theory of temporal drag of Elizabeth Freeman and the life narratives, I find it to be a point for identification, a tool for communicating and negotiating gender and a lens through which to investigate the iterative structures and affiliations in personal styles or symbols of art installations. Drag throughout these accounts is widely connected to action, acting, being conscious about a certain gendered activity, subversions and empowerment. Tracing drag as a signifier therefore functioned as a lens for moments of thinking and living points of agency and change with regard to gendered embodiment.

The final chapter centres on the notion of difference, of gendered and sexual difference. In feminism this notion is strongly connected to the feminist tradition of sexual difference thought. In this chapter I will introduce sexual difference thought as well as a critique on it developed by transgender scholars. Then I will discuss how participants talked about the notion of difference especially with regard to gender and sex. On the one hand, this is a way in which to show the multiplicity of understandings of difference and how these can be conceptualised, not only as in-between notions (e.g. male and female or cis- and trans-gendered) but also how there are strong differences in how the quality of this difference is thought of as, for instance, compatible, permeable, transient and not necessarily given. The focus in the discussion of the narratives will be on the difference between trans and cis-gendered, how this difference is problematised, thought and lived, and how participants also find ways of self-reflective positioning with regards to difference.

This thesis aims to contribute to building points of understanding with regard to gender and gendered embodiment that help grasp and relate to the differently gendered within ourselves and others across (sub)cultures and academic situations. It challenges you, the reader to investigate the negotiations of embodiment and identity in the life narratives and reflect on your own way of framing and understanding your positionality. It takes up the challenge to trace ways of positively relating to difference and to find ways of understanding things such as a transsexual wish for amputation, which are – for many

people - often hard to grasp and relate to. This thesis embraces the call Susan Stryker formulated so strongly for a performance piece at a conference in 1994:

“You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic womb has birthed us both. I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine. I challenge you to risk abjection and flourish as well as have I. Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself.” (Stryker 2006b, p.247)

Before diving into the analysis, the following chapter on methodology will introduce the set up of this thesis in more detail in order to also enable the discussion of and reflection on the positioning and set up of this thesis.

## 2. Building a Methodology, Building a Standpoint: Interviewing mainly non-Trans\* identified Participants who relate to the notion of Drag as well as Trans\*/Feminist/Queer Communities concerning their Experiences of Gender

### **Introduction**

Especially in the light of histories of medicalisation of transgender people, intersex people, non-normatively gendered identities and practices, which is grounded in medical and psychological science that explains their condition as pathological (Stryker 2006a, p.14), I want to clearly formulate and emphasise this research's approach and open it up to critical inquiry. When explaining the methodology of his book *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment among Transsexual Men* for which Henry S. Rubin (2003, p.10) conducted interviews with transsexual men and aimed to draw attention to the public emergence of FTM and to correct public misconceptions, he made a neat distinction between research that tends to inquire and that which tends to pathologise:

“When we ask what is the matter with someone, we are often in search of a diagnosis and a cure. If, alternatively, we ask what matters to someone, we are asking after their taste of the world – how it looks to them, what is salient and what is irrelevant. The former pathologizes, while the latter inquires.”

This research also sets out to understand what matters to people, their framework of meaning, what they experience and how they understand it. More specifically this research inquires how practices and identities are lived, negotiated and formulated (Spradley 1979, p.92). It traces ways of consciously positioning oneself towards gendered differences and incorporates these accounts into a wider process of discussion and standpoint building by bringing these into dialogue with each other and theories. In this chapter I will first explain the methodological choices I made with regard to participant selection and the way I connected theory and interview data. I will then reflect on the situatedness of this research project and its participants. In this way I want to open the floor to critically discuss this thesis' approach as well as to contribute to methodological discussions of qualitative research on (trans-)gender issues.

### **Methodological Choices**

Gayle Salamon (2010, p.6) claims “that feminism, particularly but not exclusively in its institutionalized form, has not been able to keep pace with non-normative genders as they are thought, embodied and lived.” Gayle Rubin (1984), radical sex activist and anthropologist who has shaped the study of sexuality since the 1980s, also highlights the importance of situated, embodied knowledges. She demands that “a radical theory of sex must build rich descriptions of sexuality as it exists in society and history” (Rubin 1984, p.275). Rubin focuses on the concept of sexuality, but her methodological request to build

descriptions of concepts the way they are lived and exist in society and history can related to concepts such as sex, gender and sexual difference. This thesis builds on Rubin's and Salamon's perspective that understandings of how people live and experience gender in their lives are necessary for and have the potential to contribute to an ethics and theory of gender/sex.

In practice, I met and interviewed 10 people between November 2012 and May 2013 in and around Utrecht, the Netherlands, in Berlin, Germany and Granada, Spain. My starting point for participant selection was that all participants somehow relate to the notion of drag in a broad sense of the word as I formulated it in the call for participants<sup>4</sup>. As I described drag in the call, it could be on stage, for parties, in everyday life and beyond categories of drag kings and queens. In the end it would be up to the participants to define what drag meant to them. Some participants distanced themselves from the notion of drag, some placed it as central to their story, for some it was a way of exploration on stage and another participant identified as a drag queen in everyday life. I chose drag as a sampling criteria, as it is not necessarily part of one's gender identity, yet signals a certain awareness of not completely fitting into dominant social imaginaries of binary, oppositional gender. People whose sense of self and life practices vary from conceptions of male and female as separate and exclusive encounter the challenge to make sense of these aspects of their lives. Such negotiations are the focus of this research.

The sampling criteria of the notion of drag links to how Joan W. Scott (1991) discusses in her article 'The Evidence of Experience' that experience and identity cannot be taken as the bedrock and uncomplicated evidence for knowledge production. Experience is central to critical/feminist approaches to knowledge production,<sup>5</sup> yet making unacknowledged experiences visible should not preclude a "critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation (homosexual/heterosexual, man/woman, black/white as fixed immutable identities), its premises about what these categories mean and how they operate" (Scott 1991, p.778). Experiences are historically contingent and constitute subjects, so research should seek to explain experience instead of taking it as a self-evident basis for knowledge. The way experience and identity come about, are politically negotiated and framed, how they work in relation to each other, needs to be investigated to bring about a critical self-positioning and questioning of power relations (Scott 1991 p.792).

This research works with the narratives of people who relate to the notion of drag in their lives. Their identifications and their experiences as formulated in the interviews with regard to gender crossed different gendered notions. Maddison identified as a hard femme drag queen, Jan Sophia wondered if he can accept the idea of being a feminine man, Nic used and felt comfortable with labels such as butch, lesbian, feminist and woman depending on the context, Alice used among other things the label feminine feminist for

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<sup>4</sup> See appendix for the full call.

<sup>5</sup> Also see my discussion of Standpoint Feminism later in this section.

herself, other participants found yet other ways of describing themselves. This research asks how markers of identity and difference are experienced, understood and negotiated, rather than taking the experience connected to one particular identity category as a focal point.

An initial approach to interview people regardless of their gender identity, developed into the idea of actually focusing on non-trans\* or in other words cis-identified people. When presenting my research, explicitly saying that my criteria for participant selection was not gender identity, but a widely conceptualised relation to doing drag, I received feedback from people such as: "so you are working with transgender people" or "why don't you contact this transgender person" pointing me to people that explicitly identify as trans\*. People immediately projected practices of gender crossing and non-normative gender onto a transgender identity as well as experiences of sex-adjustment surgery. People that it would be interesting to talk to were primarily conceptualised as transgender people in a narrow sense and nobody thought about for instance themselves. Furthermore, one trans\* person I contacted, who is fairly well known in the Netherlands, replied that he receives calls for research participation about twice a week and at times feels like "interesting research material to outsiders." This over attention and projection highlighted the invisibility of the embodiment of people that are perceived as cis-gender, of embodiment that is not seen as related to the gender dysphoria label as understood in psychology. What is sometimes called cis-gendered embodiment is naturalised. It is important to recognise the particularity of the experience of transgender people, but at the same time the gendered embodiment of cis people should not be normalised to the extent of invisibility as these incidents point to, but should be critically investigated for its being unnatural, constructed and made, as Susan Stryker calls for (as cited in the end of the introduction). I did not limit the gender identity of participants to non-trans\*, but explicitly also encouraged cis-identified people to participate and intentionally sent my call for participants to many people who I knew do not directly identify as transgender. In the end, only one of the 10 participants is a trans-guy and one person identified as partially trans.

In addition to the sampling criterion of drag, all participants shared a close or more distant connection to subcultural trans\*/feminist/queer scenes, as I contacted them through a snowball sampling starting in my own trans\*/feminist/queer networks that I have become connected to mainly by studying gender studies in Utrecht and Granada, and working in a queer project in Berlin. Some participants were organizers of performance nights, festivals and activist groups, others were more loosely connected for instance as occasional visitors to events or were friends of people that were more closely connected to trans\*/feminist/queer contexts. In this way the sample was internationally sub-culturally linked. Two participants from Berlin and Utrecht knew each other independently of this research project, as well as two participants from Utrecht and Granada.

This connection to trans\*/feminist/queer contexts was an active choice in the research set up. There are subcultures and communities which aspire to and live gender in ways that counter the social imaginary of binary, exclusive sex and gender. Beatriz

Preciado (2003, p.11) derives the idea of the contra-sexual practice from Foucault's notion of power, as both productive and repressive. She conceptualises contra-productivity as a technique of resistance. Not only analysis and critique, but foremostly also building, experimenting and living alternative approaches are important to re-opening heteronormativity.

During the course of the interviews, participants could relate to the majority of my questions and we found common ground for our conversations. I became more curious, as well as confident, that it would be fruitful to also interview people who are not connected to trans\*/feminist/queer scenes about their experience of gendered embodiment, if and how they know and talk about the word drag or gender subversion and how they make sense of gendered/sexual difference. It would be possible to take as a starting point practices such as dressing up for carnival and the way people think about this.

The group of participants is quite homogeneous with regard to age and educational background which is partially related to snowball sampling in my own social networks. All the participants were born within 10 years of each other, between the late 1970s and 1980s and were between 35 and 25 years of age at the time of the interviews. With regard to their educational background; all have a university degree or were currently attending university (one current BA student, seven (of that five almost) finished MAs, two (of that one almost) PhDs). All but three of the participants' degrees to some extent involved gender issues. It would be interesting in further research to also go beyond these parameters of age and education that characterise this specific sample.

### **Connecting Theory and Life Narratives**

One participant, Maddison, said that one influence on what we talked about in the interview is that she is part of the "post-1991 performative theory generation, whether or not we read them." Maddison's quote raises questions about the relationship between theory on gender and the way people live and understand their lives. As one performer I talked to at a workshop told me, theorists like to proclaim that theories chronologically come before and inspire practices. This thesis is interested in the connection points and synergies between theories and life narratives, and not in creating a linear history of who did or claimed what first. As I will discuss specifically in the chapter on drag, any theory has a socio-political context and is related to the experiences of the author. The sample of life narratives and theories in this research also makes the overlaps between theoretical and life accounts visible. Most (trans)gender writers assembled in this thesis also personally position themselves in their research and mention personal stories or life events that were central to the research process. In this way they highlight the situatedness of theory. At the same time, all the participants also engage in theoretical writing and reading, and Maddison - for instance - suggested that I read Vivian Namaste and in this way made a great contribution to the theoretical structure of this thesis. I am aware of four participants having had work published before on gender-related topics and at times in the interviews they referred to theory to explain their experiences and thoughts.

Because I am aware of the interconnectedness and dependency of one on the other, I will continue to use the distinction between theoretical and life narratives in this thesis, yet try to highlight the overlaps and not portray them in a hierarchical distinction.

The relationship between theory and data specifically in research is also in itself not a given, but a methodological and political question (Browne & Nash 2010, p.2). The methodology of bringing together theory and life narratives, description and interpretation in this thesis resembles the methodology of standpoint feminism. It is important to critically ask what role narratives of people's experiences have for the creation of knowledge. In standpoint feminism the challenging of dominant knowledges is linked to the idea of basing knowledge on the experiences of neglected and silenced standpoints and perspectives. Standpoint feminists such as Dorothy Smith (1997, p.392) aim for a "break with existing disciplines through locating knowledge or inquiry in women's standpoint or in women's experience." Sarah Bracke and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2009, p.46f) consider "how to think from women's lives" or the lives of subjectivities that dominantly do not inform knowledge. Referring to standpoint theorists such as Hartsock (1998) and Haraway (1985) they think of a feminist standpoint as a collective endeavour involving description, analysis and political struggle, which takes place in specific contexts. Challenging dominant knowledge and knowledge production in this sense is less a matter of liberating or discovering silenced voices than a political effort of collectively building standpoints, experiences and subjectivities.

Therefore I do not see my role as a researcher as liberating or giving a voice to silenced participants, but I view my efforts more as creating an archive, collecting and connecting those narratives. I thus chose to give a lot of space to the theoretical and interview narratives, to let the reader experience them. I see this thesis as well as both the theory I use and the narratives I have collected as efforts of building a standpoint, ways of perception and attention which are in contingency with and take (trans\*)gendered differences into account. Such motivations are explicitly stated in the theories as well as that they are an aspiration of the trans\*/feminist/queer scenes the participants are connected to. This does not withhold differences in approach or the fact that some personal statements or theoretical considerations may appear problematic from others' viewpoints. Yet, I see those theoretical and life narratives I bring together as part of a bigger effort. Bringing them together, finding their points of connection and synergies, and tracing moments where they can elaborate, extend and challenge each other is crucial to this thesis' approach.

In this process I made interpretational and theoretical framework choices. Especially in the first chapter I make choices of interpretation in the sense of how to connect concepts such as the body image to a specific event in a life narrative. In the second and third chapters participants themselves use the signifiers 'drag' and 'difference', yet, I made choices of what I can argue with and through these narratives and accounts, and how these differ and relate. These choices and arguments are part of knowledge production and are informed by political objectives aimed at contributing to possibilities for

self-reflective, gendered positioning and standpoints and should be subjected to critical scrutiny by the reader.

### **Participants, Locations, Situations**

I have been writing this master thesis as part of the Gender and Ethnicity Programme of the Utrecht University as well as at the Centre for Women's Studies in Granada. Not only participants and live narratives have a location, but so do methodology and writing. I studied in English at both universities and only read specific texts for my research also in German. Especially in Utrecht where I spent 1.5 years out of 2, a lot of courses are shaped by a new materialist and sexual difference perspective, which sparked my interest in the notion of difference as well as making me search for critiques of sexual difference from a transgender and queer perspective. Theories and studies on transgender or drag were hardly part of the curriculum, though more so in Granada than in Utrecht, and I read about transgender issues more of my own accord, the great majority of them stemming from the US context where transgender studies has been on the rise.

I started my research with regard to the life narratives by sending a call via a few feminist email lists in Utrecht.<sup>6</sup> Two interviews were initiated after replies to this call (Nic and Maddison). I also sent around the call to people personally and this is how the other 8 interviews came about. With regard to people in the latter group, I either knew that they engage in queer/drag performances or they had mentioned drag to me before in some other way (Alice had for instance told me in a conversation, "sometimes when I am in very female clothing, I feel like I am in drag") or a friend had read my call and referred me to someone they thought would be interesting to talk to (Ona). All participants however read the call before agreeing to be interviewed.

I had met all the participants before interviewing them. Kay I had talked to only once at a discussion evening, others were fellow students, former colleagues or friends from the feminist community in Utrecht. All the participants were to some extent aware of my own position as somebody who is part of feminist/queer communities, regularly visits performance nights, has been playing with various gender expressions and has done drag before. In the call for participants I also stated that "I am fairly cis gendered in my appearance, living masculinity and femininity both matters to me and can give me a lot of pleasure". I felt that in the majority of cases prior connections or shared communities created a level of trust and openness on the part of the participants that what I was doing had some political trans\*/feminist/queer backbone. A few participants also explicitly stated that they participated in the interview process because they trusted me. I also received replies from people to my call who I did not know. Some of these were a lot more critical of my research and it took a lot more information and contact to interest them in being interviewed. In the end, no interviews resulted from the contacts in question due to practical reasons such as where they lived or when they were available as well as the fact

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<sup>6</sup> askannabel@lists.riseup.net and facebook groups related to the gender studies programme in utrecht.

that at a certain point I already had enough interviews.

I used an open ended interview guide as an orientation during the interviews.<sup>7</sup> Themes of the interviews were the way participants related to the concept of drag and crossing conventional binary gender lines, how they used the word drag in their lives, and I asked about their gender expression, how they like to experiment with gender, sex and their body, what inspires them and what kind of body images they have; how they negotiate how to identify themselves, how they make sense of how their relation to gender/sex has changed over the years and what kind of feedback they get from their environment with regards to their gender performance/expression.

I never stuck to the way the questions were formulated in the interview guide. It was more a theme guide; most of the time I formulated questions differently according to how the conversation developed, the topics that came up and the language the participant used. Interviews took on various dynamics. Some participants would start talking at length about their relation to drag and gender from what they had thought about after reading the call for participants, others I asked more questions. The starting point for the interviews was usually something that I knew about the participant that would be easy to talk about, whether a performance I had seen by this person or an anecdote that we had shared previously about drag. The interview guide was phrased in a way that made it easy to start a conversation if drag is engaged in a stage performance. For participants who do not do drag on stage I had to rephrase many questions and ways of thinking about themes.

There were instances in which participants did not take up the stereotypical role of the passive research participant who submits to the researcher's agenda. At times participants commented my questions, decided to say certain things off the record or brought up the topic of knowledge politics and in how far I would be claiming participants' knowledges.

One participant, Jan Sophia, could not relate to the question "are there moments where you feel you do not fit into a binary gender norm?" because he usually does not think of the things that he does in the context of subversion of certain norms, but what he does (for instance drag on stage) is just what he does and does not to him represent being outside the norms. Which pointed me to the issue of how I reinforced a binary gender norm by asking such questions.<sup>8</sup>

One question I in the end only asked once, when one participant jokingly said, "well nobody has sent me to a doctor for this, yet," I asked in reply if ever anybody has implied that she was sick in relation to her gender which she negated. In general I did ask about, but not push, the final interview guide theme of problems/regulations. This research is an attempt to trace positive entry points for a reflected embodied, gendered self-understanding. Regulations and problems people encounter are relevant, but not to the focus of this research and I preferred not to reimpose a pathologising medical

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<sup>7</sup> For the full interview guide see appendix.

<sup>8</sup> For a further discussion on how participants feel 'different' or not see chapter three.

framework if it was not brought up by the participants. In one interview, Robyn was reading things on my paper and saw the word 'mentally ill' and asked what it is about. After I had explained the question, Robyn said that he was happy that the question had not been asked.

Various interviews were more in depth on different themes. With some participants I talked a lot about their stage performances, others more about everyday life, and with some more about queer politics. I felt that, at times, this also related to how I knew participants. As a result, some interviews are also represented more in some chapters than in others. With all participants, as I would intuitively phrase it, we talked about very personal stories and feelings. Some participants chose pseudonyms, others preferred the name with which they are more commonly addressed, which is not always their legal name.

At the end of the interviews I asked participants for their age, nationality, date and place of birth, current living environment, educational background, economic background, employment/current activities. I also asked them explicitly to explain the relevance they see in these points to the things we talked about during the interview.

While writing this methodology section I realised that to ask about participants' experiences with racialisation somehow slipped out of this list. I had been aware of the predominant whiteness of my interview partners throughout the research project, nevertheless, I did not consider, that in the end this is also an assumption and not their self-description. However, none of my participants mentioned that they had personally experienced racial discrimination, some did however criticise racist drag personas, the predominant whiteness of queer performances in their own contexts and also, for instance, the whiteness of their university environment which was understood as part of a wider context of spatial racial segregation.

The participants' economic background varied widely in terms of their family background as well as their current situation. One grew up in a single parent family with a sibling living on minimum wage, another described his family as 'simply rich'; these seemed to be the two most extremes of the spectrum. All the participants nevertheless felt that they had the opportunity to, for instance, move to other places and explore their interests and desires, even though there might have been some economic limitations on things as simple as for example whether they could afford expensive make up or wigs.

One further aspect discussed was the various socio-historically shaped geographic locations which are part of this research. The participants were born in Germany (2), Lithuania (2), Italy (2), England, Brazil, France and the USA. The interviews took place in Utrecht (4), Berlin (3), Nijmegen, Amsterdam and Granada. The first inspiration for this piece of research came from my experiences in the queer/performance/drag/transgender subculture of Berlin in 2010/11 which inspired me to explore, and positively affirm gender queerness on a personal and political level. This thesis is about the narratives of participants and the way narrative events can give an insight into the way gendered difference is negotiated and framed. It is not about a comparison between Berlin and

Utrecht as queer locations or about providing statistical data about differences between the various locations of the research. The locations are investigated here in so far as participants discuss them as relevant to their experience of gender, drag, subversion and gendered/sexual difference.

Berlin as a socio-cultural place was named as important by the people living there. Robyn said that moving from a smaller German town to Berlin was important, "otherwise this (drag/queer scenes) would have not found me". The queer scenes/queer performance scenes were seen as very relevant to their own drag practices<sup>9</sup> and participants named events such as Wigstöckel (from English 'Wig' and German 'Stöckel' which translates to heel), an event that started in 1996 and has since taken place almost every year.<sup>10</sup> These events provide a space for a diversity of drag/queer performances and the current online self-description on Facebook is as an event "from and for 'Tunten', 'Transen', Travesty artists, Trans-identified and all others who cannot be or do not want to be unambivalently identified over the classic Man/Woman scheme" ("Wigstöckel e.V." n.d.). Further spaces, associations and activist collectives in Berlin, such as the transgender Christopher Street Day, were also mentioned by participants. Participants in Berlin centrally mentioned associations, groups and other structures that have developed from a perspective of questioning exclusive, binary sex/gender from a trans perspective as well as the presence and friendship with transgender people as supporting them as well as challenging them to think about their own gendered position and the way they want to express and live this. Berlin as a place, its events, (self-)organisations and queer networks stand out in the way they were given importance in the narratives in comparison to Utrecht/Netherlands which was another place that was mentioned and discussed.

Some participants from the Utrecht area mentioned that there was a scene for performances in Utrecht/Amsterdam and that in general the Netherlands<sup>11</sup> was a space where such performances and also less conventional gender expression on the street was generally possible. Events mentioned from the Utrecht context were a first 'lady fest' ("Ladyfest Utrecht 2012" n.d.) in 2012 and the start of a queer performance night series

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<sup>9</sup> One participant, Pablo, talked about how he had heard stories about Berlin as very strict and interpreting queer in a way that it sets a lot of regulations and rules which he found paradoxical. He also had an anecdote where he himself got naked at a queer party in Berlin and was told of that this is not queer. He could have maybe understood if the other person would have said, not feminist, but queer, was utterly incomprehensible to him. Some performers from Amsterdam with whom I talked about my research project said that they now always think twice if they go to perform in Berlin because they feel the audience just rips them apart with political correctness. Kay who is a performer and lives in Berlin however did not assign certain critical attitudes towards certain locations. He said that there are always people who think that negative things should not be reproduced on stage, but he thinks that sometimes it is necessary and important in order to spark conversation and not ignore that this is part of the world. Who does not understand that he is pointing things out with a political agenda to fight them, simply does not get him and that is also okay. Other performers from Berlin, Jan Sophia and Robyn did not complain about how they feel restrained with regard to their performances.

<sup>10</sup> Wigstöckel had set out at its beginning to reunite the splintered 'drag queen' and 'Tunten' scenes, which have been described as two different transgender subcultures of female impersonation in Carsten Balzer's anthropological work on transgender subculture in Berlin (Balzer 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Some participants living in the Netherlands, did at times interchange using city names and then the country name and their stories often involved multiple cities such as Nijmegen and Amsterdam, Utrecht and Amsterdam, as those cities are also fairly connected.

called 'queer smear' ('Queer Smear' n.d.) which took place for the first time in November 2012 and had a follow-up in March 2013 as well as 'the diep festival' on sexualities which was started in 2012 and is turning into a yearly event. In this sense, the Netherlands was framed as a distinct place which provides fairly great freedom for performances.

People now living away from their country of birth referred to three places, France, Brazil and Italy where they grew up as not being so open to gender issues, particularly in public spaces and also with regard to their Catholic traditions and one participant Nic mentioned how on the street she tends to be more relaxed in the Netherlands than in Italy where there are certain places where she is more cautious. Goda said that if she were to move back to Lithuania, she would probably simply be doing very different things, be engaged in very different activism as it is different to living in the Netherlands.

Participants' specific every day contexts, for instance of work, were mentioned as relevant and possibly mediating these experiences of 'a country' or 'city'. The majority of participants said they think they are quite privileged with regard to the atmosphere regarding gender issues in their work/study context. Participants referred to for instance an art school they are at as a place where being strange is almost a plus or gender studies programmes where people feel fairly comfortable with diverse gender expressions. Eight out of ten participants explicitly referred to their working/studying contexts as being open towards gender issues, all in reference to university contexts regarding the topics of gender studies, arts and education. Some participants however also formulated reservations towards environments that they generally experienced as open. Jan Sophia says that sometimes he would like to tell people in an organisation where he wants to apply for work that:

"Ey, sorry, but some of your perspectives are very strange and distant for me and I experience them as very normative and excluding. You are missing some experience. I have had sex with one woman, many men and a transman. People working with masculinity politics do not have such an experience in most cases. And it simply makes a difference if you have seen a man with a cunt in front of you. That somehow changes something! I am instrumentalising my experience here a lot, but your imagination how diverse being a man can be. This field is quite diversity friendly and still my lived realities, my experiences are not so much part of it. And this is not only about sexual relationships. It is also about friendships, my friends create a spectrum of genders that is simply more than two, that simply is not so many." (Jan Sophia, drag queen performer)

This quote points to how there can be various levels of openness and diversity within a certain environment.

More than half of the participants pointed out how they are part of trans\*/feminist/queer spaces and communities in the places they live in and also say that this is something important to them. The majority of participants, some in all locations, are also critical of some norms of exclusion in queer environments, especially androgyny and a male body norm is criticised, while some participants also clearly stated that images of

androgyny have a power over them and they adore them.<sup>12</sup>

It was conspicuous that the participants mentioned reading, including academic reading on gender for coursework, as a source of inspiration and as supportive to finding positive frameworks for understanding one's life with regard to the notion of self, gender and sexuality. Calvin who spent a lot of time being a drag queen in London framed his experience as very central to how he experiences his gender now. To Maddison, the notion of community was very central, which was also mentioned a lot by other participants such as Nic, Calvin, Pablo and others.

Maddison pointed out a difference in queer contexts she has noticed between the US and places in Europe. In both locations where she lived in Europe she realised that her hot busted hard femme drag look is not read and interpreted as queer. In the US people recognise her as queer as she says and she points out provokingly "hello, which heterosexual guy would date me like this with my purple lipstick?" Whereas especially in Hungary some people in her queer collective wanted to teach her 'how to look queer'. In Utrecht there is more femme appreciation yet she is still the only drag queen girl. Additionally, Maddison points out her confusion about the lack of trans\* and gender queer people in Utrecht.

Especially with regard to the concept of drag it also became apparent how language plays a role in gendered conceptualisations. The word drag comes from English, but especially in combination with drag queen and king it is also used by participants living in the Netherlands, Spain and Germany. Jan Sophia, mentioned how he mainly associates the term drag with English speaking contexts and for instance Maddison mentioned how by the age of around 8 she first saw a drag show and got to know the word, which would be very different for people growing up in non-English speaking contexts. This shows how language and translation is one contextualising factor to the way gender is experienced and made sense of. In the following chapter, I will consider the ways gender is experienced and framed by participants in more detail, specifically taking up the theme of embodiment. I will continue to contextualise and historicise the gendered experience of participants throughout the following chapters.

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<sup>12</sup> For a further discussion see chapter 1.

### 3. Contingencies of Gendered Embodiment: Building Connections between the concept of the Body Image in Transgender Theory and the Life Narratives of Participants

#### **Introduction**

I met Ona for the first time more than a year before the interview was conducted. We then continued to bump into each other every once in a while and had some nice chats. When looking for interview partners, a friend told me that Ona might have some everyday life stories to tell. I was also told that Ona had just recently got a 'how to do the feminine look' self-made booklet from a friend for her birthday, as a joke following a night where Ona said to her friends, "well, do me all this make up, I wanna try it and really do not know how to do it." After I sent her my call, Ona was up for being interviewed and I want to introduce her here in the way I made sense of our interview, as an introduction to this first analysis chapter.

Ona is 25 years old, lives in Utrecht and always knew she wanted to be a girl. In what she does, how she dresses, she likes plain things, things that cover her body and she was never into putting much effort into looking feminine. She just goes for things that she wants and likes, regardless of their gender connotation, whether something is masculine or feminine is just not much of a relevant question for Ona.

When she was a child it happened that she was taken as 'such a nice boy', which was simply weird and confusing to her. Why after all? Why would anyone call her a boy just because she was wearing a baggy sweatshirt? She and her parents always took it more as a joke and did not worry about it much. It still happens to her, even now she has long hair, when she is bundled up in winter, but it happened even more when she had short hair. Once even during a longer conversation a group of guys on the street thought she was a guy, too, and a friend once told her that she is not really like the other girls, but more like a "sexy boy" to him. It has also happened that people think because of the way she looks that she is a lesbian and just does not know it yet.

In her teenage years Ona did not like getting a curvy body. She would have liked a more plain body; she did not like getting breasts. Today, if she had a free wish from a fairy so she could have a different body for a day, she would not want to have a male body, though perhaps a more ambiguous one. She has never felt a conflict between being a woman in a woman's body, but she feels she gives it a different meaning and interpretation than other people do.

It is confusing to Ona how much attention is paid to the body and she notices this attention especially from men on women's bodies in the context of relationships and sex. "Bodies are beautiful," but - at times - she has experienced this as over-attention. Already as a teenager she did not like to show her body as much, which was also one reason she liked clothes that cover the body.

Maybe sometimes she happens to blur gender boundaries, but it is not something

she does consciously. She does not actively do it as a political act; she just does what she does and would therefore also not use the label drag for anything that she does, even though other people might. How far is she on the boundaries of categories? That depends, she says, on how you even define those boundaries, from a more mainstream or a more queer perspective. As she perceives it, some people think that she is on the boundaries of things; others would laugh and say, well, there are people that are so much more on boundaries.

It is not surprising to Ona that stereotypes do not work and some people with a male body do not want to be a man or with a female body do not want to be a woman. The world is more complex and stereotypes simply do not always fit. Listening to people and hearing about their experiences is something very valuable to her, as is getting to know oneself better and finding different perspectives and ways to understand oneself. This is also what she liked the most about the interview: by seeing which questions I asked, she gained a new perspective on her own life.

The above is a sketch I wrote of the way that Ona described herself and her stories during our interview. More towards the end of this chapter I will come back to the narratives of the 10 interviews I conducted with participants. The starting point of this chapter however will be the thinking of two transgender scholars on embodiment. I bring these two sets of narratives (interviews and theory) together in an experiential way of seeing in how far concepts from transgender studies can also be made sense of in the lives of mainly non-trans\* identified drag performers. This is an attempt to explore how participants narrate their lives and how contingencies can be established with perspectives that start from trans\* experiences.

It is crucial not to force what is at times labelled as gender 'non-normativity' (Salamon, 2010) (not fitting into the dominant social imaginary of gender and sex) only onto trans\* people in a narrow sense, but to see that it is possible to also recognize gender non-normativity in the experiences of people who do not identify as trans\*. At the moment, 'transgender' is commonly, also by participants, used more strictly for people who consistently live in a gender they were not assigned to at birth.<sup>13</sup> This chapter argues in favour of seeing this divide as contingent and highlights the importance of relating beyond such categories and questioning their validity, however real they might appear to us.

Susan Stryker and Gayle Salamon are both US transgender scholars. Susan Stryker has been a leading figure in bringing transgender studies into academia in the US not only through academic work and publications, but also by strongly institutionalising the field. One of her latest successes is the publishing and editing of the in 2013 starting *Transgender Quarterly Journal*. Gayle Salamon is a member of a younger generation of transgender scholars. She published her first book *Assuming a Body: Transgender and*

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<sup>13</sup> I will discuss how such a narrower understanding of trans\* coupled with cis\* as its oppositional binary is problematic in more detail in the chapter on difference.

*Rhetorics of Materiality*, which I build on in this chapter, in 2010 and is currently working at Princeton University. They both use distinct approaches and styles to write about gender and the body from a trans\* perspective. Stryker broadly bases her texts on a phenomenological description of her own life and embodiment. She illustrates how there are constant on-going processes negotiating materiality, sociality, structures and fantasies, and the contingency of these in the texts 'My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage' as well as 'Dungeon Intimacies: The Poetics of Transsexual Sadomasochism' which I will work with here. In the first chapter of *Assuming a Body* called "The Bodily Ego and the Contested Domain of the Material" Salamon provides a thorough rereading of psychoanalysis from a transgender perspective and frames her main argument so as to indicate that there is a gap between the materiality one lives and the body image for all genders.

Gayle Salamon and Susan Stryker explicitly claim that the concepts they develop from a transgender perspective are applicable to the experience of all embodiment. Susan Stryker posts transsexual experience as a force of destabilization to the presupposition of stable genders and bodies as that on which personal identity depends and causally stems from as naturally given. She sees the need to affirm and take up the insult directed at transsexuals as being monsters or creatures. She wants to affirm that all embodiment and selves are creatures, are created beings, a made thing, and not a constant stable given (Stryker, 2006b, p.245f).

I will illustrate how such a way of phrasing gender speaks to not only transsexual people, but can also be connected to the narratives of the interview participants with regard to gender. Despite differences in how gender non-normativity is lived and experienced, I argue that on the level of experiencing gender, the gendered sense of self and relationship to one's body, it is possible to identify points of connection and contingencies between the experiences of trans people and cis-identified people. To allow, see and live such connections and contingencies is important in order to counter the exoticisation and medicalisation of transgender people as utterly different, mysterious and/or sick. Thinking and theorising about transgender issues must take into account its implications and connections for all embodiment in order to not re-other it and constrain its critical potential for re-thinking gender.

In the first sections of this chapter I will introduce how Stryker and Salamon both argue for seeing beings and bodies as created, as creatures, in an on-going tension between material, psychic and social structures. Both Salamon and Stryker dwell on and develop a way of thinking and living the body that one could even say creates a contingency between different genders, a way of framing gender as processual and non-fixed, yet felt. For this chapter they will be read together and the complementary aspects of their approaches will be highlighted. In the second section in particular, attention will be turned to how both theorists write about a felt sense of self, about an immediate feeling and certainty of, for instance, knowing to 'be a woman' and how they integrate this into a framework of thinking embodiment as ambiguous and constantly in process between the

psychic and material as developed in the first section. The body image and a felt sense of the body are central concepts in this second section. Salamon in particular brings into play the issue of transgender embodiment by claiming that for all embodiment there is a gap between the body image one has and the materiality one finds, whether it is felt in small moments of looking into the mirror or whether it is a constant feeling of not being able to produce the gendered body image one wants to have.

In the last two sections I will introduce the interview data in more detail and read it in connection to the theory presented. I will expand on their claims concerning embodiment and will try to make them more tangible by tracing how these theoretical claims about gendered embodiment can in general (not only for transgender people) be traced in the life narratives of people and specifically also in those of people with different identifications; after all, most of the interview participants voiced in some measures a non-trans\* identification.

The participants talked about and understood themselves in reference to a multiplicity of notions and criticised the ways society demands you to express a consistent, essential gendered understanding of oneself. In the participants' narratives there are moments where a sense of self and body image come into play. The participants actually highlighted a multiplicity of body images and not just one.

Some participants pointed not only to moments of feeling a discrepancy between their body image and the materiality they find themselves with, as theorised by Salamon, but also to a social dimension of a gap between the way they imagine and see themselves, and the way others see and read them. This points to how the participants have re-coded specific sex and body parts, images and appearances. They especially voice annoyance about the latter gap, about the normativity of how bodies are coded and read; which bodies are allowed to be lived in certain ways and allowed to connect to a certain gendered notion or identity. They also lament the strong demand for consistency in this realm while participants experience a multitude of body images and gendered roles, which they enjoy and live often depending on the context they are in.

### **Transgender Theory Unsettling the Natural**

To live as a creature, a transsexual, is - in the context of contemporary societal norms - staged as a spectacle for its being made and remade, involving amputations, bandages, clothes, make up. It is in many ways contested and denied. Language and our imagination, are widely unable to represent the movement of transgender subjects over time and through gendered categories. Stryker talks about how after great investments she still feels invisible in many circumstances and constellations:

“Now, as a dyke I am invisible among women; as a transsexual, I am invisible among dykes. As the partner of a new mother, I am often invisible as a transsexual, a woman, and a lesbian... The collective assumptions of the naturalized order soon overwhelmed me. Nature exerts such a hegemonic oppression.” (Stryker 2006b, p. 251)

Stryker delves into techniques of her own bodily production to bring to the fore the processual and made character of bodies and their gender. Stryker thinks of gender as patterns and automatisms which resonate in the space of the body before there is consciousness thereof. This is her attempt to highlight the created nature of all embodiment (Stryker 2008, p.42).

To make this process visible and graspable, she takes up sadomasochism (SM) as that which became her technique for the production of transgender embodiment, where patterns of identification, sensation and appearance can be dismembered and bodily space remapped. Stryker describes how she sees in front of herself the map of San Francisco, its various subcultural districts and the movements of exclusion and relocation of different bodies, places, patterns of desire, sexualities and genders. She takes architecture and geography as starting points to envision the logics of location. She first elaborates on the history of the industrial architecture and then moves on describing the dungeon, the SM space of the Golden Bull where she used to go in the 1990s in San Francisco. She theorises place as process, as a temporal coming together of material and contingent forces. Not only architecture and gentrification are 'glocal,' both global and local phenomena, but also transsexual SM epitomises the process in which the body materialises its place, where - in shared patterns of motion - the body actively receives and transmits the movements of others, of social forces. Stryker recalls:

"In dungeon space I could see a woman in the mirror, and step into the place of woman in the structure of another's desire, to witness those bodily signs - the heaves and shudders and seeping fluids - that attested to my viable occupation of that fantasized place for them." (Stryker 2008, p.43)

In the conscious rhythm and solitude of these patterns, fantasies of new sequences and positions can be lived, sensed and incarnated. In this architecture of relations it is possible to experiment with gender through a physical engagement (Stryker 2008, p.40). What took place in these catacombs was a fluctuation where one can think "fantasy as inhabited structure and of structure as inhabited fantasy" (Stryker 2008, p.39). The distinction between real and fantasy, between masquerade and real becomes obsolete. This assemblage in the dungeon brought to the fore space as simultaneously "phantasmatic and material" (Stryker 2008, p.39). Stryker here again uses the analogy to buildings which can be furnished with variable contents both tangible and psychic. Stryker thus refuses an easy relation or separation between psychic and material structures in embodiment. Stryker thinks her body,

"[my body] as a melting point, a node, where external lines of force and social determination thicken into meat and circulate as movement back into the world. So much that constitutes me, I did not choose, but, now constituted, I feel myself to be in a place of agency." (Stryker 2008, p.42)

SM gave her the possibility to extend into the world and through her presence in patterns and rhythm find possibilities to repeat patterns and to inhabit and envision new patterns.

SM becomes gender poesis, an act of artistic creation, when transformation extends not only to the imagining being, but to others and the world that embeds them. The dungeon in the Golden Bull is a laboratory for poesis where transsexual embodiment can be incarnated and which Stryker uses in her writing to create a perpetual process of growing new boundaries and making an interplay between materiality and the psychic in embodiment visible (Stryker 2008, p.43).

Stryker theorises a social dimension of all embodiment which implies that others are implied and undone in their embodiment by transsexual poesis. In her text this is not only a theoretical rethinking of embodiment, but also an emancipatory call to fantasise and awake from the automatics of gender and embodiment, and live gender poesis, to see and live the creation of genders and bodies, and to not segregate all non-normative bodies as illusionary fantasies.

Salamon brings a more traditionally theory-based approach to bear on the project of unsettling a conception of the body as naturally given. She mobilises psychoanalytic conceptions of the bodily ego in order to understand under which conditions embodiment proceeds and a body and sex are assumed. Her point of departure is Freud and his formulation of the bodily ego. She works through a great range of different scholars from Anzieu, Schilder to Silverman to argue that, also for normatively gendered people, the body one feels to have is not inevitably the same body that is given by its exterior boundaries (Salamon 2010, p.3).

Salamon unsettles 'the natural' by showing how the relation between the material and the psychic is not theorised as causal and uni-directionally linked. Neither psyche nor subjectivity linearly derive from the materiality of the body. The materiality of the body is granted and must even be affirmed, however this does not imply that bodily materiality is a simple matter (Salamon 2010, p.33).

Salamon cites Freud on how "the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego, it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface" (Salamon 2010, p.21). The ego inter-dependes on the projection of a coherent entity, a body and its surface, also referred to as the body image. Salamon mostly argues in line with Silverman in her understanding of the body image. After Silverman there is always an element of fantasy or fictiveness that is part of the constitution of the image which founds and represents the ego. 'Solely' materiality is not the basis for psychic identity. A notion of distance is part of any identification. Identification takes place with an idealised image, which even if internalised is always external to the subject in question. The image is a more general notion and part of the visual register. Identification with an idealised subject position is an impossible attempt to bridge the gap between particularity and the idealised image (Salamon 2010, p.23).

The body is constituted as a whole through image, posture and touch. Image and touch necessarily rely on a distance in those operations. Touch arises in interaction with another object or person, and is as the image mediated through the senses. Images are filtered through cultural representations. Also posture is a phenomenon built up through a

series of images, social relations and identifications. Bodily contours arise out of a tension between the psychic and the material. Becoming a body involves a fictive wholeness and coherence, while there is in fact always misrecognition and difference at play in identification (Salamon 2010, p.23ff).

Salamon here carefully reads psychoanalytic theory to illustrate how bodies are made and are available to us in a tension between psychic and material forces. Drawing on Grosz, she even contests the model of a material core overlaid with a psychic surface as for one reason it might lead to an urge to discover the underlying pure materiality. In her framework, the psyche and the body are characterised, not through their ability to contain, but through their lability and a multiplicity of touching surfaces (Salamon 2010, p.27f).

Through an inspection of theory, Salamon points to the difference at work in embodiment and the complexity of the tension between materiality and psyche at play therein. The body image in this theorisation must be built up into an assemblage that we eventually recognise as a whole, which is a process that is never final (Salamon 2010, p.29). In this manner she unsettles the idea of a naturally given body which uniformly relates to bodily identity and from the outset situates herself in theories on all embodiment and makes this claim for all and not only transgender embodiment.

### **An Authentic Body Feeling in Transgender Theory**

Talking of gender Stryker asks

“Who can say why I heard its music the way I did? All I know is that from earliest memory I disliked being called 'he' and longed to be addressed as 'she'. I wanted to look like what I considered myself to be, and perceived that I was profoundly misplaced – all of which evoked in me the utter sadness of feeling irremediably lost and alone in a situation impossibly to rectify... These feelings were real. I am agnostic as to their origin. I did not choose them. I chose only how I would inhabit the architecture of their affect.” (Stryker 2008, p. 42)

An immediate feeling of who one is figures very prominently in Stryker's text as she writes starting from her own embodied past, as exemplified by the above quote. The question of where this feeling comes from is very explicitly incorporated. She also freely states that she is not able to testify to why she feels the ways she does, and questions whether anybody could. This question gains attention in the case of transgender people where it does not fall in line with cultural expectations based on the morphology of a person.

Salamon very explicitly asks the same question as Stryker. She does not seek to answer it at the individual level, where the impossibility to answer posited by Stryker persists, but engages further with psychoanalytic theory in order to unfold a more general logic behind the body feeling which on first consideration seems as the most internal and immediate phenomenon.

As elaborated above, Salamon builds on the difference as theorised as part of any identification. She argues here that we only have recourse to a psychic representation of the body that we come to recognise over time as a whole. The body image “is the

perception, immediate and certain, that the body comprises a unit, but even here ... [it] is not a mere perception and is not mere representation" (Salamon 2010, p.31).

The body image is multiple, evolves over time through social relations and cannot be described as in a direct identical relation to the contours of the body. The coherence of the body is established through a reliance on a layer of accumulated memories. Past impressions may rise into consciousness as images, but more often as organised modes, as bodily schemata. Bodily schemata modify the impressions of the sensory system. So our immediate sense of ourselves is mediated through past experiences. As the origins of the body image are relational as well as temporal and the body image appears to function as a mediating entity between self and world, it is not voluntaristic or consciously chosen (Salamon 2010, p.31).

Materiality, even though it must be affirmed, thus always remains ambiguous and arises from a psychic relation between body and world. The material body and psychic imaginary are phenomenologically simultaneous, not causal, but maintain a necessary and productive link (Salamon 2010, p.31). Salamon, suggests that "the usefulness of the body image for theorizing gendered embodiment is precisely not that the body image is material, but that it allows for a resignification of materiality itself" (Salamon 2010, p.38).

Despite upholding that to theorise a simple correspondence between materiality and gender identity is very problematic and the sense of one's body cannot be understood as based on such a correspondence, Salamon upholds that transsexuals have an investment of sex into flesh, and without such investment the relationship of any gendered person

"to our bodies is one of depersonalized estrangement: my sense of the 'mine-ness' of my own body – and, crucially, even my sense of its coherence – depends on this narcissistic investment." (Salamon 2010, p.42)

This investment, the affirmation of materiality, is - in the case of transgender people - to insist on the liveability of one's particular embodiment that is culturally abjected. It is a

"constant and always incomplete labor to reconfigure more than just the materiality of our own bodies. It is to strive to create new meanings of those materialities." (Salamon 2010, p.42)

Stryker invests in this project outlined by Salamon on a less theoretical level and dares to bring in more practical transsexual experiences, working and reworking the connotations involved in them. She confronts her audience with the wish for amputation, felt by many, if not all transsexuals. Stryker talks about the fantasy of bodily wounds, cuts of opening and amputation as a space of subjective fulfilment and how the opening of a space gives potential for regeneration and the movement of desire into it. It is the "transformative growth in which absence becomes the space of possibilities" (Salamon 2010, p.45) that Stryker describes as desirous.

To integrate this felt sense of embodiment and work with it instead of deny it or argue against it when reconceptualising the body, proves to be crucial, especially when envisioning a space for transgender embodiment. Both theorists theorise an immediate

sense of the body and integrate it into a larger framework which highlights the processual tension between psychic and material investment in a sense of the body. However, Stryker in particular, highlights that even though it is inevitable to conceive of our bodies as coherent entities, it is nevertheless important to inspect and invest in moments like the one in the dungeon that might be privileged to reveal something about embodiment, the sutures and poesies of our bodies.

### **A Gendered Sense of Self in Participants' Narratives**

With regard to the interview narratives, I want to start writing about the way people talked about themselves and named themselves in the interviews. These notions can be related to the felt sense of one's body theorised above. Salamon and Stryker provide a framework for placing an immediately felt sense of one's gender, of one's body, in a post-structuralist framework of thinking. Such an immediate feeling is here not understood as a contradiction, but as part of a processual understanding of the relationship between materiality and the psychic, and as coming about through difference and identification.

The immediately felt sense that Salamon talks about is mainly related to the body image one has. Participants also described a sense of self that does not mention images of their body. A felt sense of 'who am I' was not always described in relation to body images. People described something that could also be referred to as the gender identity of a person. Gender identity is a term derived from psychology in the 1950s and 1960s in the US which has also been adopted by transgender advocacy and activist discourses all over the world. The EU report *Trans and Intersex People: Discrimination on the Grounds of Sex, Gender identity and Gender expression* defines gender identity in a way that seems to closely resemble how participants experience gender as a phenomenon. In it gender identity is understood as a person's deeply felt individual experience of gender. This experience can or cannot be in line with the sex assigned at birth. Part of gender identity is the sense of the body which might involve modifications of bodily appearance or function by surgical or other means as well as other expressions of gender, including manners, clothing and ways of speaking. Gender expression refers to someone's way of embodying their gender identity. People usually seek to make their gender presentation fit their gender identity/ies (European Union, 2012). Here a sense of the body, bodily appearance and gender expression are actually defined as part of a person's gender identity and this definition broadly overlaps with how participants at times referred to their gender identity without reference to the body, however body images and expressions were also a central part of this at other times.

For some interviewees questions about their sense of self were first and foremostly associated with pressure and uncomfortable situations. Even if I tried to phrase and contextualise these in ways that signal a non-essentialist understanding of gender identity, at times it seemed to repeat a question that society asks of everybody in many very persistent and stubborn ways and most often in an essentialist framework which contrasts to the post-structuralist framework of Salamon and Stryker as well as the definition of

gender identity above. One participant, Robyn, directly criticised the concept of an essential identity. While doing so s\_he also formulated how s\_he thinks about one's being, one's core more as something unstable and wobbly, which seems more approximate to the way Stryker and Salamon theorise embodiment:

"I have a piece, it does not have a name yet, but it will be called something like perlmuttercore ... that talks about things like identity questions and all the things that you need to already have found, or are supposed to, and that this is somehow shit and so on, ... ha-ha.. (..) well actually it is perlmutter, pudding core. This weird essentialist self that is said to somehow exist, in fact that is flabby all the time and moving, but all the time there are people who want to determine it or also have to, well.. and, eh, that is quite exhausting... that all the questions of being, of the becoming and the past being are supposed to be clarified, is really to ask a lot of such a wobbly perlmutter pudding."  
(Robyn, Berlin, used to have a love story with drag, partially trans\*)

This spoken word piece formulates a critique of the concept of identity as it is worked with in many contexts, especially institutional ones all over Europe, but also in the everyday life assumptions people display. This quote highlights the difference with how a felt sense of self is theorised by Salamon and Stryker. Identity is often connoted as something predetermined, fixed, stable, binary and easily given while in contrast the sense of self after Salamon and Stryker arises out of an interplay between the psychic and the material and is under constant mainly unconscious renegotiation.

Three participants clearly indicated that for them questions concerning self-identification are problematic at the moment. I did not directly ask the majority of interviewees such questions. One reason was, that I knew these would possibly be uncomfortable and another central reason was that I was actually more interested in longer stories and ways of experiencing gender and only later on might have also asked questions as "Which labels do you tend to use for yourself?". I ended up asking how people describe themselves only in few interviews directly, because participants had already talked about it by themselves or because I felt the answer could possibly not be pinned down so easily. In the latter cases, participants would actually talk about what is complicated to them about the question 'who am I?'.<sup>14</sup>

Here Calvin described how he feels after having engaged in drag queen performances in all kinds of settings for years.

"Through the experience of doing all these things, I really feel now a point where I want to somehow understand how my own expression comes through, how I can express myself without making those performances, or..yeah... and I think it is very complicated, because it is also this kind of existential crisis of, who am I? (..)You know, it is easy to do all these kind of things, in a way like, when... yeah, most gender transgression is within such specific boundaries that that is easy, really... or if you go to a party, or if .. to be something at the fairies where drag is somehow the thing, it is not enforced, but it is almost the natural thing (...) so actually I feel that it is

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<sup>14</sup> I will discuss the way participants positioned themselves and how they felt they are different and did not feel they fit society's expectations in the final chapter in which the focus is on the concept of difference

really challenging when it becomes personal, and I think that is also why I feel a bit like, I think it is that difference between when it is sensational, because that is never personal, that is more, you are doing things to provoke reaction. (..) But I think it is also like when I don't want reaction, or I don't know what the reaction is that I want, yeah, then it has to do with expressing yourself.. but that is... I mean I don't really know, I don't know if... I don't know how... how you would... it depends on how you think about it, what it means to express yourself... because I don't know really, who I am, so I don't know what it would mean..." (Calvin, drag queen for many years, also professionally, talking in his apartment in Amsterdam)

This quote illustrates an overwhelming sense of pondering 'who are you' and how one can express oneself or one's confusion. Both the above quotes illustrate how for some participants a felt sense of self and body is actually not always described as 'immediate and certain' as theorised by Salamon, but experienced as complicated or subject to a certainty of not knowing.

One participant, Kay, described how - after having transitioned through hormones and top surgery to the body of a trans\* guy - he feels much more comfortable with himself than he could have imagined before and also wears items, colours and does things that are connoted as female and feels comfortable. Now that he generally feels comfortable it is much easier to play with gender and be less insistent. Another participant, Jan Sophia also indicated that this feeling of 'nothing really fits me' could be temporal, even at times he hopes for a change, but ultimately he did not seem convinced by himself, that anything will ever "really fit;" no terms such as "feminine man" or "transgender" really suit his experience. Kay and Jan Sophia in this sense hint at the idea that feeling in between could be a temporal state and that one day one finds one's spot that 'fits'. Jan Sophia seemed to not really believe in this possibility, while Kay narrated his story in a way that he has found some calmness now, even though he still occupies many in-between spaces. Some participants also experienced 'not fitting in' or 'feeling in-between' as a feeling that they described to have taken them a long time to accept, but that they now indicated as a fairly certain feeling of how they have come to know themselves.<sup>15</sup>

A position that is not clearly associated with one of the dominant genders in a strict sense brings about moments of confusion, in which one is questioned. A way of thinking of oneself as not fitting in at the same time 'fits' well with queer or transgender theory about embodiment, that sees an ambiguity in all embodiment. Despite theorising embodiment as being ambiguous, endlessly individual and vague, Salamon (2010) still recovers feeling as an entity and having an imaginary of oneself, through theorizing the felt sense. This way of theorising allows us to also think of feeling in-between as a sense of self possible among seemingly endless possibilities. Being drawn to ambiguity, fluidity and a feeling of 'in-between', 'a lack of a contained self' (Goda) which participants referred to is another way of having a felt sense of being. We all do have such a sense of whatever kind, our desire to live as that which we feel might stand out or give more or less trouble depending on how well it blends into the dominant concepts of the environment we are

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<sup>15</sup> For more detail see the chapter on difference.

part of.

In the end, all the participants did use words and phrases to describe a sense of self. Gendered self-descriptions formulated in all the interviews illustrate a multiplicity of possibilities which also go beyond a dual frame of male and female. Some I rephrase here out of longer paragraphs to be able to demonstrate the breadth of the descriptions, for some I have found illustrative quotes<sup>16</sup>:

"At this moment as hard femme drag or hard femme witch girl gang ..... rape revengist... or something like that"	Maddison
"partially trans* in transition to something"	Robyn
feminine feminist	Alice
one person has been very active as a drag queen also professionally, right now not really knowing how to identify and thinking about maybe being a cross dresser more than a drag queen.	Calvin
woman yet understanding it often "differently than others"	Ona
"Queer, as long as it is not too normative yet"	Pablo
"trans guy"	Kay
Jan Sophia feels no label really fits regardless of what people say how they perceive him whether it is as feminine man, transgender or new man.	Jan Sophia
"I find it very comfortable to be, to present myself as lesbian in certain environments, as a woman in other environment in some other environment I do not like to be called a lesbian, or, ehm, some, eh... I am always fine with being a woman actually, but there are some contexts in which I do not feel, necessarily like being a woman is my first aspect of my identity one was wondering if feminine man is something sometimes to say"	Nic
Mostly feeling in-between, not really using that as a self-description, though, but playing with many labels.	Goda

The majority of participants had one label or category they found describes them most of the time. Nic for instance said that "I am kind of always fine with the label woman" even though she explained it is context dependent which connotations and labels she would be comfortable with. In such descriptions of themselves, the participants formulated an awareness and observation of their gendered selves and experiences as temporal, processual and possibly shifting as theorised by Salamon and Stryker. Participants, for instance, talked about past (passed) phases, saying things like "This was my boy face, I liked to dress like a hip hop dude" (Alice) or "And know I am probably past that (masculine) phase and now I am getting, getting back to sort of this, trying to be comfortable with the fact that I actually have never managed to be in one position or the other. So kind of I think I, I except these, I do have these, I enjoy that feminine, role and I

<sup>16</sup> These examples highlight that most participants do not centrally identify as transgender. One does so and one does so partially. Others differ in their expressed relation to trans\*. How participants relate to or differentiate themselves from trans\* will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

enjoy that very masculine role and I definitely enjoy a certain gender ambiguous role” (Goda).

Some participants would state outright which kind of associations and imaginaries they have and which labels they use and are comfortable with, but also made it very clear that it depends on the context they are in, the people they are with. This participant hypothesised how she feels if somebody for instance says, oh, you look very feminine in this shirt.

“Yes. Yes, and I get annoyed sometimes (..) sometimes I find it pretty uncomfortable, so I am like, okay then I am changing the shirt. But you know there are occasions when I actually find it super sweet.... ehm... a while ago I... this... eh... this friend of mine... a guy... we had... we had intimate moments together and then afterwards he, he was like... hm.. was focusing on all the things that he found so feminine about me... he was like... oh wow, you are a lot more feminine than I thought in under your clothes you are a lot more feminine than, than I thought and then, then in that case I kind of found it sweet because he was almost surprised.”

(Nic, identifies as a woman and plays with different kinds of roles)

This quote illustrates how the feeling evoked by one notion such as feminine can be either described as feeling 'annoyed' or 'finding it super sweet.' In participants' narratives there is an outstanding awareness how one's sense of self and intuitions of what one wants to do or be depends on the context and time. The following quote is another example of how differently connoted roles, identities and practices can be part of the imaginary of oneself.

“And then a very good friend of mine, a guy, another one, ehm, so we were talking and whatever and we are really good friends and at one point he said, I always wanted to have a gay experience, but I do not fancy men very much, but I have always wanted, because I think that actually, whatever... so he was reflecting on his whole sexuality and then he kissed me and then.. wow... you know the evening went on and we were among friends and whatever and so for the whole time for the whole evening and night we were performing as a gay couple, as two men, because that fit well and I found it kind of strange, because I knew him all too well, to be.. to be a girl with him, I thought this is weird. We are friends and I am not his type of girls, this just does not fit, also in front of other people it just does not fit and somehow it was much more easy for both of us, to, to somehow narratively to each other and to the people around us to perform as if we were two gay men. (...) and that is something it happened to me sometimes to perform more on more masculinity, but then gay kind of masculinity around men in intimate situations ... Gay masculinity, or whatever you want to call it so to speak, so that was always in my imaginary anyway.”

(Nic, identifies as a woman and plays with different kind of roles)

These quotes illustrate how different constellations and relationships can create space for living different gendered roles and possibly also create opportunities for exploring different ways of understanding oneself. It also shows how the associations and imaginaries that one is comfortable with might depend on the environment one is in. For some participants intimate relationships also seemed one area where they were especially aware that gendered scripts were at play.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> How sexuality, desire and pleasure is connected with gendered embodiment is a theme that is also

In the following quote Jan Sophia described how both of his names are linked to different imaginaries of himself. At other times, he also referred to having different body images, but here he talked about a feeling of self and being a different person.

“That is crazy. What kind of different experiences I have with this. What I... I think, really, that I am somewhat a different person, when somebody calls me Jan or Sophia. In case they do it in a consistent way. It is really crazy. Really split actually... no, not split, because there are overlaps, but I indeed think that I have some kind of male image of myself, more at least when I am Jan, and when I am Sophia, in fact I have something like a female feeling of self, or a bit more. That means none of that is neutral and I really also do not feel like inventing a third name. It is all crap.” (Jan Sophia)

The narratives of how people formulate their reactions to notions such as feminine, masculine, man, woman, butch, gay man, drag queen, drag... illustrate how 'intuitive' feelings towards such notions are very different. The interviewees expressed that, also as mostly non-trans\* identified people, their way of relating to and mapping such notions and practices does not align with traditional conceptions of a causal relation between sex, gender, sexuality. They emphasised a great particularity and individuality in the sexual and gendered schema of the body and how people narrate their experiences.

Participants described immediate and direct feelings of what they like or do not like. These feelings can be contradictory, multiple or not quite possible (yet/anymore). Feeling ambivalent and in-between or not completely fitting into dominant understandings of women and men was present in all the interviews to varying degrees. How Salamon and Stryker theorise a gendered sense of self with regard to its social dimension and processual character resonates with the narratives that participants created about the past and present of their gendered embodiment. Participants' descriptions seem to point to reflection on and thinking about concepts similar to the ones Salamon and Stryker work with.

### **The Place of the Body in Participants' Narratives**

The previous discussion of how participants framed their experience of gender largely did so without discussing issues of the body or materiality. A sense of self was – at some points in the narratives – not exactly described as linearly and automatically deriving from

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discussed by Salamon in the second chapter of *Assuming a Body*. Desire and sex is one way in which being oneself and being another, being one's materiality and at the same time beyond it, comes out very strongly. Sexuality makes very sensible the transfer the body into something that is less a being in itself and into a mode of directionality towards another. Sexuality was also discussed by the participants on multiple levels, however, this aspect which Salamon discussed by working through Merleau Ponty's thinking of sexuality from a phenomenological perspective was referred to less in the narratives. Participants mainly mentioned sexuality in ways such as the stereotypical connection between gender non-normativity and homosexuality. Some people who identify as women that are read as masculine talked about how they are often read as lesbians. One participant for instance also reflected on how, in her experience of herself and in her desires for what to be, there has been an interlinking of sexuality and gender in congruence of how there is a norm connecting being a woman with a certain sexuality.

“I don't know what changed, I wanted to be a girl (after wanting to be a boy), and I wanted to have a boyfriend. And I was fine with this, because it is not so difficult to be heterosexual in a heterosexual society. (...) I think it is quite related to gender to, how your sexuality is expressing is also a bit how you are expressing yourself, how you portray yourself in the society and so on.”

one's anatomy, but as changing, context dependent, intuitive and working on a multitude of gendered notions. This illustrates, how in the end the sense of self, if at times confusing, is experienced as an immediate feeling in the sense of not constantly consciously linked to embodiment. Yet Salamon and Stryker work with an understanding of the body as central to subjectivity and view rethinking embodiment and the notion of the body from a transgender perspective as crucial.<sup>18</sup> In this second part, I want to focus on how notions of the body, materiality and embodiment were embedded during the interviews.

The participants described an intuitive feeling not only with regard to how they describe themselves or which roles they like to adopt as illustrated in the previous section, but also with regard to how they like to shape their body using for instance clothes or which kind of images/physical notions they like to think of themselves with. The notion of a body image appears in different instances in participants' narratives. Maddison for instance mentioned that she is aware of certain images and preferences she has "I wear the shortest shorts possible, you know what I mean, and because I have flesh everywhere half of the time, which I view as part of my gender presentation". She was also conscious about the effort she puts into her gendered self-presentation and how she simply likes certain looks, things, imaginaries better than others: "like I try to look like a witch, I try to look like I can beat you up, and I try to look queer, because I think those things are all hot. Not because I think, I feel like, those I feel like I am forced to present to people, but they are things that I like and... I feel like I embody those" (Maddison).

The notion of a gap between the sense of the body one has and the materiality one lives derives from the theorisation that there is ambivalence and difference at play between the psychic and material in all embodiment. This notion of the gap between, on the one hand, the image a person has of his body and, on the other hand, the materiality s/he finds, which Salamon conceptualises, on first sight is easily connected to the wish of amputation, hormonal supplementation or devices such as chest binders or the tucking of penis or testicles. This gap can be made sense of quite easily in transsexual experience marked through such modifications of the body. In the following I want to trace more unexpected moments from the interviews that also can be connected to the notion of the gap as utilised by Salamon. One example for the experience of a gap in participants' narratives is how Calvin talked about body images which he has for how he wants to look in everyday life. He specifically used the term 'body image' that Salamon works with. Calvin talked about how he cannot create the image that he has of himself, looking feminine, dressing in everyday female clothes which is something different to him than his drag queen performances.

"And I also think that I have this... weird, weird haha, understanding of my own eh...body image... because like, .... I don't know I always, I have this very... eh... like masculine body... and very hairy and I got very broad shoulders and you know, like in, I feel like it, I somewhere... it is this dual thing, where I appreciate, looking like I do, like I do not have a problem with my body, but I just also have this other thing, where I just wish it was

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<sup>18</sup> For instance Salamon, p.44.

completely different, you know and I just wish, I would look completely different, and I always think there is this kind of..., I always deal with this sort of obsessing thing whenever I wear something, I wear a dress, or I am wearing a nice top or something like that and then look in the mirror and however I imagine what it looks, does not look like that, and I am just like... ah, shit you know.. you know it is still... you know... all this body going on that is sort of ruining the style of it, but eh... yeah... it is funny... it is also... the other day me and my flatmate, we are the same height, so I was also trying on some of her clothes, so funny and then she has this sock and was stuffing it down her trousers and we were doing this just at home at some party, we had some people over for dinner, but it is also this... you know that I put on her clothes and she is like, yeah, same height as me, but obviously she is quite slim and... and so I put on her clothes and I am just like... this is not how I wanna look, eh... I wanna look like she looks in it. but, eh, but yeah so I think it is also, I find it a bit difficult, I don't really know how to dress with my body type in those kinds of clothes, I still have this conflict between this image of a ... a female body in female clothes and a man's body in female clothes and it also make me feel uncomfortable to look like that too." (Calvin, drag queen for many years, also professionally, talking in his apartment in Amsterdam)

Calvin expressed that he has a sort of dual relationship to the materiality he sees of his body. That he appreciates it, but that it also limits him for living a specific body image he has of himself. This highlights that besides generally being comfortable, not having a "problem" with his body, there are some other notions of his sense of self that he feels he cannot live and so there indeed at times exists a gap between the materiality he lives and one of the body images he has. Calvin here formulated the possibility of having multiple body images, which links to the notions of multiplicity and change in gendered roles, labels and connotations that participants framed as part of their imaginaries and lives also discussed in the previous section.

One aspect of their body image that Maddison and Ona explicitly mentioned was the extent to which they wanted to show a lot of skin or not. Ona says that she never liked to expose her body a lot and likes to wear long, simple shirts and sweatshirts. Maddison on the other hand said that she understands showing a lot of "flesh" as part of her gender presentation. These examples highlight how body images have specific details and can differ on a multitude of levels.

The quote from Nic, cited above, that referred to gay masculinity being part of her imaginary of self, can also be understood in a more embodied way. She also described how performing gay masculinity is an image she evokes in an embodied way at times.

"I mean some friends of mine joke about it, but it is kind of true, like when I try to dress like a woman, so to put on a dress or heels even or even something and I move like a woman or what I think a stereotypical woman looks like, I look super gay, I do not look like a woman, I look gay, like a man that is trying to be a woman." (Nic)

Nic here does not seem to experience her body as a hindrance to living the body image she has and likes, the imaginary of gay masculinity, in contrast to the frustration that Calvin expressed. Nic even seems to hint at her style of body inhabitation, her body schema as a fueling force for furthering and living gay masculinity as part of her

imaginary. These examples invite us to speculate that a lot of people have partial or simultaneous imaginaries of themselves, and also possibly actively live and embody these.

A notion of a body image that was mentioned in almost every interview is the androgynous body. Most participants mentioned it as a commonly used category or label for a body image, mentioning it as something they have been described with or something desirable. Three participants clearly formulated a desire for a more androgynous body, but "do not fit into androgynous" (Goda). At the same time, these same participants had a critical attitude towards this notion. They stated that it makes them uncomfortable to see that this is the dominant, desirable body in queer scenes and criticised it as a male body ideal imposed on all kinds of bodies. These discussions illustrate how participants are also aware that there are certain norms regarding body images that also play a role in spaces that try to question dominant understandings of bodies and that what one feels comfortable with is related to the feedback and norms of one's environment.

The following example also clearly speaks of a gap, between the materiality Kay sees and the body image he has, what he wants. He also took the discussion to the level of social imaginaries and norms for embodiment. Describing himself as a trans\* guy he here talked about the past before his transition and what he wanted his body to be like.

"When I was 20 I wanted to do my transition, and then I did not do it, because I only found this thing of I am a woman in a man body or a man in a female body... and then I thought I had to do the whole thing including the dick and then I thought wait a minute, a) I think I am not a man really and b) it is not about having a dick... I want to have a flat chest, more hair... a lower voice,.. maybe a bit more muscles, but a dick...? As everyone I would like to know what it feels, you know to try, but nooo... though. Also at that time the surgery was even worse... than now so... I saw some pictures... and I was really like... But I am like how would it have been if I did my transition when I was 20? I would have been another person. Now it is over, but then I was really angry at society not to have been able to do that earlier and to have missed 10 years somehow... you can find... for me it was.. it is different, like I do not have that feeling anymore... but a thing that you want to have and you cannot..." (Kay)

The interesting thing here, is how there is not only a desire for changing his physical characteristics, but also a great frustration about the gap in understanding of what kind of body is possible and acceptable for a trans\* guy. Salamon theorises an endless particularity of the gendered and sexual schema of a person and an ambiguity between the psychic and the material in the embodiment of sex. She writes specifically on the notion of sex:

"What one might read from the contours of the body is something less than the truth of that body's sex, which cannot be located in an external observation of the body, but exists instead in that relation between the material and the ideal, between the perceiver and the perceived, between the material particularity of any one body and the network of forces and contexts that shape the material and the meaning of that body. The perceptual truth of the body is not necessarily what we see, and the traditional binary of sexual difference might have less purchase on the body's truth than other ways of apprehending its lived reality." (Salamon 2010, p.62)

The sense of self and materiality have a vague and endlessly individual relationship that constitute ways of becoming body. Therefore also the perception of bodies is never a purely visual or unambiguous matter. This quote illustrates how Salamon's framework complicates how perception creates relation. What do we see if we see a certain body? Can we see a trans\* guy in the body Kay wants and now has? Which assumptions and associations rule our perception? Stryker uses the language of invisibility, invoking the transsexual child that is invisible to its environment, that nobody can see, because its body is taken as evidence for something that s\_he does not see himself reflected in. And Stryker also talks about her own 'invisibility' saying, "now, as a dyke I am invisible among women; as a transsexual, I am invisible among dykes..." . Gendered invisibility can be experienced and thought of in different ways. Nic talked about not seeing herself in the mirror saying "I feel comfortable with the idea of wearing make-up, I do not mind, but I, ehh, like sometimes people are like, let's put make up on you... and I look into the mirror and I am like, who is that person, it just feels weird. If we are going to a dress up party, I might do it, but that is because I am dressing up."

This notion of invisibility can be linked to the gap, that the materiality there is, does not correspond to the imaginary one has of oneself. The idea of invisibility also introduces a social dimension. In that idea of invisibility there is at play not only the person that perceives a gap between hir own materiality and sense of bodily self, but there is another person, the viewer to whom the other person is invisible. Thinking the gap, I want to open the theorization of the gap as staged between what I understand myself to be and the materiality I see, to also a possible if not inevitable a gap between what I imagine and what others imagine me to be when they meet me. This social dimension of body imagery is linked to the questions what meanings of a materiality can have and how it can be coded in different ways or which kind of materialities are thought of as even possible or possibly desirable.

Kay actually loves to get naked on stage, he now sees his body as a strong tool and receives a multitude of feedback from people simply believing that there must be a trick somewhere, that he has tucked his penis away due to the great enthusiasm with which he shows off his body. Not only Kay referred to such a gap in understanding and imagination, but on many notes participants voiced a frustration with a certain gap in understanding.

A: "So...you just dress in a certain way you like and it might involve elements that in a stereotypical ways of thinking might be masculine, but that really somehow does not matter for you?"

O: "yeah, yeah. Because I do not see it as... as this thing. Maybe somebody else tells me or something like that, but at the same time that is not how I perceive things. Yeah, exactly, because again there is a thing of self-determination. Like how we determine certain terms for yourself and how others interpret these kind of things and again there is lot of misunderstanding. Like, sort of the same thing has many different meanings for different people, like as banal as it is, it is so true in many situations.

You have to ask what is a woman, in a woman's body, I am fine with that, but

have a problem with how people see that. I attach a bit of a different meaning to that." (Ona)

Another participant, Robyn, described being very conscious about the way certain signifiers are inevitable coded and read in a gendered way.

R: "(...) if we stay with the scale between natural and unnatural,..so, that feels more natural, as if.. for example I wanted to go to a party and was supposed to wear lipstick. I don't do that, I don't go then... I do not know what people read into me then."

A: "What do you mean, you don't do it at the party or in everyday life?"

R: "Not at the party. And in everyday life anyways not! Lipstick, ehehe, no! That is not about it not being nice, but that sexualizes and womanizes me a lot... is also about my lips. It's like you, you have a lot of lip. You have already risked a 'big lip' (German saying for daring to speak out) in your life?"

A: "Ahaha, yes."

R: "And that is just so crazy what kind of focus of attention this creates somehow...yep..." (Robyn, Berlin, used to have a love story with drag, partially trans\*)

This quote also illustrates the special vulnerability that some transgender people experience with this normativity of body images. Other participants also expressed feelings of awkwardness or disappointment. Not fitting in, being read in a way that felt inappropriate, was for instance disappointing and annoying for one participant, when dancing and flirting with a girl who had read her as butch. Then she danced just for a moment in a fairly feminine connoted way and the girl just completely dropped her and left.

At times, a certain ambiguity in 'mix ups' as for instance being 'mistaken' for a man was also described as fun. One participant, Alice, recalled how the first time she was confused and sad when she was mistaken for a boy, but she increasingly started enjoying such readings or confusions with regard to her sex. She explained this change also had to do with her changing political consciousness of queer issues. Despite the way in which such a different way of reading moments can give somebody a different perspective on a situation, people live different vulnerabilities in different moments and contexts and do not have to be fine and amused when being put back into a category that is not part of their reality. Words can actually carry very different meanings and the same word could fundamentally question somebody's self-definition or constitute friendly play. Some people's reality is understood as fantasy, as something fake. Taking Salamon's and Stryker's theorising as a point of reference such distinctions between fantasy and reality become shaken up. Stryker uses the dungeon SM space to illustrate how one can understand and think of "fantasy as inhabited structure and of structure as inhabited fantasy;" (Stryker 2008, p.39) how a person's fantasy can become lived and how in the first place our lives are embodied fantasies.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter is an exercise in trying to think in concepts derived from transgender studies in our own lives, whatever those might be and to try and see resemblances and differences

in how people can possibly experience gender starting from a transgender perspective.

The interviews with participants highlighted how the sense of self that Salamon and Stryker pose as immediate and certain can also be experienced as complicated and ambivalent when participants do not feel that they can find a culturally intelligible category through which they can make sense of themselves or communicate how they want to position themselves. A widely applied strategy for negotiating such feelings is to use multiple labels and categories in context-dependent ways. Being drawn to ambiguity, fluidity and a feeling of in-between, a lack of contained self was by some understood in a way that can be linked to having a felt sense of self, while some contemplated whether they were possibly going to have a more set feeling of self at some point in the future.

As Salamon focuses on the theme of the body from a transgender perspective, she theorises a felt sense specifically of the body. Participants also talked about a felt sense of who I am in a way that was not always narrated in connection with a body image people had in mind. Nevertheless the concept of the body image was named and present in the interviews. Participants in the interviews reflected on changing, multiple and contradictory or impossible imaginaries of themselves. Androgyny stood out as a masculine body image that is experienced by participants as a norm and especially desirable in queer contexts, which highlights the normativity at play in body imagery.

After Salamon a gap between the materiality one lives and the sense of self one has comes about through the endlessly particular ways of embodiment and ambiguity and difference at play in embodiment and identification. The experiences of multiple, impossible and contradictory body images participants talked about can be linked to the notion of a gap and invisibility, whereas participants did not use the vocabulary of the gap directly to talk about such contradictions and multiplicities in body images. As the narratives from the interviews indicate, such gaps, are however also marked by norms of acceptable embodiment. Some surgeries and body modifications are only available after being diagnosed as sick, others are elective. People might feel invisible or misunderstood in different ways and invest into forms of embodiment that make them feel present and comfortable.

Ambiguity and particularity as part of embodiment necessitate a constant questioning of the norms of embodiment. Ona, who I introduced at the beginning of this chapter, said for instance that she is fine with being a woman in a woman's body, but she does not have a body image that she experiences as very feminine. Most of the time she likes things that are plain and simple and she does not like to show much skin. Ona is aware that her gender presentation is at times not conventional. People apply scripts of what it means to be a woman or a man that just do not fit her life. She feels she interprets what it means to be a woman differently than others. I do not want to imply that more self-critical norms on embodiment would necessarily mediate the gap experienced between sense of self and materiality one lives, but they could make it easier to find ways to mediate and invest into one's embodiment.

In this chapter, the body image, embodiment as processual, ambivalent and

contradictory, the notion of a gap are all concepts written from a transgender perspective and provide a lens which is particularly useful to see gender non-normativity and to develop ways of seeing gender non-normativity in lives beyond those conceived of as trans in very strict ways.

Whereas in this chapter the gendered feeling of self and body of participants was the theme traced in the narratives, in the following, I will deal with the ways people inhabit such feelings and make sense of it in more detail. This theme connects to the writing of Susan Stryker cited in this chapter on gender poesis, the artistic creation of gendered embodiment which she experienced very consciously through SM in the dungeon. In the following chapter the concept and practice of drag not SM will be the lens for such moments of conscious (re)creation and inhabitation of gender. Drag will prove to be a fruitful entry point as it is commonly connected to conscious action and explorations of gender.

## 4. Dragging Differently: "I can do what I want and I am a Queen about it!"

### **Introduction**

What struck me first was the diversity of approaches to drag that shaped the different interviews. Take just for instance Robyn. Robyn moved to Berlin during hir study time.<sup>19</sup> I know Robyn from activist work we did together; from the many intense discussions about queer politics we have had. Robyn has a very critical, analytical perspective on drag and our interview was characterised by this and mainly focused on a discussion of drag as a tool for performances and its pros and cons. Robyn felt that drag understood as an exceptional performance reinforces the idea that an opposite side, a common, real, everyday life gender identity also exists. Drag in this sense does not break with the logic of identity, which is something Robyn aims to criticise with hir performances. Robyn posits that "simply not everybody is allowed to do everything" and thinks a lot about accountability and privilege.

Goda organises queer performance nights and other events in Utrecht. We talked about Goda's performances and the queer night she was organising at the time. She also performs and preferred to call her performances queer rather than drag performances as drag can be one of many elements. Experimenting with gendered embodiment, with drag, at home and at parties or for performances has become one playground of gender experimentation for Goda. She emphasised how her own position and personal history embeds how she lives and uses drag for experimentation. For instance drag is just one tool to live a multiplicity and in-betweenness that she feels has been haunting her whole life.

Maddison grew up in California, United States. Now she lives in Utrecht. She first found as she says 'queer family' in the US while studying at a small, critical, queer liberal arts college. Maddison identifies with and through being a drag queen and for her drag is a celebration, it is about adorning oneself with beautiful things, being proud and out there about things in everyday life. Identifying as a drag queen is primarily about emancipation for Maddison, about being confident and fine with how and who she is even though this might not be the way 'society' wants her to be. Thinking about drag as a concept she thinks first of the saying "we are all born naked, the rest is drag" by Ru Paul, her "favorite person on earth". Trying to see what somebody 'drags' in their daily gender performance, what kind of genres, images and ideas people are serving is something that Maddison likes to look out for in people and already as a kid she loved extreme presentations that she saw around her, and gender presentations which clearly reference a style or an era.

Robyn emphasised the way drag can or cannot provide a subversive message to its environment and work as a useful tool in stage performances. Goda elaborated on how she experiences dragging as a performer and how her drag links to her personal history with

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<sup>19</sup> Robyn wants to be addressed in a gender ambivalent way. How exactly is not so important as long as it is not consistently referencing any gender.

gender. Maddison thinks of drag as a point of identification and a perspective for life that empowers.

Guided by these narratives the focus in this chapter is on how people find active ways of inhabiting their felt sense of self and body through performances in different contexts and conscious ways of framing their genders in everyday life. This perspective connects with the writings of transgender theorists Gayle Salamon and Susan Stryker as outlined in the previous chapter. They stress the immediate and intuitive sense of self, but also highlight the concept of agency. Stryker highlights the possibility for 'gender poesis', (Stryker, 2008, p.43) the artistic re-creation of one's gender. Salamon stresses the importance of the personal exploration and re-creation of one's gender. She theorises an 'investment' (Salamon 2010, p.42) of the self into its body as central for a feeling of the body as one's own and as coherent. Transsexual surgeries or the taking of hormones fit the association of an active intervention into the body. Such an investment however tends to be exoticised and penalised in the case of transgender embodiment. Drag is an example of investment that also tends to fall outside dominant imaginaries of gendered embodiment. This chapter is an attempt to explore what a plurality of forms such an investment<sup>20</sup> into one's gender can take when connected to the concept of drag. In this way this chapter attempts to show a contingency in all embodiment as for all genders it relies on an investment of the self into the body (Salamon 2010).

My approach in this chapter resembles that of Gayle Rubin in her paper 'Of Catamites and Kings: Reflections on Butch Gender and Boundaries'. Gayle Rubin investigates butch as a category of lesbian gender. Her goal is to "diversify conceptions of butchness, to promote a more nuanced conceptualization of gender variation among lesbian and bisexual women and to forestall prejudice against individuals who use other modes of managing gender" (G. Rubin 2006, p.478). Coming from an anthropological perspective, Rubin also thinks gender, in this case butchness, along the lines of a tool, butchness as one of many "imperfect tools" (G. Rubin 2006, p.479), as a strategy for navigating one's life. Gayle Rubin highlights the different ways that people live and utilise butchness and how the label of butchness comprises a great diversity of life strategies and experiences. I want to conduct a similar investigation here surrounding the category of drag.

The call for participants encouraged participants who have "a relation to the notion of drag – in a wide sense of the word" giving a wider range of examples of what drag could mean, though leaving the definition of drag open to the potential participant.<sup>21</sup> In this research, drag, in analogy to transgender, unfolds across the fields of an identity, as a practice, a phenomenon and a theoretical concept. Drag was adopted as a point of self-identification by one participant in particular. Whereas butchness was more adopted as somewhat of an identity category in Rubin's investigation. I investigate how drag is adopted as a theoretical tool, as a performance, as fun and as a means of challenging

<sup>20</sup> The vocabulary of investment evokes neo-liberal logics of profit and outcomes. I would here like to connect the notion of investment more to the idea of caring.

<sup>21</sup> See the methodology chapter for more detail on the selection of participants.

one's own perceptions and embodiment, how it is abandoned as problematic, redefined and adopted as an identity or all of those at once in the various life narratives.

Tracing the notion of drag in the participants' narratives I found a multiplicity of approaches to drag, meanings given and references to other ways of understanding drag within theory and practice. I came to the point of asking myself why I should use theory in this chapter, as the life narratives give such a diverse account of different ways of thinking and living drag. One answer was, well, theorists are also people doing things with drag, so their theoretical work on drag is also one practice of using drag which I want to investigate. Furthermore, I want to see what kind of new aspects and perspectives in comparison to those written about might come from asking about the notion of drag in a very open way, especially also in connection to everyday life. In this chapter I want to bring together the life narratives on drag with the theoretical writings on drag whilst simultaneously eroding this distinction. I want to see how they are all hybrids of abstraction and practices/experiences, and how drag is a concept with a multitude of functions that people adopt it for.

This chapter is divided into three sections each combining theory and life narratives. The first brings together theory and the participants' perspectives on how subversive or normalizing drag can be. The argument made is that drag is multiple and that any drag needs to be analysed in its a specific social context whilst considering a multitude of intersectional power dynamics. The second section looks at publications on drag (king) culture and practices, and argues that explorations with gendered embodiment in the context of the stage, for parties or at home can be a site of change and affirmation of alternative ways of framing one's own gender. The final section traces the notion of drag beyond the stage how it can be a different way of framing gendered presentations, a social position or a point of identification.

### **The Drag Effect: Subversion's Social Context**

Judith Butler (1990), who became famous for her theorisations on drag, takes the drag queen as her example, and theorises her effect as one of making visible the contingencies of the sex/gender system. She provides a theoretical base for thinking through the possibilities of subversions through queer gender performance. She poses gender as performative. Performative after Butler are those aspects of a discourse that produce what they claim only to name. Gendered performatives bring about an illusion of coherence and continuity of female and male through on-going imitation. Gender is 'a kind of imitation for which there is no original' (Butler 1990, p.339) and drag is a parody of the idea of the original, it exposes gender as an imitation (Butler 1990, p.137f).

In her later work on gender, Butler creates a link between lived experiences, practices, cultural formations and theories as she reflects on how her own socialisation in drag bars made her aware of an implicit theorisation of drag as performative in this context (Butler 2004, p.213). She continues by asking "how is it that drag, or, indeed, much more than drag, transgender itself enters into the political field?" (Butler 2004,

p.217) and stresses that the crucial point about drag is that it highlights how we live with implicit ontological assumptions about gender which position some genders as 'real' and others as 'false' and that actually these presuppositions are open to re-articulation (Butler 2004, p.214). Drag can make the ontological assumptions on gender and sexual difference tangible.

Butler's account on drag stands out due to its level of abstraction in comparison to other theories on drag. Additionally, all the publications from academic to artistic that I have seen on drag reference Butler's theorisation of drag in the early 1990s. It is almost installed as a universal point of reference, a point of origin for thinking on drag, which also installs theory as a starting point for drag as subversive and seems to forget that the practice of drag definitely preceded Butler's theory. Also in the text on drag before you, Butler's account is the first point I am going to write about. However, I also want to take Butler not only as a precedent, but also as material for analysis alongside other narratives on drag. Yet it seems to make writing easier to explain Butler before citing other theories that take her as a point of reference.

Viviane Namaste (2000) takes a critical look at the emerging body of queer theory (including that of Butler) on drag in her book *Tragic Misreadings: Queer Theory's erasure of transgender subjectivity*. She cites "compulsory sex/gender relations" as one of the most addressed topics in queer theory as well as the "inherent liberation of transgressing normative sex/gender codes" and laments that these themes are written about without discussing and contextualising, for instance, the precarious situations many transsexual women find themselves in (Namaste 2000, p.9). She criticises Butler for writing in an overtly abstract manner on transgender and intersex lives and not taking lived experiences and material realities into account. Butler theoretically exposes an appeal to a gendered origin of a person as a myth in her theorisation on drag. However, she fails to take into account the social context and material reality of the drag queen that she analyses; in this case of a gay male consumer culture which highly regulated or marginalised femininity in the 1980s (Namaste 2000, p.10).

Female drag was entertainment, a performance on stage in the male gay scenes of the 1980s and its place was seen as on the stage or on the street, but often prevented from mingling in the club scene, which denied a variety of life models and motivations for going in 'female drag.' The relegation to the stage included, at the same time as it also excluded, transgender people. It portrayed them more or less explicitly as entertainment or abnormality (Namaste 2000, p.11f). Namaste sees an "essential paradox of drag within gay male communities: at the precise moment that it underlies the constructed nature of gendered performance, drag is contained as a performance in itself. Gay male identity in contrast establishes itself as something prior to performance" (Namaste 2000, p.13). Namaste points to drag seen as something you do and not someone you are, in contrast to gay male sexual orientation.

Namaste sees a lack of taking a transgender, transvestite identity seriously as a position and lived experience, and as an important point of investigation for queer theory.

In her view, such an investigation is prevented by the division that she sees implied in Butler's writing between the drag queen as subversive and the transsexual as miming hegemonic identity. What Namaste finds instead of a thorough materially based investigation is an abstraction and involvement with the "transvestite effect", (Namaste 2000, p.14) the queering effect of gender transgression. She criticises that "transsexuals function as rhetorical figures within cultural texts, terms wherein the voices, struggles and joys of real transgendered people in the everyday social world are noticeably absent" (Namaste 2000, p.16). Butler does not acknowledge transgender activism, subjectivity and other ways of understanding drag performances.

Next to Namaste, Roderick Ferguson (2003) theorises in his book *Aberrations in Black* drag as a socio-economic position in a capitalist system which highlights how drag is a practice and a position, and shapes people's lives beyond the time they spend on stage or how being a drag queen or king might be something more encompassing and specific. Ferguson's approach is to study the working of normativity and exclusions in the context of capitalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century USA from a queer of colour perspective. In his book, Ferguson studies African American cultural formations that are in a central manner created by the (labour) demands of capitalism and yet provide a glaring contrast to the normative ideals of capital and nation.<sup>22</sup>

Symbolically countering this stigma, the black drag queen prostitute opens the introduction to his book. In the scene from *Tongues United* a "black drag-queen prostitute sashays along a waterfront" (Ferguson 2003, p.1f). The scene is intriguing to Ferguson as he sees that the pleasure and 'alrightness' she expresses is possibly disturbing to those who say that her life is nothing but bad luck and pathology. She does not denounce the meanness of life which highlights Ferguson's atonement to the tension between oppression and agency or livelihood. To Ferguson the black drag queen prostitute allows us to grasp the general estrangements of the time. In her viability and distance to the ideals upheld by epistemology, nationalism and capital she makes the working of normativity visible and helps us understand how racialised gender and sexual diversity is, situated within the dynamics of capitalism.

In this theory, the black drag queen prostitute is a historic constellation and an important site of knowledge. In this context Ferguson specifically studies gender-transitive drag as an identity, lifestyle and position in society that intersects with other categories of differentiation and carries specific meaning in specific historical contexts. The subjects mentioned in historic documentations through and with whom Ferguson is reading history are addressed in differing terms from the mulatta that throws a party, to transgender woman, sissy, cross dresser and fag. It is worth noting how, in his language, Ferguson

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<sup>22</sup> Roderick Ferguson highlights the critical positionality of marginal genders within nationalist, capitalist systems that foster their formation at the same time as they disavow their existence. Ferguson in this way points to the need to consider the wider political, economic context in understanding cultural drag formations as well as their potential to criticize society beyond its formation of gender. This research project will also try to consider the assumptions of for instance culture, economics and nationality that could be part of the critique through the performance and experience of drag (Ferguson 2003, p.143).

historicises and contextualises these subjects and does not produce or refer to neat contemporary identity categories. He addresses certain subjects as gestures or figures and tries to refer to cultural formations and individual constellations in a way that is critical toward normalisations.

Ferguson clearly and thoroughly points out, based on an analysis of capitalism and its values how positions of marginal genders, genders on the lines of or in-between clear categories, or other historically marginalised social formations are not only a choice of subversion and political strategy. They are ways of existence and a search for a viable life that are structurally ostracised in the current cultural-economic system and Ferguson highlights the history and intersectionality of these power relations.

I think that Namaste in her critique of Butler's abstractions raises important parameters to consider when investigating queer theories' discussions of drag, drag queens or transgender issues. Ferguson illustrates how being a drag queen is a socio-economic position that has to be analysed in its cultural specificity. In the following, I want to highlight the considerations that participants voiced with regard to the effect that drag has, the meaning that it conveys to for instance an audience and in particular I want to see to what extent this critique is specific to drag's meanings and practices in various socio-cultural contexts and individual life situations.

Half of the interview participants also mentioned Butler, but maybe even more importantly they also connected to the level of thinking about drag for the possibly subversive effects it could have which speaks to the perspective on drag that also Butler adopted.

One of the participants who reflected a lot on drag and the possible subversive effects it can have is Robyn. I interviewed Robyn in April 2013 in hir flat in Berlin. Robyn has written a psychology-critical analysis of a trans\* diagnostic and is currently planning to finish an article on the dominance of drag queens in Berlin. I know Robyn from the time when I lived in Berlin. We shared an interest in the queer scene and performances, attended the same events where a couple of times I was in the audience while Robyn was on stage. Robyn still lives in Berlin.

Robyn talks about his "long love story with the word drag". Robyn talks about how experimenting with drag, with embodying different genders used to be a fascinating endeavour. S\_he describes his love story with drag "as a classical one. Every party... something, with the face, meeting up with people, dragging oneself up and so on. The performances I did were also in admiration of the concept of drag in general". At one point it had been fascinating to Robyn to experiment with how one can change the connotations of the body and use it in diverse ways. Robyn describes one of her drag performances as particularly in love with such experimentation and how the same objects used differently can create very different effects.

"I did a transformation from plastic sex doll to rugby player and used for both genders exactly the same things, for example took off the high heels and put them under the t-shirt. That way I had gigantic shoulders and I used my eye

make up in a dramatic moment I took the make-up from my eyes and made it into a beard, the tights I used as a head band... what else did I do.. and until the very end I had these crazy red lips, but they were not visible anymore because of my habitus." (Robyn)

Robyn contrasts this performance to ones she is not interested in: "I am really not into the classical travesty show where the person is the whole night in an unambiguously feminine dress and then in the end the guy is revealed, ha look what an illusion. That I do not find exciting. Others can find it exciting, I don't". These two examples clarify how Robyn tries not to reinstate clear divisions of this is 'drag' and this is 'real' in her performance and also tries to question the 'natural' binarity of gender. She says: "And at the beginning and at the end, I was extremely slow in my poses, in this way the artificial nature of the two ends was clear in that way".

Not only Robyn, but also the other participants distinguish between different kinds of (drag) performances. Goda talks about performances at the queer performance night that she has organized twice within the last year or so in Utrecht saying that most performances "are already in this idea that there are multiple genders" and she would therefore rather call them queer performances. A performance which "only entails dressing up as the opposite sex and lip syncing to some trashy pop song, it is fine, tomorrow on stage it would be great if somebody did that, somebody who never did it before, great. But otherwise it is not interesting for me anymore". Goda sees drag as something that can be an interesting, involving experience for somebody in a certain way at a particular point in time and this would also make it something great for the audience to take part in, but Goda herself does "not only" wish to engage in classical drag. This also illustrates that there are certain contestations between a more traditional binary understanding of drag and a more 'queer' one.

Both participants indicated a critical attitude towards some performances and Robyn says that thinking about drag somewhat annoys her now. "Well, I mean it is often like that, right. When you get to know a concept, you fall in love with it, and then at some point of this relationship you realise, eeehh...? Or other people use it in a way that annoys you." Alongside possibly reimposing a binary understanding of gender i.e. by reinstating the concept of identity: there must be an original gender identity in order to 'drag' another one. Drag is dressing up for the stage in something that you are 'normally' not. The possibilities of drag depend on such a 'real' gender identity. "This artificial division between drag and everyday life performance" (Robyn) maintains a normative understanding of that person's gender in general, separates the drag on stage and labels it as for instance exceptional or art and as not having much implications for who that person is.

Robyn sees the subversive effect of drag as limited because it reimposes a distinction of the real in everyday life and drag which is the exceptional. At the same time, Butler theorises drag precisely as revealing the ontological assumptions of which lives are real and which are fake, and that drag makes one question such assumptions.

Robyn mentioned that this is not the only way drag can be framed and understood, yet judging from the participants' narratives, it is a fairly common notion that underlies the

concept of drag. Drag is understood as something that is not authentic or in which one does not feel completely comfortable. Other participants, such as Nic, at certain points in time during the interviews employed this type of understanding of drag when for instance they said things like: "I won't feel comfortable going out with a skirt to be honest, unless it is because it is clearly framed, that would be for me, wearing a skirt, high heels and make up, for me that would be going out in drag".

Nic pointed out how labelling something as drag changes how one is perceived and the meaning a moment comes to have; which implications for 'who one is' a situation is thought to have. This connects strongly with Namaste's observation how drag is contained as a performance (Namaste 2000, p.11). By labelling a skirt as something that would make her feel in drag, Nic distances herself as a person from being somebody who would wear a skirt or could be represented by such.

Calvin, pointed out how to him drag is a performance. Femininity is part of how he personally likes to present himself and it connects to one of the body images he has, yet, performing as a drag queen is to him a very specific style of performance, that he sees as a temporary performance. He talks about how some people do not understand that being a drag queen is not all there is to him and that he also has other sides.

"I think that largely they do not get it, that it is even a performance, that, I don't know that they expect you to always be a drag queen, that you know also.. yeah.. I am quite amazed.. that is the reaction not from cool people.. that is when you do a distinction ahah.. like ah, that person is really, nice, but yeah, the majority does not make the connection, yeah.. but if you are in a queer space it is obviously completely different and more or less everybody makes that connection." (Calvin)

To Calvin being a drag queen is a performance he does and as a practice it is part of his life, but he also feels that the stereotype of a drag queen that swings along such a performance cannot represent him as a person. Calvin explained that from his perspective it is also an advantage, when people see the drag on stage or at a party as not representative of the person as a whole or as only one part of someone's life. Calvin's perspective is however therefore also different than understanding drag as having nothing to do with a person's life, gender and identity as criticised by Robyn.

Robyn goes on to criticize the common practice of drag performances around him as dominantly white, slim, beautiful, young. She calls it "attractivity" drag or "looking sexy in another gender". She talks about how she used to play roles in theatre and today she does drag and s\_he thinks that so often drag forgets all other aspects of a persona and power dynamics other than gender.

"For example I would not do a poverty-drag, because I am not clearly affected by poverty... not affected... (..) and then there is the question, am I entitled to just do this, or is this just my viewpoint, or do they rightly feel mocked, if I did this. Or do I rightly feel mocked, in my female socialization, if some guys represent women all the time? Even though somehow it is about breaking open and to make things good... but... if it is done systematically always in the same way, I am again annoyed. That again is then the question

of, not everybody is allowed everything. Sorry." (Robyn)

Something that Robyn in contrast finds inspiring and daring is when trans people, for instance a close friend and trans guy, goes in female drag, with a wig and a ballroom dress. S\_he points to the vulnerability of trans people with regard to how others might read their gender expression and admires how some people are willing to expose themselves to this vulnerability.

Robyn's critique on many drag performances she has seen around him lately is not only based on an abstract logic, but connects to the present power dynamics at stake and the personal histories and experiences involved. He asks questions such as, which drag is recognised as drag and who, by extension, receives attention and space for doing something exceptional?

"Well, I have been used as a litmus test before by,.. by... eh... that I was used to reflect how feminine other people are, kind of like, "well darling, I am a real diamond, look at you ... blablabla" you with your nonononono. Everybody thought it was funny. Five gay cis dudes were really amusing themselves and all this focus of attention and gigantic and loud, screaming, sitting down in-between people, interrupting people. For all I care they can do that with guys, but I will not let you do this with women\*, female socialized people. That is a reproduction of gender relations, that you use the masquerade of femininity to be able to exert even more power than you have anyway." (Robyn)

She also recognises problematic tendencies that could be seen in his own critique of, for instance, drag queen practices. She does not want it to be understood as a critique of femininity per se. The social stigma still attached to drag queens cannot be underestimated and the space given to them cannot be taken for granted. Other participants talked about how drag queens are treated in disrespectful ways. Calvin talked about how, especially when working professionally as a drag queen, people often did not see a person in him, but just 'the' drag queen, and felt that they could through any stigma at him.

"I don't know.. people are pretty stupid I think.. you know.. if you see, like if, if you do it (drag), especially in clubs or bars or parties or whatever, people have this kind of.. I don't know like, like most people you meet have this idea, that's who, that's it that there is nothing else to it, I think that is also the reason why people treat each other so badly in party. Somehow this moment people appear exactly who they are, and as you no longer need to consider what they do the rest of the time or how they feel about stuff, I don't know.." (Calvin)

Jan Sophia talks about how as a drag queen he feels he is not sexy to gay men, not considered a potential partner and also Calvin says that one of his drag queen friends has problems with his boyfriend for being feminine, especially when lived beyond the stage. These accounts can be lined to Ferguson's analysis of the drag queen and her position in a racialised socio-economic system (Ferguson 2003, p.143).

Nevertheless, out of hir own experience Robyn strongly criticises the practice of many drag queens she sees around herself and how the border between drag and

everyday life is drawn in a way that makes female drag queens invisible and fosters the dominance of male drag queens. If a guy wears exactly the same glittery outfit as a female socialised person, he receives a lot more attention for it.

Robyn's thinking on how the line between drag and everyday life is drawn illustrates strongly how there are processes of negotiating the (in)visibility of gender non-normativity also in queer/LGBT contexts. His critique of certain practices reflects a female socialised experience and his very individual one, making a very relevant claim to consider for whom and how certain forms of drag might be empowering or how these might be annoying and subordinating looked at from another person's situation.

### **The Meaning of Drag to the Performer's Life**

In this second section, I want to specifically not on the outside perspective of drag in the sense of what message it sends to others, but look at participants responses with regards of how they experience drag, what can you do with drag concerning yourself, how tracing the narratives around drag can give an idea how we can actively engage with our gendered embodiment. In this section I will focus on dragging in the context of the stage act before I shift the perspective to everyday life meanings of drag in the following and final section of this chapter.

There are a multitude of publications, blogs and zines on drag king and queen subculture that look at drag as a counter cultural practice and investigate the techniques of drag as a stage performance. These mostly focus on drag king or queen cultures and seldom on both categories or trying to investigate drag as a practice that might go beyond those or challenge them. For the analysis of theory, I investigated mainly English and German speaking publications that focus on drag king culture. When thinking of gender drag, what springs to mind for many people is the glorious drag queen and not so much the drag king. Judith Jack Halberstam states in the book *Female Masculinity* that the "immense social power of masculinity" (Halberstam 1998, p.269) is the reason why maleness has been reserved for people with male bodies and denied to others as a way of explaining the lack of attention to female masculinity and for instance drag kings from the mainstream.

As an explanation for the decades long lack of self organisation in drag king culture, Halberstam points to the links with feminism and its values highlighting the way drag kings or female masculinity was suddenly almost banned in lesbian bars of the 1970s.<sup>23</sup> Balzer in an anthropological study describes how, after the development of drag king scenes in places such as New York or Berlin only in the 1990s, the character of the drag king is still also not very vivid in the current social imaginary in Europe and the US (Balzer 2007, p.36f). Citing and critiquing historical silences as that regarding drag king culture can also tend to reify those, while there might be instances of speech and living that signal agency and possibilities which this research wishes to explore. So, in this

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<sup>23</sup> This does, however, for instance not mean that subcultures as the one of the lesbian 'Damenclubs' in the Berlin of the 1920s did not exist where women were wearing suits and playing cards (Balzer 2007, p.396).

theoretical review, I chose to focus on publications on drag king performance cultures.

Nina Schuster (2010) introduces the concept of practices (German: Praktiken) in her sociological dissertation *Other Spaces: Social Practices Creating Spaces by Drag Kings and Transgenders* (German: Andere Räume: Soziale Praktiken der Raumproduktion von Drag Kings und Transgender). She conceptualises how “unreflected everyday-life repetitions of constructing gender can be disrupted through self-reflecting practices” (Schuster 2010, p.183). She analyses how through consciously induced habituation in subcultural scenes differently gendered realities can be created. She looks at practices of body modification, ways of enlarging, shrinking body parts as well as giving them new meanings and facilities such as changing rooms at parties. Schuster sees drag scenes, drag cultures as one sphere in which self-reflecting practices and interventions are crucially present. Schuster’s concept of practices is oriented towards which kind of sociality can be built through conscious practices of embodiment. The focus in this chapter centres on the perceptions, feelings and perspectives of the participants, on the way these differently gendered realities play out at an individual level.

Many publications on drag as a stage performance are a mixture of, for instance, photographs, academic analyses and historical documentation. For instance Judith Jack Halberstam and Del LaGrace Volcano created *The Drag King Book* in which they present their research into the drag king cultures of San Francisco, New York and London in the 1990s using photographs and interviews (J. “Jack” Halberstam & Volcano 1999, p.13).<sup>24</sup> Their book is less focused on tracing all kinds of practices, for instance of how bodies can be enlarged or shrunken as Schuster does and more on visual as well as oral life narratives and meaning gravitating around the practice of drag kinging. They describe how performing as a drag king has multiple meanings to the performers. Not all drag kings are transsexuals in hiding as some stereotypes might have it, and only for some are the drag king personas more than a stage act. In *The Drag King Book*, a drag king is described as “anyone (regardless of gender) who consciously makes a performance out of masculinity” (J. “Jack” Halberstam & Volcano 1999, p.13). Their book highlights that drag kings should not purely be understood in terms of gender fluidity, huge investments in pleasure and play, but in line with what Schuster argues that they are also serious realms for the production of gender difference and the accommodation of gender variance, complex gender systems and codes (J. “Jack” Halberstam & Volcano 1999, p.36).

In the book *Sex, Drag, and Male Roles: Investigating Gender as Performance* performance artist Diane Torr (2010) together with critic Stephen Bottoms writes about the details of her life, performances, workshops and political motivations and practices in their historical context, and in connection to socio-cultural developments (Torr 2010, p.1). Especially in the context of her ‘Man for a Day’ workshops Torr centrally sees drag as a tool for empowerment. The workshops have always aimed at creating the opportunity for women to pass as male in the outside world beyond the workshop environment, so that

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<sup>24</sup> A similar more recent publication in Germany is *Drag Kings: Mit Bartkleber gegen das Patriarchat!* (Thilmann, Witte & Rewald 2007)

they can - at least temporarily - experience what it is like to be a person considered to be male. This is hoped to enable women to critically distance themselves from their socialized position as female (Torr 2010, p.2 & p.155).

Torr describes how from the earliest workshops onwards, they attracted all kinds of participants from trans-curious people, to heterosexual women, to lesbians (Torr 2010, p.101). Torr provides various examples of participants' motivations for taking part in the workshops. She mentions looking for a sexual thrill, interest in cross dressing, motivations such as exploring one's own masculinity, professional performers looking for inspiration for public art performances or people sometimes seeking to develop alter egos which they can make use of in situations in which they are vulnerable. Once an effeminate man participated who wanted to learn how to anticipate his femininity in situations where a more conventional masculinity would be to his benefit.

Torr indicates that using drag in real life situations to access male privilege when talking to a school or a medical or social authority as she herself or friends have done, is a very short-term strategy that might however make a big difference to women's lives in very specific situations (Torr 2010, p.157). However, in the motivations and experiences of participants Torr sees manifested that there is also a more long-term potential for empowerment and the reconfiguration of power relations in experiencing the world through another's perspective and being perceived differently by others. She sees what she does as a way of facilitating fantasy and opening physical possibilities other than those that we take to be natural (Torr 2010, p.144).

Torr, Schuster, Volcano and Halberstam all trace the question what such experimentation with drag can mean to a person and how it possibly changes and improves their relation to gender and in turn their lives. There are different ways how one relates to drag and gives meaning to it and whether one's drag persona is understood as having meaning beyond the stage or not. Gayle Salamon takes up the question to what extent first of all there are different ways of relating to gender. In her lecture entitled "The sound of my heel on the ground" which she held in Granada in November 2012<sup>25</sup>, she introduced the idea that many people relate to gender as it was an 'ultra chose', as something untouchable, that has power over us, but it is out of our own reach; we cannot shape it. In contrast she highlights how there is the possibility of relating differently to gender and how a trans\* boy whose gendered behaviour is discussed in a court case, did seem to have a different relation to gender not posing it as an 'ultra chose', but as something within reach, something he could use in the ways he wanted or at least in ways that people around him did not expect or accept. Salamon here seems to point at how there are different qualitative levels of relating to gender with regard to the agency it has over oneself or the other way around. In the following, I will specifically discuss the role drag can play in such qualitative changes in one's relation to gender.

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<sup>25</sup> I only heard this lecture of Salamon on her understanding of gender as an ultra chose. She is planning a forthcoming publication on it and I hope that based on my lecture notes, I am here doing justice to what she was saying.

This perspective that drag can be a critical, self-reflective practice and self-exploration is emphasised by Goda. She organises queer performance nights in Utrecht and I had the pleasure of seeing her perform on stage a couple of times. She also helped co-organise the Diep Festival 2013 and also wrote a blog entry on the fleeting position of female masculinity for this event (Godo, 2013). I conducted a Skype interview with Goda while I was temporarily studying in Granada and while she was in Utrecht in November 2012. It was the first interview I did for this thesis project. It lasted 2.5 hours and Goda's engaging replies and elaborate answers gave me courage that my project would speak to people. Goda has a critical attitude towards her own performances. The idea of one performance that she described to me was that "people can have different parts in them." In this way she also challenges herself by enacting different roles and role changes as she was the main character of the performance she described to me.

"The macho guy realises that eh, he actually likes being hit on the face and this is where he turns into a sort of submissive kind of male of sorts, then he puts the leash on, he eh, whips himself (...) then there is Roberta who comes to the man lying on the stage and puts lipstick onto him and leaves the lipstick together with the mirror next to him and then regains consciousness and kind of looks into the mirror and realises, wow, maybe there is also, maybe, this weird female part in me, even, it might even be a quite dominant part." (Goda)

When I asked Goda what kind of styles or personas she likes to adopt she connected this to her own personal history, also with regard to gender. She talked about the past saying

"The feeling that I would sometimes get, is that I am too sexual for being a woman, too promiscuous, or I am not enough... eh, gracious, or I am not enough,.. ehm.. submissive.. You know (...) it gave me a general feeling, that there is something that I cannot really produce, a proper feminine subject." (Goda)

She described changes in the way she framed and lived gender, and linked the start of those changes back to studying and reading texts on gender, reading the novel *Stone Butch Blues* and starting to seriously date women. She said that she then also largely consciously acquired a very masculine role in terms of manner and clothes and said

"This lasted for quite a bit. Now I am probably past that phase and I am getting back to sort of this trying to be comfortable with the fact that I actually have never managed to be in one position or the other. So kind of I think, I accept these..., I do have these..., I enjoy that feminine role and I enjoy that very masculine role and I definitely enjoy a certain gender ambiguous role." (Goda)

Performance was one tool and playground for such changes. Dragging, performances and experimenting with embodiment have multiple meanings for Goda. She thinks of performances not only as what she does on stage, but also personas, styles or outfits for a party or other occasion, and also preparing and experimenting at home with different roles is something that she enjoys. She finds posture and gesture especially interesting to

explore, how for example high heels change the way you hold your body. She said "It (drag) is also challenging in a very positive way that I actually have a tool to access and explore through performance these different parts of myself (...) it is a tool to, you know, explore yourself and it is also a tool to ... to reveal something to others. To explore on a more general level what it means to be this or that".

Goda's narrative is one example of a narrative that is shaped both by (sub) cultural scripts, academic thinking as well as personal experiences and ways of making sense of things. Here Goda creates a narrative about how conscious experimentation with embodiment and gender is part of her process of living and exploring gender, and a way of expressing and living the multiplicity of the self. She signals a change in her own relation to gender, to a sort of acceptance of her feeling of in-betweenness and the pleasure she takes in exploring different roles. Also she points to a change in her relation with the two more stereotypical gender representations of masculine and feminine. "And I would say that, which is weird, I do it [feminine role] much better now, when I take it up as a performance, rather than when I took it up as who I am." Here Goda hints at a changed relation to gender which resonated with Salamon's discussion of the idea that there are different ways of how one can relate to gender and feel agency over it or not. Goda here states that she feels her agency over gender has changed as well as her understanding of such as performance. She used to think of femininity as that what she was and has to fulfil, now when she takes it as performance she is actually better at it. Drag on stage or for parties as experimentation creates a space in which to play with patterns of embodiment and to fulfil desires of expression. Such experimentation can be part of finding a way to shape one's relation to gender.

Other participants, especially Kay, talked about how enacting different characters and roles is a way to live and reflect this part of one's own personality, start relating to realities that are maybe not one's own, explore unknown aspects of one's character, get over ones that one does not like by performing them in exaggerated ways or simply a form of reflecting on them more and gaining some agency. Kay for example talked about how having performed and criticised a macho in one of his pieces this enabled him to talk about this topic with others and also gave others the space to playfully remind him, hey you are not in the macho play at the moment.

Maddison simply stated that "drag has always been about gender queer" talking about how drag is part of and affects a person's life, personality and being as anything else one does. Drag is not an isolated thing in a person's life.

Drag however also has limitations. Especially Calvin talked about being a drag queen on stage as a practice that is very 'easy' at some point and not very challenging anymore. The conventions of the drag queen in particular, but also of the drag king can set limits. There is a certain normativity at play to do certain things and not others, what is in line with the style, what is considered subversive, what is desirable (off and on stage).

Drag in the participants' narratives is one of many factors that they have experienced as bringing about change in the way they conceptualise and live gender. Other

factors people mentioned included academics, reading and trans\*/feminist/queer environments. Alice for instance said "my community is something that really shaped who we are and changed my relation to gender". She explained how as a child she wanted to be a boy, but it did not really work, because she was not a tomboy as she says and rather small and weak. What she hated most about what it meant to be a girl was to be weak and the risk of more easily being a victim of for instance rape, which was a logic that she was told by others. Later she just dropped the idea of being a boy, but she felt that only through the experience of being in feminist spaces and viewing femininity not as necessarily connected with weakness she got to embrace her femininity with a positive feeling.

Drag is one specific practice of (consciously) exploring gender and especially an embodied side of it. However there are many factors that contribute to how one can experiment with gender. There is not a single way for everyone and such explorations should not be seen in isolated ways. Drag, especially on stage, also takes a certain inclination for liking to be in the spotlight of things. Goda talked about her enthusiasm saying "I just feel like I really want to do this [performing on stage and experimenting with embodiment]. Because there is this, I don't know, surplus of energy I have, or, eh...too many ideas that I cannot put to use in any other way or just having fun as well". Other participants, Calvin and Jan Sophia, describe starting to do drag as a mixture of being drawn to gender subversions as well as an inclination to be the centre of attention as well as coincidentally being asked to join in or do it again because people liked it.

### **Drag Beyond the Stage**

While in the first section Namaste and Robyn stressed how in certain contexts drag is interpreted as utterly distinct from who one is, without implications on the levels of self and subjectivity, Goda's narrative understands her own drag as one playground of challenging and exploring her own gender and embodiment. She sees her drag as interlinked with her own personal history and a way of relating to gender. In this section I want to investigate moments in which drag is not only seen as a temporary exploration or stage act, but how the word drag can function in discourses beyond the stage and the party to signal certain gender configurations and understandings.

A strong reason that some participants named for why they do not label their everyday life gender presentation as drag, even though it might involve crossing gendered lines, is because they experience a certain everyday life performance as either something authentic, who they are – which is not drag (by implication then they defined drag as temporary practice of something that you normally are not) - or because they feel that drag is a conscious political practice which is not how they see their everyday gender (most explicitly Ona).

Participants were also hesitant to use the concept drag for everyday life situations because drag to them is strongly connected to the stage where conventions of, for instance, what a 'real' drag queen has to look like reign. This at times made participants

question whether it is appropriate to use the signifier drag in different contexts, as they do not do 'real drag' as the following quote illustrates.

N: "... when for instance I need to dress formal, (...) then I go vest and tie and wear a jacket and all of that, then, yeah, matter of fact I am in drag, but without maybe... eh..you know, I am not doing fake hair, or binding my breasts, but for the rest it is basically the same thing, or that is what it feels like to me."

A: "Yeah."

N: "Yeah, so I am not going like the whole way, like I am not going completely in drag, but in.. but as a matter of fact it feels like I am doing it."  
(Nic)

Participants did use drag to label moments where they feel they received exceptional attention for their very female attire (Alice) or in which they presented a gender that they do not consider their own. In this way it is also possible to use drag to distance oneself from a dominant gender category one feels coerced to adopt for a certain event or adopts just for a moment. For instance, when speaking about my research, I was once given the example how, at a belly dancing workshop, various women said they felt as if they were in drag, as in performing a gender that does not feel their own, even though this performance did not imply the crossing of a normative line between male and female.

Robin pointed out how drag with the connotation as exceptional, not representative and inauthentic can be also used in other ways to negotiate and regulate gender performances in everyday social spaces. It can be used by outsiders to point to a presentation as not legitimate or inauthentic. He illustrated this by stating that she sometimes feels that people think she 'dressed up' (in German the word she used was 'verkleiden' and implies dressed up not for everyday life, but for a stage performance or carnival in the sense of wearing a costume).

A: "What kind of situations are those when you feel like you are in drag in everyday life?"

R: "...those are situations where people think that I 'dressed up.' That is also about the personal embodiment of gender. Sometimes it works better than at other times. And when this does not work so well, then I think that people think that I either dressed up as a hipster or as a gender that I am not entitled to. That happens sometimes, but rarely actually." (Robyn)

As a further implication of this division between everyday and drag presentation Robyn talks about how it shifts vulnerabilities. A performance that is not clearly marked as drag, as temporary play, is more likely to cause confusion and possible intrusion. She remembers a situation in which a friend who can easily look very masculine, dressed up in drag with a ballerina skirt for a soccer match. Members of another team were chatting with us when they started asking about this friend's sexual orientation and then sex until in the end one of them grabbed this friend between the legs to finally know. On the other end of things when you are in drag and people understand it as a temporary performance, then people do not ask any questions. These instances highlight a definition of drag as the

exceptional stage act. These examples make it clear how drag can be a tool of labelling and negotiating in subversive as well as restrictive ways what feels to be 'natural'.

Yet there are also accounts of drag that challenge these frameworks of thinking drag. One elaborate account in this direction is that of Elizabeth Freeman (2010). She investigates drag as a crossing of different times and genres in art installations, movies and the narratives of books. Freeman's understanding of drag does not require a stage performance or necessarily a person as the carrier of the principle 'drag', but also outdated symbols, crafts and statues can constitute a moment of temporal drag. She rethinks notions of history and drag, and theorises them in an interwoven manner.

Freeman spells out how timings, schedules and time zones implement hidden rhythms and temporal experiences which are oriented towards maximum productivity. Those rhythms appear natural to those to whom they are advantageous. Her title *Time Binds* stands for the ways in which people are bound into meaningful embodiment through such time regulation. However, building on Freud, Freeman claims that the project of modernity and the capitalist system, which aims to organise meaning completely within their system, inevitably encounters a rebound effect. The binding of meaning and energy also always triggers a release of energy beyond its organisation (Freeman 2010, p.xvi).

Non-sequential forms of time, which do not neatly fold into modern time, can also provide structures of belonging for individuals, which tend to however not be as present in the cultural imaginary (Freeman 2010, p.xi). So, to Freeman, it is worth tracking other forms of timing, belonging and duration, odd, anachronistic moments that are somehow unintelligible (Freeman 2010, p.xvi). One of the main interventions Freeman provides is her conceptualisation of temporal drag. Her entry point for this new way of thinking drag is a detailed look at art that plays with anachronisms.

Sharon Hayes' project *In the Near Future* is one that involves such anachronistic signs probably in the most obvious way (Freeman 2010, p.60). In the beginning of November 2005, Hayes stood in the street every day with a sign bearing a different slogan referencing a past failed 'revolution'. The signs read, for example: 'We are innocent', which might have been a slogan for prisoner's rights and might now turn into a sign for American's victim mentality after 9/11. The sign 'Ratify E.R.A.. NOW' in Freeman's perspective, looks thoroughly inept and awkward as the Equal Rights Amendment has failed ratification, has been criticised as actually being a not very meaningful proposal and seems naïve in the light of criticism on equality feminism. When holding this sign, Hayes' body also turns into a vintage sign as she looks a bit like the humourless lesbian feminists of the 1970s as she stands at the crossroads with her androgynous hairstyle, legs apart, dressed in dreary, but contemporary clothing (Freeman 2010, p.60f).

This kind of performance is what Freeman terms temporal drag, playing on the implications of drag as delayed, regressive, the pull of the past. Past feminisms here appear not only as dead and gone, but as a challenging 'embarrassing' other. In this sense drag cannot only be the excess of the signifiers 'woman' and 'man,' but the excess of the

signifier 'history'; that which falls outside of the glorified canon of history that social movements build on and take pride in. Invoking this past removes the viewer from the present they feel they know and demands that they re-connect the past and the present (Freeman 2010, p.62).

To develop her concept of temporal drag more thoroughly, Freeman goes back to Judith Butler's famous theorisation of performative drag, asking what the time of queer performativity is. In *Gender Trouble* the implicit answer appears to be that time is progressive as repetitions with a difference are the most promising. A sign as lesbian has most potential in the unpredictable forms it can be taken up in the future. Repetitions that cite an imagined past original, uphold the normative power of this fantasised original. Novelty, not anachronism is promising here. In this sense queer performativity ignores citations of pasts that signal life lived differently then and neglects activist history and its potential energies and subversive challenges for the present (Freeman 2010, p.62f).

Tracing Butler's important turn from a theory of performativity based on the play of surfaces to *The Psychic Life of Power* is what Freeman also views as a turn towards a more backwards oriented vision. In *The Psychic Life of Power* to turn backwards is a constitutive part of subjectivity as the psyche necessarily involves the past through for instance 'deferred action' (Freeman 2010, p.64). Deferred action here means that a memory trace is acted out physically by the subject re-living a past she could not possibly live back then, thus harking back to the past and its failures. Freeman wants to think temporal drag however "less in the psychic life of the individual than in the movement time of collective political fantasy" (Freeman 2010, p.65). Thinking of temporal drag as a mode of habitus or style offers a way of showing how bodily styles highlight complex relations to different collective histories.

This complex relation to history, to historical 'predecessors' of feminisms can also be read in the performances of Hayes which are moments of bringing the different histories into touch. It makes the signs and importantly also the social context of the time available in new ways. It is a mode of longing that engages with both the familiar and the altering sites of the prior time. Hayes' poster poses a disruptive energy of not fully past, but not properly present moments. What can the memory of collective feminism or lesbian feminism do to movements today in the light of sex wars or the transgender movement? (Freeman 2010, p.66). The identities and desires analysed by Freeman and foreclosed in current movements highlight that those might actually have a productive effect when rediscovered in the present context.

Freeman explains this mode of referencing the past using the theorisations of allegorisation by Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power*. Allegorisation is here initially contrasted to the symbol. Butler theorises that normative gender identity works as a symbol and may be melancholic in the sense of preserving the lost object of improper desire, the same sex parent, in the form of a properly gendered identity. From the depth of loss can arise outer emblems such as gestures or clothing. Normative gender identity erases the past and turns it into a seemingly timeless identity without history. The literary

term for normative genders could thus be symbol, fusing diverse, oppositional moments into a coherent, singular, lifting it into eternity (Freeman 2010, p.69f).

Gender drag is explained using the literary term allegorise. An allegory personifies abstract notions such as beauty or friendship into bodies that interplay in a performance. It involves retelling a past story through a new one, connecting both, but in a way that both remain visible. Drag turns bodies into emblems of other times and genders, and tells personal stories with and through past stories. It is a means of occupying the structure of one's own gendered position by recalling a prior one as a disruptive anachronism (Freeman 2010, p69f).

Continuing this, Freeman thinks of allegory as a collective melancholia. Melancholia moves inward, securing the lost object as part of the person's subjectivity. Allegory pushes melancholia's incorporation back outwards, in a cure that is not solely personal, but collective, so that the earlier story that is recalled is culturally recognisable. At the end of her elaborations on allegory, Freeman highlights the importance of difference as used by Butler, proposing that drag, rethought as allegorical, might recreate an embodied temporal map of gendered possibilities and belongings and help re-live a silenced past in the now, handing it down with a difference (Freeman 2010, p.70f).

Drag is a way of visualising or making the past as well as on-going constitution and multiplicity of instances tangible that constitute an individual (gendered) self as well as the set-up of political movements. Thanks to the choice of artists used to talk about drag, Freeman builds her ideas around the historical figure of the feminist, the humourless lesbian feminist, the fat lesbian asking what these figures do to for instance queer theory today. What kinds of histories are expelled and which options does this open up or close off for movements and subjectivities today?

Freeman notes that the humourless feminist appears as the opposite of the shiny drag queen. Freeman however states with regard to the mechanisms behind camp or drag that it is "a mode of archiving, in that it lovingly, sadistically, even masochistically brings back dominant culture's junk and displays the performer's fierce attachment to it" (Freeman 2010, p.68). There is something past, that has failed, is shameful and yet upheld by the person in question, the performer or assembling artist as something personal, worth not neglecting, worth reliving and investigating, and this is something the angry lesbian and the drag queen share.

One participant, Maddison, also conceptualised drag in a way that does not tie it to the stage or portrays it as exceptional. She emphasised how drag is central to her everyday life experience of gender, as she identifies as a drag queen. I conducted my final interview with Maddison in May 2013. Maddison and I are 'family' - queer feminist family in Utrecht. Maddison moved from the US to Europe almost two years ago and during the interview we talked a lot about her time in the US and her queer family there. Most of these people she met during her time as an undergrad at a small, radical queer liberal arts college became her family and that is where she as a female socialised person began identifying as drag

queen.

"I remember once saying to my sister when I was like 19 or something saying, I wish I was a drag queen but I can't and she was like, why not, why can't you.. And I was like... ah, you are right. I am one. (...)and I mean I started in undergrad too wearing fake birds in my hair every day and a bunch of lipstick and fake moles and big dresses with flowers on them and shit like that and that kind of evolved and changed and a lot of my friends would dressed up in things whether they are female gender or.. differently gendered, get dressed up in big femmy shit." (Maddison)

Drag for Maddison is about how she acts, dresses and the conception of her gender identity. For her it is however also more than just a particular style. It is very much about empowerment for her as she expresses in the following part of the interview:

"I think it is fucking radical to be okay with yourself if you are of an identity that you are not supposed to be okay with yourself. (..)Drag is a celebration, fuck you are adoring yourself with beautiful things and cherishing yourself and your community and I do think that a huge part of drag is like... one having certain, doing... making fun of each other and also celebrating and supporting each other." (Maddison)

She describes her gender queer community as an important inspiration, support and as giving recognition to how she has come to make sense of herself and life the way she wants to live it. She also explains how identifying as a drag queen in particular has been something empowering in her own life history, how it makes a difference in her life in particular.

M: "I think... I am gonna get real. I never felt pretty (...) I had friends that were very beautiful and got a lot of attention... and I never.. and I was Jewish, I had eating disorders, I got a nose job when I was 17, because big old Jew nose and I lived in southern California, and everybody got a nose job anyways, come on."

A. "ahah, yeah.."

M: "and I think that part of identifying as a drag queen ... helped me accept a more busted hot look that is not prestige and classical beauty or whatever... (...) so that it was not like a shame thing. And I was like fuck that shit. I can do what I want and I am a queen about it! Like yes, I will wear tons of liquid eyeliner every single day, because I am a mother fucking drag queen bitch! You know as opposed to... like I wear eyeliner every day, because I don't want people to see me without eyeliner." (Maddison)

Here drag is not only a style of clothes, but also an attitude of being fine with how one is, actually celebrating this and not buying into ways that question a person's gender identity just because it does not adhere to certain norms. It also comes with a certain attitude of reacting when people question one's gender presentation. When people, including queers in Europe are sometimes confused and ask "how are you a drag queen, I don't get it! I (Maddison) would just be like: (while waving her hair around and moving her hand up to her face, framing her face with her hands) What is there not to get?" She has experienced some queers in Europe thinking they should teach her how to be more androgynous or queer, which she would just swipe it of the agenda.

Her identification as a drag queen is embedded in a more general understanding that all

gender is drag and that everybody 'drags'. She in particular 'drags' the drag queen. Other participants also referred to this idea. Pablo in specific also applied it to his everyday life saying "okay, if I look at myself then... I am totally drag... hehe. Like when I am punk, I am drag... I do not know. my... my code used to be my mother's code... so, it is a woman's code and I am a man, so I am drag. So everyday I am drag." He refers here to drag as adopting extreme styles, obvious styles. The examples of "punk" also illustrate how drag can be viewed more intersectionally as dragging more specific notions than being a 'woman' or a 'man.' Maddison also referred to the way she thinks of herself sometimes in her "college girl drag". Robyn mentioned the idea of age drag. Maddison used the concept 'serving' with reference to people dragging specific styles or eras.

"When I say serving that is also a queer, a queen ball culture term, it is like you get a genre. Like business woman and then you have to drag and serve the business woman. So you can serve realness which is trying to pass or look like 'real', or not and so like you can figure out how anybody is serving themselves." (Maddison)

This term according to her comes from black ball culture which she is not part of. Ball culture comes from the 1920s and 30s in Black US culture. Here People of Colour met and performed in specific styles such, for example, as bankers. Often it was connected to positions and practices that were denied to People of Colour. Participants would perform and 'serve' a certain genre such as business man and present in front of a jury. Today Ball culture is a space for queer people of colour in the US to keep up the tradition of performances in specific genres, today often of dance styles<sup>26</sup>. Maddison talks about how a lot of everyday life presentations stand out as showing what they serve. She talks about one example from her childhood that came to her mind.

M: "Angeline (..) is like a local celebrity who when she was younger, now she is 60 I guess, she decided to be famous, so she married a rich guy and put herself on billboards and it was just her in a pink bikini with these giant tits and this giant blond hair and sunglasses and giant heels and it just said Angeline and a phone number." (..)

A: "How do you find this is queer?"

M: "Because it is so ridiculous, like not sooo ridiculous, but it is so out there. She is obviously a drag queen. She has gotten all this surgery for it; she wears these fucking heels everyday she got this... like she is a motherfucking queen, you know... like that is.. I just think that is queer, like... I guess such extreme gender representations, or not even gender presentations; I think a lot of extreme presentations are queer in a lot of ways." (Maddison)

Here drag is a lens for tracing the genres, styles and past moments that somebody's presentation connects to, the historical category that makes this person's presentation legible. Maddison is excited about Angeline as her style seems to not shy away from forms of femininity that seem queer to Maddison. Angeline here actually references a style that is that of the drag queen in Maddison's reading. A performance that makes it obvious that it is being made, its cuts and investments such as surgeries. Serving highlights an

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<sup>26</sup> See for instance the documentary 'Paris is Burning' for more information on black ball culture.

understanding of every person's gender presentation as constituted through past affiliations and experiences. The idea of serving connects to Freeman's way of thinking drag as a tribute to past genders, other genres and times. Maddison suggests an exercise of closely watching a person and analysing what kind of ideas, styles, genres they are serving, what they are imitating and affiliating with and expressing. This resembles the exercise Freeman follows in her book of reading art for the past moments it brings into the present, which it cites and becomes legible through.

## **Conclusion**

Tracing drag highlights how there are processes of negotiating and making gender (non-)normativity visible or invisible. The focus in this chapter was on what drag means to the person that 'does' drag and to what extent it is a tool or stepping stone for reworking and rethinking ways of framing one's own gender as well as gendered embodiment in general. Butler upholds that drag can make visible ontological assumptions on gendered embodiment. Namaste, Ferguson and the way participants highlight and understand drag points to the need to contextualise any analysis or understanding of drag. Drag has to be understood within the hierarchies and constraints that bring it about and from the different viewpoints involved. Maddison's quote in the chapter's title "I can do what I want and I am a queen about it!" has emancipatory meaning if it is understood in the context of her living her femininity in a confident way using the image of the drag queen while she does not fit into the way society wants her to be. The same words coming from a male socialised drag queen who is dominating a space with people who were socialised as women would be harshly criticised by some participants. Most of all perhaps by Robyn, who has experienced many situations dominated by male socialised drag queens and would point out that such a situation reproduces gender hierarchies.

In the framework of this thesis the signifier drag has been a useful lens to recognise how people actively invest into their gendered embodiment and how people can do this in various ways. This chapter traced the meaning and role that drag had for participants performing it on stage or in other contexts or using it as a speech act. Some interview narratives illustrated how drag can be a tool to make sense of, live and negotiate gender non-normativity by, for instance, exploring one's own embodiment, having arguments and discussions about gendered embodiment surrounding the notion of drag or by identifying as a drag queen as an alternative point of everyday gender identification. Using the label drag can, in some cases, mark and signal an alternative way of understanding gender in other moments, however, it can also signal a way of constraining a certain practice or position by giving attention to some and not others or relegating a certain performance to a specific space such as the stage.

Drag posed as the exceptional, the temporary performance of what I am 'normally' upholds a hierarchy between drag and everyday life gender that reimposes logics of gender identity. This is a criticism that one participant, Robyn pointed to. At the same time, in other instances, participants highlighted how drag as a stage performance and

conscious exploration of gendered embodiment is intertwined with their personal gendered history and therefore everyday life. For Goda, for example, drag was a way of exploring masculinity, a feeling of being in-between and a multiplicity of roles she likes and in this way also shaped her own femininity. Calvin, on the other hand, also pointed out how he now experiences the genre of the drag queen as somewhat limited for the ways he wants to express himself.

Historic drag as theorised by Freeman strongly differs from the understanding of drag as that which I am not, that which is not real. To Freeman drag is a conscious tracing and exposing of how what we are and how we do gender is a new resemblance of our pasts and their constraints. Freeman, by tracing how drag is a way of connecting, reliving, 'serving' other genres and times does not limit drag to the dimension of gender of male and female, but also focuses on other dimensions of the social context of the time, race, sexuality and class as part of any drag. Some of the participants explicitly pointed out the importance of seeing the intersectionality of drag. This makes it possible to see dragging in relation to all kinds of different categories, positions and cultural artefacts.

In the experience of Maddison's drag in particular, the drag queen can be a way of understanding and framing one's everyday life gender identity in a self-affirming and emancipatory way (Maddison). Drag here can be an emancipatory practice, a way of celebrating yourself and community, and consciously re-appropriating one's gender.

Elizabeth Freeman and Maddison's understanding of drag resonate in the sense that they both see drag as re-appropriating the "cultural junk of history" (Freeman 2010, p.68) as living, as serving a notion, a style, an identity that is devalued, that comes from one's personal or cultural past, was not possible then and is nevertheless celebrated. Freeman traces how art re-presents past moments whereas Maddison enjoys the practice of trying to see how other people serve different genres.

I argue that the narratives on drag presented here illustrate how drag is also used as a tool to make sense of, affirm, live and explore gender non-normativity and as a lens for seeing the masquerade, the extremes, the drag in every gender presentation. For some participants, taking drag as a platform for self exploration and group play with embodiment was experienced as re-framing and challenging conceptions of one's own gender and embodiment. These moments labelled drag are negotiations of meaning. In this way, drag as a genre can be limiting and also reimpose hierarchies as well as affirming the logics of identity. In the next chapter the focus will be on how negotiations of meaning take shape surrounding the concepts of difference and transgender. The focus will be less on moments of change than on the way the participants position themselves in relation to others and to what extent they manage to establish a positive relationship with gendered difference.

## 5. Thinking Difference: Narrating Positions of Difference through notions of Trans\*- and Cis-Gender

### **Introduction**

The starting point of this chapter is the concept of difference, especially gendered and sexual difference. Difference is looked at here in the framework of the self-positioning and understanding of a person. Am I different from you and what kind of relation persists across this difference? What stands out in people's perceptions and understanding of themselves and the world around them? The connectedness as inhabitants of this world or our differences and how are these framed?

Initially, I will introduce sexual difference feminism as presented by Lucy Irigaray and Elizabeth Grosz, their thoughts on difference and relation, as well as a critique of sexual difference feminism from a transgender perspective. Sexual difference feminism poses an "irreducible" (Irigaray 1993, p.36) force of sexual difference. No concept or identity can ever hold sexual difference. Sexual difference is here thought to be exactly that which is outside of language, any name or concept, untidy and ambiguous and which makes change possible and inevitable (2005, p.172).

Part of sexual difference feminism however is also a dominance of thinking of sexual difference as the difference between the masculine and the feminine, being linked to the difference between men and women. This can be read in statements such as "man and woman is a most mysterious and creative couple" (Irigaray 1993, p.199) which highlights the perspective of thinking difference through a heteronormative lens.

Gayle Salamon (2010) develops a critique of sexual difference feminism and opens up the location of sexual difference as not only between the feminine and the masculine, but as possibly having a multitude of locations also between two women or a transman and his boyfriend for instance. By extension Salamon also rethinks the quality of sexual difference and what kind of disconnection it is. She posits that the 'limits' of sexual differences are possible to move across and linger on. She talks about the multiple locations and spaces of gendered difference and re-thinks the notion of the gendered other bringing academic discourses on transgender and sexual difference together.

Salamon's intervention did not come about in isolation. It resonates with the lives and frameworks of participants and the way they think difference which highlights how Salamon's intervention is connected to trans\*/feminist/queer subcultures. In this chapter I want to treat the on-going rise of transgender as a 'new' identity on the rise over the past two decades as a discursive event and investigate the ways it is experienced and negotiated by participants. As Joan W. Scott points out this does not equate to linguistic determinism, but is an act of insisting on the creative power of discourse (Scott, 1991).

I will trace how participants define and use the concepts of difference, binary gendered difference, cis-gender and transgender for self-description and identification. In this thesis I will mainly discuss the narratives of participants who do not clearly self-

identify as transgender or transsexual defining these terms, which is important to consider when reading and interpreting their statements. Nevertheless, multiple participants define themselves in relation to the term transgender, are drawn towards transgender as a notion and some advocate a definition of transgender that is more encompassing than the one they presently see around themselves. I will focus on the way the participants position themselves with and through trans\* or in relation to or distancing themselves from it.

### **'The Force of Sexual Difference'**

Sexual difference after Irigaray is actually not the differences we see between men and women today, as one might associate with the term at first sight. She theorises sexual difference as that which is virtual in the present and has the force to open up a new future. In the following Irigaray's understanding of sexual difference and its generative power is explained with the help of Grosz's elaborations especially in her essay 'The force of sexual difference'.

What is present today is an opposition between the sexes created through negation, commonly referred to as patriarchy or phallogocentrism. The female sex, is defined as lack, as opposite, complementary or in sameness to the male sex. It cannot exist on its own terms. There is no room for difference, for sexual difference, for at least two sexes, but for only one sex, the male one, and its negation or opposite (Grosz, 2005).

Grosz highlights the consequences for thought and knowledge. Present is a singular universal neutrality, a one dimensional understanding of time, space and knowledge. The domain of knowledge and concepts is impoverished. This is not only problematic with regard to the attributes and qualities associated with femininity, but also with regard to knowledge in general. There is just one dominant, male way of how things are done and known (Grosz 2005, p.165).

Sexual difference is "that untidy and ambiguous invocation of the prestructuring of being by irreducible difference" (Grosz 2005, p.172). No concept can ever hold difference. Sexual difference is exactly that which surprises how we think and live at a given moment. It is that which is posited as the real, the outside. But it is necessary to go just there and beyond gender which is always already represented and socialised. Sexual difference is importantly material. It is matter as ontological force, creating an effect, resonating both on the material as well as the conceptual level.

There is no single smooth truth or identity that could be revealed. There is no move of incorporation possible that would stop difference as a motor for change. There is a constant becoming-other. Grosz' thinking about past, present and future adds to a deeper understanding of sexual difference as a generative force:

"This past, a past created simultaneously with the present and always carried along with it, is the ongoing resource, the site of virtuality, that provides any possibility of disruption to the forces that dominate the present because the past is able to be revived, actualized, in different ways according to the different possibilities the present affords it and the future opens up to it."  
(Grosz 2005, p.181)

The past is therefore always changing within the present. It is a resource for change due to its virtual quality and is not actualised as it holds the non-represented and infinitely unknown. The past is therefore a disruptive force that redoes, brings wonder and in this manner propels the present into the future.

Only if knowledges, disciplines, concepts and identities are regarded as relations of power and the expression of forces, can sexual difference come about. Irigaray is not in favour of negating and dropping out of the concepts we have, most importantly the feminine and masculine, for neutrality and sameness despite their current problematic status (Grosz 2005, p.175). We need sexual difference and differentiation, but need to rework it so that one does not threaten to annihilate the other. She wants to rework these concepts, rework the notions that bind us into a positive relationality. Sexual difference entails at least two points of view, frameworks, interests, ideals, methods, criteria for anything. Most importantly, these differences should not relate in negation, but as different viewpoints relating in affirmation and positivity (Grosz 2005, p.164). In this way, the feminine can emerge as having its own place, not being the non-masculine.

This chapter works with this philosophy of difference as it tries to highlight the ongoing power struggles and negotiations through which differences are denied, accepted, ignored, celebrated and how language and linguistic markers such as transgender or feminine are part of such negotiations. Furthermore, the principal orientation towards difference as something positive is taken up in this chapter as well as the goal of contributing towards creating more space for multiplicity and change.

The participants used different words and concepts to name and describe being 'different', 'not fitting in' or 'failing to produce a proper feminine subject.' Pablo, talks with confidence about not fitting in and the discomfort it gives him to think about the pressure to do so.

"I, I don't feel comfortable in this way... in this crystal clear identity policy... I feel like prisoned in myself, if I always have to behave and always be this, be the homosexual, the heterosexual or the male or the female... ahah, totally."  
(Pablo)

Jan Sophia similarly talked more extensively about how no label seems to fit his experience and life.

"So, this is somehow a somewhat unsolvable problem for me, because I somehow have the feeling that I connect different feelings with different things and somehow I feel that I do not get it integrated. And when I did therapy, my therapist feedbacked me that he perceives me as something like a feminine man and then I sometimes asked myself if that is not a position, which I could accept well. But nothing really suits me. Nothing that I can really accept. Nothing I really like, nothing fits, not Jan, not Sophia, not transgender, feminine man does not really fit and ehe... and I do think a bit my life would be easier .... what I do now is well this fluid thing from back and forth, and sometimes I think, my life would be easier, if I could rather relate myself to one position... that is both a blessing and a curse at once... so.. yeah..." (Jan Sophia)

Jan Sophia explained how his way for now is not one label or name, but multiplicity and moving between options. This is a strategy that resembles the narratives of many participants (it was explicitly mentioned by Goda, Nic, Calvin, Pablo and Maddison) and also connects to the elaborations on how labels are often context specific and how people feel and live different roles and alliances in different contexts as discussed in the chapter on 'Gendered Embodiment'. Some participants' narratives of their experiences resemble Grosz's point that difference is uncontainable by any system or signifier and in this sense eternal.

Pablo also described a situation that made him feel that he does not fit in and went on to highlight that he does not necessarily feel comfortable in these situations:

"Oh yeah I like it, especially when there are heterosexual guys around me... and they (friends) call sexy lady and I come with my nice coat and I sit down and I just say the most direct things ever, like.. would just burp or whatever... and everybody is like... ah, what's going on here... ya... but that is.. okay... if we come back to... that I want to feel comfortable, but not always feel comfortable. Like I like these situations, but it is not always that I am comfortable in these situations. They are very daring... I am... I am not stupid, I am totally conscious of that. It is not always comfortable... but I don't know. It is worth it...and these are situations that are more... they are not like... it is not that someone calls me sexy lady 5 times a day in a bar. It is sometimes that it happened, and I try to embrace it." (Pablo)

Pablo pointed to the joy and thrill that is also part of occupying a 'differently' gendered position involving feminine and masculine codes, but at the same time also indicated that social dynamics make it uncomfortable and risky at times. Goda highlighted altering emotions that can be attached to being different depending on the framework that one places them in. She talked about being different in terms of a failure to produce a 'proper feminine subject.' In this way she highlighted the possibly strongly negative connotation of difference which Pablo also alluded to.

"It can both feel very good and very bad, this... failure, because I guess, failure to perform, can also be seen as a success to perform something else, or as a successful refusal to perform." (Goda)

Pablo and Goda both pointed out how they try to take up the challenge of living difference in a positive manner. Kay uses the word difference itself a lot and how he thinks about it. Kay also talked about difference in a more general way and contributed to a perspective that tries to frame difference in a positive and all-present manner. He talked about how we are all different...

"Because in fact if you dig deep in, there are different people in the straight scene. Then there are people of colour... then there are white people and then you have people secretly doing SM and then you have people saying it is disgusting... and likeahaha, you can divide that in a lot of small groups and you do not have a majority anymore.. But people think they belong to a majority... because that makes them... they are scared if they don't feel that way." (Kay)

Kay thinks of difference in this sense as all-present. This quote points to how difference can be thought and experienced concerning a wide range of themes and in intersectional ways. Jan Sophia for instance experiences being different not only at the level of gender, but also as intersecting with the level of his activities in the trans\*/queer scene.

"I have had the feeling before that people look at me as hermaphrodite and little star and blablabla and somehow people do not see me so much as on the same level or so, which is related to the shooting star thing." (Jan Sophia)

Kay himself talked about his difference/relation to other trans men. To recognise differences between trans men was an important issue for him. That differences of embodiment and senses of self exist is self-evident to him and something that he can relate to. For him the differentiating factor is more people's actions and how people respect others and differences. Here he talks about trans men who are machos.

"You never felt as a girl. I respect that... is... this feeling I have too, I never felt like a girl neither... you have this feeling as a guy... which is different as my feeling. this I can still understand, but that you fucking reproduce something that you yourself have been through...but it is... the same when... minorities... with gays and lesbians I also have less patience for accepting my transition.." (Kay)

Here it becomes clear that to Kay, not every trans guy has to be a macho, also appealing to the history of female socialisation in childhood. He holds this principle to judge people by their actions also with regard to what he refers to as cis people. Pablo talks about his feeling of difference and then by implication talks about other people who he perceives as 'fitting in' in a way that he could not.

"I understand that people feel this normal in what they do and whatever, I understand that they feel like that and I don't say that it is always a show and a trick or how do you say that? That they are continuously faking it, that they don't believe that they are like that, but I don't fit into that, I just don't. So it is not so much a critique for the people that do fit in... It is as well a critique..." (Pablo)

Pablo here imposes 'fitting in' on other people while at the same time it could be asked in line with Kay's perspective at which levels these people he has in mind might experience sexual difference, a struggle with gendered roles and identities.

Some participants, despite referring to difference in the way they understood their own experience of gender, also stated that it was not a theme that constantly is with them in everyday life and that, at times, it sometimes happened that they did not feel different. Jan Sophia, who on the one hand, as cited in the last section, talked at length about how no label, concept or position seems to be one he can accept, also talked about how he does not think about himself as 'different'.

"And yes, most people call me Sophia and I also use it publicly as publication name. It is not like that I experience myself as different or untypical, or not in correspondence with certain imagery. I know it somehow, but this is not my

first perception. I downright have to sometimes remind myself or then ask myself sometimes how ordinary people, for whom I am already extraordinary, see me. And I don't know that, I cannot really put myself into that position.”  
(Jan Sophia)

He said that specific situations make him aware of being different in his everyday life. He gives the examples of trying on clothes and finding that T-shirts just do not fit his long body or wonders what an impression a feminine name leaves when he is asked to enter his name on the international gay dating website 'Gay Romeo'.

The theme of difference is therefore present in the narratives of participants about their gendered/sexed life experience. The notion of an eternal or lasting difference to any category was present especially in some of these. Those concerned consciously try to inhabit difference in a positive manner, grappling with experiencing it in an affirmative manner while society in many instances poses a critical or hostile perspective towards difference.

### **The Place of Sexual Difference from a Trans\* Perspective**

In the essay 'Place Interval' in *The Ethics of Sexual Difference* Irigaray (1993) develops a theory on how a place for the development of sexual difference can be created. The male father to whom she refers in this essay is Aristotle and she draws a parallel between his issue of space and the issue of sexual difference. First the ideas of Aristotle will be outlined in basic terms together with Irigaray's reworking. This will be followed by a discussion of the problematic points from a transgender perspective along Salamon's lines.

Aristotle highlights existence and motion as central to his understanding of place. This is the case because all things which exist are somewhere and motion is a change of place. The existence of place becomes obvious through replacement of one thing by the next. If another body occupies a place, then that place is held to be different from any body that can come to occupy it. Place comes into existence by being disconnected from the objects that move through it. Place is the proof of the boundedness and separateness of two objects, one replacing the other in place. Relation is here exclusive. Only one object can be in a place at any one time and that is what establishes place. Place in itself implies that two objects cannot share it. Place becomes a lack of relation (Aristotle 1930, p.208a, 1.30).

Importantly, however place develops as the text continues. It becomes a location where relations take place; the space where two bodies touch and meet. Eventually space becomes that very relation, the place where the two meet, established by their proximity. "Place is the boundary of the containing body at which it is in contact with the contained body" (Aristotle 1930, p.212a, 1.20). Still there are two separate bodies and one contains the other neither completely being place. The maxim for place becomes: "If then a body has another outside it and containing it, it is in place, and if not, not" (Aristotle 1930, p.212a, 1.32).

Irigaray here associates the feminine as that which gives place to the masculine.

This creates a dilemma as all that exists has a place, according to Aristotle. If place is the innermost layer of the containing body, it leaves the containing body without a place. For the feminine to come into being herself and to be able to be place for the masculine, the feminine needs to become place for herself first. What Irigaray suggests as a solution is the feminine's outer layer, her skin, to house itself. Skin is however not automatically place yet. The task Irigaray poses is a 'corporeal surveying' (Irigaray 1993, p.36f), a becoming aware of her own sexual difference, claiming her body, form and size, her corporeal identity as a discrete entity (Salamon 2010, p.136).

One can find the place one is only in proximity and relation to the other she contains from which she needs to retract. Male and female alike retract. As my skin is what delineates me from the other, it is this other however who is my boundary and installed also at exactly this moment of finding and claiming the boundary. At this boundary one can be place to the other and the self. The other has a place in the moment she finds place herself. Just as much she needs the other to find her own space. Described in this manner, the feminine finds her place as inescapably bordered by the masculine. Joined, as they are nevertheless distinct. In fact only through finding themselves and delineating their separateness, the boundary, they can be so proximate. As their distinctness is established, they are not substitutable for one another, they can inhabit one place without the fear of annihilating one another, as they both have a place found with the other (Salamon 2010, p.137).

In Aristotle's theory space is secured through the substitutability of one object for the other in space. Here positive relation and proximity is possible in one space as unsubstitutability, sexual difference, ensures that one body cannot replace and annihilate the other, as it needs the other to establish the self and space (Salamon 2010, p.139). This excursion reworking the notion of place in Aristotle underpins how the emergence of sexual difference, the constitution of distinctness and substitutability, is intertwined with the emergence of an affirmative way of relating. This makes possible to share one space in differentiation, which also holds potential for trans\* people and differently gendered/sexed in a broad sense and their way of living material, psychic and emotional sexual difference.

Salamon points out that difference thought in between the masculine and the feminine as described in Irigaray, arises through a certain interchangeability, a non-difference, a sameness within the feminine and, as Salamon reads Irigaray, this extends to an interchangeability between women. The question arises: Why is difference always posited as at play only between the feminine and the masculine, and between men and women? And who benefits from this location? Is there another possibility of thinking the place of sexual difference? These questions will be the focus of this section. First they will be tackled from a theoretical viewpoint thinking through Salamon's intervention and then related to the interview narratives.

What first comes to mind is that this indifference between women gives relations between men and women a privileged position which erupts in Irigaray's fiercely discussed

phrase "man and woman is a most mysterious and creative couple" (Irigaray 1993, p.199). This is widely, also by Salamon, interpreted as alarmingly upholding that "homosexuality is a flight from difference, merely love of the same that has no relationship of difference at work within it" (Salamon 2010, p.142). Irigaray's essay 'When lips speak together' on the other hand could be upheld to support that relations of difference are at play between or even within woman in Irigaray's thinking.

Beyond the charge of homophobia, a staging of difference as purely between man and woman or also just giving primacy to this difference, creates a further problem: it unifies notions of masculinity and femininity, and denies a possible space for variations of how masculinity and femininity can be lived. This effect backs up the need to move beyond privileging sexual difference between men and women.

Salamon asks, "Must sexual difference be visible at the surface of the body? And is sexual difference the same thing as 'natural' sex?" (Salamon 2010, p.138). Salamon suggests an opening up to sexual difference locatable within femaleness or maleness (Salamon 2010, p.142). This perspective also enriches the task of corporeal surveying. Corporeal surveying as thinking seriously about bodily contours and one's boundary can help us understand finding our own place. Irigaray's text 'When Our Lips Speak Together' in her pronunciation of genitalia, their movement and even autoeroticism, emanates a power that seems to counter popular portrayals of the vulva as passive, a hole, a non-existence and opens space for new ways of self-discovery. Rethinking sexual difference in multiple spaces demands that I not only differentiate myself and find a place for myself in relation to a distant 'other sex', but to set myself in relation to my own materiality, what is around me and to discern my and the others' sexual distinctness in this process of surveying. This creates space for sexual difference to a much greater degree.

"For if we do not restrict our scope to the categories of male and female as they are most strictly conceived, and extend our consideration to the myriad ways in which gender is performed even within the category of, for example, femaleness, we can begin to discern difference, perhaps even difference itself. These are differences that are emphatically bodily, undeniably material, even as they are also psychic, emotional, and relational differences." (Salamon 2010, p.142)

Salamon still draws on the core assumptions of sexual difference theory,<sup>27</sup> staging the emergence of difference as most important in the above quote. Her reference to 'difference *itself*' hints at her understanding that sexual difference theory does not offer a place to people who do not fall within the categories of 'male and female as they are most strictly conceived'. She re-frames the project of creating a space where differences not strictly

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<sup>27</sup> This quote illustrates how Salamon tries to cast a new place, shared by and in differentiation to queer theory as well as sexual difference theory. She does not restrict herself to one vocabulary. To feel their tension, yet trying to cast a place where both strains of thought can come together seems to be the project Salamon is working on. In this way she is methodologically embracing an ethics of sexual difference. The notion of performing gender is definitely foreign to sexual difference thought, and is the different element that Salamon, tries to set into relation with sexual difference theory. She needs this notion to draw on knowledge of the great spectrum of gender performances established by queer theory. Borrowing from sexual difference language as Salamon is just reshaping it, one could say the multiple manifestations of sexual difference.

within male and female categories can join without the threat of annihilation. Salamon tries to introduce difference at a linguistic as well as ontological level; introduce what we cannot make sense of yet within a philosophy of difference.

Salamon lists multiple scenarios in which sexual difference can be found if not swept over in a generalising, binary look. In a relationship between a transman and a cis woman different styles of bodily inhabitation and affective tendencies are clearly at work. Sexual differences, bodily and affectionate, can also be found in a lesbian butch femme couple. Acknowledging sexual difference between a couple consisting of a transman and a cis man prevents the collapse of masculinities into one undifferentiated category and at the same time affirms that each one of them is indeed a man (Salamon 2010, p.143).

Salamon draws on stereotypical sex/gender images, to be able to communicate possibilities of sexual difference. This is simplistic, but makes Salamon's point that sexual difference can be found not only between a stereotypical man and woman if it is considered to work on a whole range of dimensions as "bodily, undeniably material,.. psychic, emotional, and relational" as stated in the above quote. At the same time, the employment of stereotypes by Salamon also highlights how binary images of sexual difference between man and woman, indirectly draw on what one could call stereotypical images.

The quotes from participants illustrate how they also conceive of difference with regard to and within a multitude of concepts and categories which include the experiences such as the pressure to produce a 'proper feminine subject' by Goda, but also the feeling of more generally not fitting in also with regards to categories such as the homosexual, being a feminine man or transgender. Kay for instance also highlighted how he thinks of himself not as a man as most people assume when they meet him, and how he is also different from other trans men in one or another way.

"Yes, because mostly people know cis and they don't know trans and what I, what I like, try to, yeah... it is just to bring the fact that people think I am a guy and I am not and also as a trans man I have a different body and then to bring also this idea that not all trans people are the same." (Kay)

The examples he gives for being different from other trans men is about the body he has and that some feel they are men, whereas he feels that he is a trans guy and not a 'man'.

By locating difference not only between men and women in the strictest sense, it becomes possible to conceive of a transman as a man. Even if respect for the gender/sexual identity of a transgender person is becoming a politically correct stance, there are many examples of people struggling to conceive of a transman as a man. For instance there are a multiplicity of newspaper phrases that seem to be grammatical mistakes such as 'now she rather wants to be a boy' (TransInterQueer e.V. 2011, p. 6). Addressing the person in question as 'she' illustrates the hardship of understanding a transboy as a boy and addressing him as 'he'. This clarifies the dire need to rethink the categories of male and female, and the possibility of difference within them .

This move by Salamon to relocate sexual differences within masculinity and

femininity, does not debunk and collapse notions of male and female and does not turn into calls for neutrality, but questions the boundaries and differences of masculinity and femininity. She opens up the question which methods of corporeal surveying are appropriate to decide the masculine or the feminine and decisively leaves this open so that place can be constantly recreated in relation (Salamon 2010, p.139).

The way participants described being different was in the sense of difference to multiple categories while also enjoying and living multiple roles, associations, identifications. They did not pose sexual difference in terms of a difference between the feminine and the masculine as the predominant framework through which they made sense of their lives as was highlighted by the above quotes. Affirming difference was not solely and necessarily about affirming the feminine, in the sense of notions that in society are connoted as feminine, but centrally about affirming the possibility of living in-between or in difference to categories and in association with multiple ones; about the uncontainability of lives and bodies in a wider sense.

Sometimes I felt that I forced a framework, especially one of binary sex/gender onto people and created confusion when I for instance asked for stories in which participants fell out of a 'binary framework of thinking gender'. Jan Sophia had to think for a while when he heard that question and said that he does not have a strong feeling of not fitting into certain dominant gendered images. He said that at the same time he does fit certain images (possibly of a feminine man). In his everyday life it appeared to me that he thinks much more of gender as multiple and sexual difference as having multiple locations which resembles Salamon's framework of thinking sexual difference.

Ona, also talked about how things can have different meanings and how something being masculine or feminine is not the primary thing she necessarily sees in things.

"So I went to my mum's closet, I thought like I need a sweatshirt, you know, and she had all these things, they are kind of nice, but they are just like, I don't want to wear this and I went to my dad's thing and I found a sweatshirt and I was like, yeah, that is cool, yeah, because it was simple somehow and stuff like that. (..) It is good for me that I am just taking and I don't have this: ah, oh no, but it is a men's thing. I don't have this. I just don't care as long as it is... good for me, the thing I am searching for and this is it." (Ona)

Maddison stated that she feels thinking about and criticising a binary framework of sex/gender is not the main priority when she thinks about the communities she lives in. The following quote illustrates how people also build a language and habits of speaking that do not cite masculine and feminine as unsubstitutable signifiers that have a certain originality in reference. They are two different cultural categories, roles, positions, that have different connotations. I asked about masculinity, and Calvin used another signifier, butchness, instead which shares a certain resemblance and both seemingly point to what we were talking about for Calvin.

A: "but *masculinity* in itself is something that you also like to perform in that

sense, or..."

C: "No. I never feel comfortable being like, *butch*... in a no, never, it makes me feel deeply uncomfortable. Ahaha. Like I think if I was to do it then it would also like have to be drag, I feel so... It is so alien to me, trying like be like, kind of... I think I don't know the pressure to be *masculine* freaks me out..." (Calvin)

There were various instances of language that signalled how participants were framing sexual difference as having multiple locations and dimensions. Maddison for instance said "the two more typical gender presentations" in this way pointing to their normative position without directly reciting them. Participants also talked about how they at times feel they lack the language to talk about what they want to say, especially Ona and Nic said this explicitly. Nic commented how it seems that people then start adding adjectives as in for example writing: dominant masculinity or female masculinity or how in her life she does not shy away from using terms that seem contradictory to some. These instances of crossing, bridging and reassembling point to an understanding of the limit, the quality of the distinction between the feminine and the masculine or any gendered notions for that sake as bridgeable, overlapping and compatible. Pablo for instance talks about how he feels that he is what he does and he does and wants a lot of differently connoted things. Such understandings break with Elizabeth Grosz's understanding of sexual difference and resonates with Gayle Salamon's rethinking of the 'limit' of sexual difference which I will outline in the following section. She argues that the notion of the limit between the masculine and the feminine which sexual difference feminism poses as unbridgeable, has a different quality when lived from a transgender perspective.

### **The Notion of the Limit from a Trans\* Perspective**

The lives lived by transgender people suggest that notions such as male and female, masculinity and femininity can be bridged and traversed. This creates a tension between transgender and sexual difference theory with regard to the question of the permeability of the divide between man and woman. This tension is recreated in the standpoints of Grosz and Salamon discussed in the following. The last section questioned masculinity and femininity in terms of its internal differences. Now their limits, their separateness will be called into question. I will first elaborate on Grosz's take on the body, its limits, the interval of sexual difference and the implications she sees for trans\* people. Afterwards, Salamon's questions will be taken as a starting point to rethink this account of the limit of sexual difference.

Grosz radically rethinks corporeality, the ontology of being, in her book *Volatile Bodies*. She theorises that a body is unpredictable, unstable, excessive, a body whose "capacity for becoming cannot be known in advance, cannot be charted" (Grosz 1994, p.124). The body Grosz talks about can exceed the confines of its own skin. This is the case as the grounds for subjectivity is not the material body, but rather the body image, which is "capable of accommodating and incorporating an extremely wide range of objects. Anything that comes into contact with the surface of the body and remains there long

enough will be incorporated into the body image" (Grosz 1994, p.80). The body can in this sense supersede its own limits by interacting with objects around it. It is the body image, not the material stuff that is the grounds for our subjectivity. Grosz affirms the importance of the materiality of the body, while at the same time thinking corporeality decisively more complex than a naturally given body which linearly lends subjectivity. So far, there is a strong resemblance in the way especially Salamon, but also Stryker think embodiment as illustrated in the chapter on embodiment. At first it seems that Grosz continues this thinking onto the level of sexual difference maintaining that "there is no natural body to return to, no pure sexual difference one could gain access to if only the distortions and deformations of patriarchy could be removed" (Grosz 1994, p.85).

As Grosz affirms the possibility of a body that transforms itself and its environment, she however also expresses anxiety about such a body. She maintains that if there are no limits, there is the threat of the loss of the materiality of the body altogether. She moves on to announce sexual difference as the limit that is pre-ontological and pre-epistemological, in the sense of prior to how we know and a precondition for our existence (Grosz 1994, p.209). The question of the limits of bodily plasticity in this way becomes rephrased as a question on the limits of gender plasticity. In order to secure the body as a configuration with unknown limits, gender plasticity is paradoxically foreclosed (Salamon 2010, p.146). Nevertheless, Grosz refuses to pin down what creates this pre-existing difference. She does not define female sexual specificity as either very real differences or experiences. What she does nevertheless, is define what or who cannot be female, that which remains outside and indirectly marks the limit, namely 'the transsexual':

"There will always remain a kind of outsidership or alienness of the experiences and lived reality of each sex for the other. Men, contrary to the fantasy of the transsexual, can never, even with surgical intervention, feel or experience what it is like to be, to live as women. At best the transsexual can live out his fantasy of femininity – a fantasy that in itself is usually disappointed with the rather crude transformations effected by surgical and chemical intervention. The transsexual may look like a woman but can never feel like or be a woman. The one sex, whether male or female or some other term, can only experience, live according to (and hopefully in excess of) the cultural significations of the sexually specific body. The problematic of sexual difference entails a certain failure of knowledge to bridge the gap, the interval, between the sexes. There remains something...unpredictable, and uncontainable about the other sex for each other." (Grosz 1994, p.207f)

In this quote the transsexual's failure of being a woman secures the place of woman for women without specifying it on its own terms. This quote reinscribes the mysterious remainder posed to persist between the sexes as just not bridgeable.

'The transsexual' does not fulfil being a woman primarily because of the incapacity of feeling which appears central in this quote. And as Salamon points out what kind of feeling it is to be a woman is nevertheless not specified and paradoxically the feeling of gender identity is the core of the clinical definition of transsexualism. Grosz furthermore describes the bodily transformations of transsexuals as 'crude' which is surprising given the way she does not provide such a judgement towards other instances of bodily

modification she also discusses such as scarification or piercing which can be technologically much more crude. It seems to be more about the point that genitalia or sexual attributes are modified than the technological practice itself (Salamon 2010, p.153). There is a double standard at play in Grosz's stance on corporeal change. Corporeality can be reworked, just not in the realm of sexual difference.

In her book Salamon, as a first stance, raises the question if sexual difference, masculinity and femininity can be bridged or joined? Here she asks the reader to stretch his/her imagination on difference. Salamon asks which spaces are opened if femininity is detached from women and masculinity from men. Salamon highlights the importance of Jack Halberstam's book *Female Masculinity* in creating a space, in pronouncing the compossibility of the two categories female and masculinity. Salamon also mentions the theory of Gayle Rubin who is thinking sex as a multidimensional continuum system so that there are no boundaries of sex that constantly need to be policed in response to what she experienced in lesbian subculture. Rubin understands her model as an approach to not exclude those 'at the margins'. She lays a continuum of dysphoria parallel to a gender continuum. Dysphoria here is used as a purely descriptive term for persons who have gender feelings and identities that do not match their assigned gender status or how their physicality is commonly understood. The dysphoria continuum stretching from a mild desire to alter one's body to a strong desire to do so is intertwined with a continuum of female masculinity reaching from soft butch to transsexual man. This is one approach that can illustrate how one can start attempts at dislodging women and femininity (Salamon 2010, p.165).

Salamon investigates further and asks if the feminine and 'woman' cannot be set in another relation than sameness? Drawing on the importance of difference, she thinks back to the dilemma of woman creating a place for herself: The emergence of woman cannot come before her encounter with the other. Place can only emerge in relation to that other, who is proximate, even part of her as she gives it place as she emerges. She retracts only to be able to join in one place. Everybody, male or female, seems to be in this process of becoming feminine, of finding place and difference in relation (Salamon 2010, p.136). Inhabiting one's own body, finding one's place necessitates an encounter with sexual difference,<sup>28</sup> but as Salamon here adds, not as that which is far away and never possibly understood. According to Salamon, we need to not only survey the difference of the other, but the "difference that inherits my own flesh. The crude materiality of myself, as much as the boundary with the other that gives me my form" (Salamon 2010, p.140). I have to relate myself towards masculinity and femininity. Rendering sexual difference as mystical and far away, proximate, but never knowable, yields my own sexual being closed and isolated, not possible to encounter myself and the other. If we cannot traverse and cross boundaries, explore differences, our own being remains closed to us (Salamon 2010,

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<sup>28</sup> Here sexual difference is again referred to in the sense of having multiple locations as introduced through Salamon (2010) before.

p.143f).

To elaborate on this point and to show the potential this way of thinking sexual difference opens up, Salamon comes back to trans\*: "The trans\* body can help us understand the traversal of sexual boundaries not as an representable breach but as a negotiation of difference (...). Indeed, transition itself can be understood as a means of 'reclaiming the skin'" (Salamon 2010, p.143).

The body image, as elaborated by Grosz, figures prominently in Salamon's theory. Salamon, however does not restrict the potential of becoming in the sphere of sexual difference. Salamon theorises that also the production of all, also normative gender, depends on a disjunction between the 'felt sense' of the body and the body's corporeal contours.<sup>29</sup> This disjunction is the tension of sexual difference in the process of becoming place. In this sense, transition is seen as part of the process of becoming, of recreating a place for oneself, of relating, of relating also to the difference that inherits my own flesh, difference being at the core of this project. Here, this process however involves closely intertwined masculinity and femininity and brings about an intimate negotiation of those terms. Moving from one term to the other, recreating masculinity and femininity in new terms, keeping both in interplay, attempting their compossibility in one place.

Without further elaboration, Salamon suggests that a couple consisting of a transman and a gay man can help us to make sense of sexual difference without keeping up the condition that one sex is quarantined away from the other (Salamon 2010, p.143). Here she seems to suggest that this couple negotiates femininity and masculinity, which at first could be surprising. Are there not two men in relation? Does Salamon also suggest a certain trace of femininity 'left' in the transman? Does she not recognise his masculinity? These seem unlikely implications. However, on second thought, why shy away from any connections with femininity regarding a transman or the gay man for that reason? They of course have negotiated their own relation to femininity with regard to desire, corporeal style and affect, changes most likely also occurred in their relation to femininity and masculinity as talked about in the experience of participants in the chapter on embodiment.

### **Participants' Self-Positioning**

My main analysis of the interview data in this chapter is on how participants differentiated themselves, delineated their own position and difference with regard to sex/gender in particular. I will focus on the way the linguistic markers of non-conformity difference, transgender and cis-gender are used and function in this context. I aim to trace ways of positively relating while still making space for difference and strangeness.

When I asked Ona what she connects with the term transgender and later how she feels about this experience some people have, she said clearly that "stereotypes just do not work" which she is well aware of thanks to personal experience, feeling and knowing

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<sup>29</sup> For further elaborations on how Salamon thinks the body image and embodiment see the chapter on embodiment.

she is a woman, but in a way that differs from what most people think this should entail. To her it seems to 'make sense' that people have diverse body images and feelings of a sense of self. This to her is in line with her own experience.

"I, ...from the beginning I understood that the world is more real. It became more grounded when I met people that really feel different about gender and really talk about themselves differently. (...) Now, you are talking about empathy. Not at all confusing. As natural as it is that I am a woman born into a woman's body, it can be that someone is born into a different body that somebody can not relate to." (Ona)

In this way Ona manages to think of herself and people who inhabit their bodies and lives in ways that differ from hers as exhibiting certain similarities whilst remaining aware of the differences.

Different participants have asked themselves whether they want to transition. They focus more on the stereotypically thought of means of transitioning, such as surgery and hormones, whereas people's gender presentation and appearance can also change radically without such means even across gendered notions such as feminine and masculine, and appearances evolve regardless. Pablo and Calvin talked about transitioning in a more 'stereotypical' way and actually did not rule out this possibility. Calvin says:

"I mean we, ha,.... I mean this it totally ridiculous and I don't know if I can tell you, and it is probably really offensive to people, but we both (Calvin and his friend Simon with whom he started doing drag) had this... I don't know, maybe it is a joke, I don't know if it is real or if it is a joke, but we had this.... thing that if we were alone, both alone, single at 50 then we would actually just move in together and transition at 50 you know, (...) It is more, ...what I am more drawn to, when people have this image that does not fit you know... that.. because it is, you know, one thing to be cool. You always in some ways just recycling a style. So what does it mean to present yourself in awkward...? Or what does it mean to have the body of a 50 year old men and then transition? Because in some way you will never really be possible... as a woman, but then you know these kind of... you know I think... this is where I feel most kind of excited by what I was interested in... when people have bodies that can't be cool or that can't be..." (Calvin)

In this sense, Calvin is curious about body modifications in a broad sense beyond clothes, styles, make up, body posture and movements, but also does not see the perfect solution in them for him personally. He also says how he has 'sneaked' some testosterone from trans guy friends and used it for a while, because he was curious whether it would change the way he related to his body and masculinity. He says that actually he could not really tell a difference.

Pablo said "I don't see myself transitioning neither. But I don't know. I cannot say if in ten years I am still comfortable with my body as it is... yeah..." (Pablo). Calvin and Pablo here frame the option of body modification through surgery or hormones as one option that they have considered and do not deem it impossible to grasp while they still do not want/need it in the present. For some people surgery and/or hormones and a sex/name change present a necessity to feel more comfortable with themselves in their

everyday life. It is important to me to point out that such steps are not viewed as a fun option. I also did not understand participants' statements as suggesting such an interpretation. Calvin, for instance, merely pointed out how he does not want such changes now, but still is drawn towards them and points to the possibility that surgery, hormones and legal sex change might also not resolve the ambivalences and contradictions people experience about gender forever. Nevertheless, it might be an urgent or simply needed and wanted step for some people.

Pablo and Calvin here explicitly also posit an unconventional understanding of gender with regard to time. Gender here is understood as in process and that one's sense of self and body can change. One's belonging to a gender does not have to be permanent. In line with this, Robyn, who identifies as 'partially trans' says that she denies the interpretation of psychology on her life that she has always been trans, but just did not know it yet.

"If I come out as trans\*, then I have always been that and have until now just not understood it. That is a psychiatric narration, so... and against such I also resist. I have lived quite happy then in my femininity, not always, it has also always been a bit strange and I also had started thinking and so on, but yeah." (Robyn)

These understandings and ways of framing transitioning also clearly resonate with an understanding of sexual difference that is a difference that shifts and that the limit between notions such as butch, transgender, femmy and male can be crossed at a particular point in time, but also over time.

When multiple people who Nic would describe as quite butch, started transitioning to live as men, she also wondered if this is an option for her.

"quite some people are transitioning so obviously I thought, well, is this anything that I would ever take into account in whatever way... either surgically or hormonally or in any other way... and I actually no. I wouldn't. So that was a confirmation. (...) I would never wanted to be named a man, also a sort of theoretically and politically, I would find it difficult to inhabit a male, a normative male, masculine position. Come through a feminist activist perspective, to suddenly appropriate a sort of... hmm... normative masculinity, male masculinity, I would find it complicated for example." (Nic)

Nic here formulates a reservation that none of the other participants shared in this way. Nic stated that she asked herself whether transitioning was an option for her and she desired to do so, which first of all poses it as a possibility and not something completely alienated and outside her life world. Her answer was no and she also argues that she sees it as something politically 'difficult'. She seems to see a tension between transitioning and her own perspective of feminism, which is not an uncommon phenomenon, especially talking from a position of sexual difference feminism as exemplified above. At the same time, there is also a difference between the statements made by Elizabeth Grosz that the transsexual is simply not possible and Nic's statement here. To Nic it is perfectly possible to occupy the position of a man, in her eyes even in a normative masculinity which then

for her is a tricky, a complicated issue and position to have.

Trans\*men are differently positioned than for instance butch masculinities. Nic's statement imposes a hierarchy of one being politically justifiable from her feminist perspective and the other not. This statement seems to come from a way of thinking difference closely linked to the feminine, femininity and people who are female identified. Anybody who is positioned as outside the category of women i.e. also transmen are not part of this political subjectivity of women (anymore). The feminine is here given primacy as a political position and other positions are stripped of their political value with regard to sexual difference.

This trace of sexual difference feminism strongly differs from the perspective taken up in this thesis. Thinking sexual difference as multiple also poses transmen as inhabiting a position of sexual difference and poses their corporeal surveying and different mechanisms of transitioning, of embodied exploration of their own difference as political. In this sense then these stories, reflections, discussions, self-positionings in participants' narratives are also political even though they do not primarily work on affirming the feminine and femininity in society.

I would pose these two projects of the feminine and sexual difference thought as multiple as in tension, as having an important interaction. The feminine has a radical potential as theorised by Irigaray. However, if claiming to deal with 'the woman question', how the feminine can be redone, I think the challenge coming from the lives and experiences of trans\*people for instance transwomen and their femininity cannot be disregarded as false consciousness, but bear a great political potential which should also be thought out. This is also a question of ethical relations with the other which is the challenge at the heart of sexual difference feminism.

### **Discussing Cis**

A. Finn Enke is a historian transfeminist who focuses on the history of sexuality and gender. In the article 'The Education of Little Cis: Cisgender and the Discipline of Opposing Bodies' Enke writes about the discursive uptakes of the term cis (2013, p.235). Enke points out how the advantage of the term cis has been seen in marking an invisible normative position and in highlighting its privileges. More than half of the participants (Goda, Calvin, Robyn, Jan Sophia, Kay and Maddison) used the word cis to for instance describe a constellation of people. Participants also explicitly used it as a term for self-definition or demarcation of their own position.

"(...) because I do feel pretty much in-between, even though I am cis gendered, I would not like to go for sex change for instance, so I would say, yes, it more pertains to my daily life. Sometimes there are situations where I do not want to be identified, immediately as a male or female." (Goda)

Maddison explicitly said that labelling herself cis-gendered is a way to mark cis-privileges, as for instance not facing hostile reactions when showing one's identity card or having to face a health system which is not willing or prepared to deal with one's needs. Kay uses cis

to talk about others:

“By chance I discovered a guy, looks like a cis guy... I don't know if he is straight, gay... bisexual whatever, seems queer to me like artist who wants to explore sexuality through dancing whatever, so he is trying to raise money for that, whatever, so maybe I am going to help.” (Kay)

Enke analyses how cis is used in activist as well as classroom contexts in the US since 1994 when Dana Leland Defosse supposedly first used the term in a call for research on campus climate and transgender. Borrowing the term from molecular biology Defosse used cis-gender to describe the situation of congruence between birth assigned sex and gender identity or staying with one's birth sex. Enke had introduced the term cis-gender in some of her classes since the mid 1990s without ever noticing students use it. Enke elaborates on how around 2008 students started using cis by for instance saying “as a cis woman, I..” (Enke 2013, p.234f).

Enke has come to a position of criticising the concept of cis as problematic because it explicitly re-secures for the speaker at least some normativity, limits transgender in turn to a narrow definition of people who want to undergo surgery or hormonal treatment. This move projects gender non-conformity onto the latter people alone. In this way the term cis furthers an effect that Enke for instance sees when she teaches about transgender issues and the normative regulation of gender binarity: She feels that most students then do not think the books that they read are also about themselves, but about transsexuals who face entirely different oppressions than themselves (Enke 2013, p. 238).

To Enke, it is not only cis people are the agents of cis privilege as cis is also an effect in time and space, despite its implication of being static. If one wants to find a difference between cis and trans it can, in Enke's opinion be distinguished as two different methods by which one changes, in which it is not the case that one is static and the other in motion (Enke 2013, p.239ff). The concept of cis-gender reinforces the idea that something as the 'natural', 'real' woman or man, the 'real' cis exists. It implies that these categories are there and pre-given and that those neat lines can then be transgressed by transgender people. “Cis makes the *across* (n.) that trans *crosses* over refer to the “line” between “male” and “female,” as though we had agreed upon what and where that line may be as well as on what constitutes male and female” (Enke 2013, p.242). This view on embodiment and gender links her understanding of gender and embodiment to that of Salamon and Stryker, who also see gender as non-static and a context-specific agglomeration of the material and psychic as outlined in the chapter on embodiment (Stryker 2008 & Salamon 2010).

Enke points to the downsides of cis-gender, because she sees the importance in keeping the concepts of trans\*, man and woman, and the morphologies associated with them open and flexible for them to become available in unforeseen ways. “We make up pronouns and prefixes - language changes, after all - and then we wrestle with how to use them, because they do not escape systemic gender policing (..) perhaps it is in this very wrestling that we can find hope and be changed” (Enke 2013, p.244). Maddison also sees

cis-gender as problematic, yet does not turn away from its usage.

“Yeah, obviously, I feel the idea of cis is super problematic, but it is also a reality in the sense that, social understanding is real and that is what we have to work with at this point a lot of the time.” (Maddison)

She finds it problematic that such a generalising category branded as the common gender embodiment exists in the minds of people, yet, she also thinks that she needs to mark her gender presentation as 'cis-linear' because of the privilege it gives to her as her gender presentation falls somehow within the range of what is considered 'natural' for the sex she was assigned at birth. Nevertheless, she re-opens the category of cis by saying that she is not the same as many others and at the same time as using the word 'cis gender' to describe herself, she also uses the label of gender-queer. However, she points to the complications of her specific gendered embodiment and bringing these two labels together.

“I think that identifying as a drag queen also has gotten me out of the confusion of identifying as gender queer with having this sort of privilege and similar, kind of cis presentation... you know, because it is on the spectrum of cis, I am totally cis. even if I am queering my gender presentation by doing queer things or whatever.” (Maddison)

Maddison says she is 'totally' cis as she was assigned a female sex at birth and also lives predominantly female connoted gender expressions. Maddison talked about how she refers to herself with the word gender queer only in specific contexts. In her use it becomes very clear how referring to herself as gender-queer is a form of communication and in different contexts she wants to send different messages or sees different kinds of languages at play. There are some queer contexts where people have told her that she is genderqueer which was an important step for her and a way of recognising herself in that. In some contexts in which she feels people understand what she means by it, how her representation is queer and emancipatory, she would use gender-queer for herself. In other contexts she sees how the message of genderqueer does important political work especially for the acceptance of the crossing of gendered notions thought to be incompatible as lived by butch women, transsexual people, people who drag beyond the 'stereotypically' conceptualised divide of sexual difference. Then at times she knows and understands why people would not appreciate her calling herself gender queer.

Calvin again defines cis somewhat differently while talking about his drag performances and trying to describe the audience of some events.

“... because you could be in a situation that you are performing in a bar with .. let's say we are just with men, with gay men who out rule like... who never questioned their masculinity, their being a man or something... and that ah... ah.. what was it called... aha.. cis.. yes, cis men.” (Calvin)

To Calvin cis refers to a person who has not questioned a gender binarity or critically reflected on their own positioning. To him it is not about whether a person wants to undergo surgery, hormonal treatment or a name change and official change in sex in their passport. In Calvin's definition the awareness of a person seems to be the decisive factor. Calvin uses cis to mark people who have not questioned normative understandings of

gender which poses a line that is not a natural given or drawn along 'conventional' gender lines, but sees it as decisive whether people question and work on their own perceptions which in turn also points to a redone self-positioning and perspective of gender.

While Enke's intervention points to an adverse tendency of cis to reinforce the idea of 'normal' gender as a self-evident category which applies to the majority of people. This view overshadows all genders being made and being constantly redone within a social context. This creates a vision that sees gender difference only in the lives of the few who are understood as transgender or transsexual. From Enke's perspective terms such as gender non-normativity also appear problematic, as they also point to a norm that exists and in certain ways reimpose the idea of such a norm in this way. Trying to strike a balance between pointing out the hegemony of the norm while also being conscious of not wanting to reify its existence seems to be a consideration Maddison has in mind when she indicates her privilege within specific socio-cultural structures while also posing her own gender as queer in its own way. In this way, she implicitly points to a certain 'normalness' of herself, but discusses this implication as problematic and an imperfect way of dealing with an imperfect situation.

The use and spread of cis should be strongly questioned, while at the same time Calvin and Maddison's working definitions of cis in their context and their way of elaborating on them, indicate that at certain points in time cis can be used, defined and complicated in a way that appears meaningful for fostering a complex understanding of sexual/gender difference.

### **Discussing Trans\***

In the introduction to *The Transgender Studies Reader 2.0*, Aren Z. Aizura and Susan Stryker lament how at times the 'definition of "transgender" comes to signify a static identity category or specific ways of being in the world, rather than circulating as multiple modes of analysis. (...) it must also encompass new potentials for unexpected becomings, and it must accommodate the manifestation of unforeseen, emergent potentials of bodily being' (Stryker & Aizura, 2013, p.7).

Anthropologist, David Valentine published the book *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (2007) based on his research in New York almost exclusively among people he describes as malebodied transgender women. He points out that making the distinction between gender and sexuality as separate spheres was a theoretically useful intervention, yet nevertheless had adverse consequences. It disconnected the notion of gay from gender non-conformity so that gay is now to be understood as gender normative which is a particular conception and logic of thinking transgender and gay. He writes: "In asserting the truth of the distinction between gender and sexuality – rather than recognizing that it is simply one way of carving up how we know about ourselves and others – contemporary critical social theory engages all those aspects of modernity that in other guises it critiques: a master narrative, unfolding within a historical teleology, characterized by progress and a coming-to-truth" (Valentine 2007, p.243).

If this conception of transgender is taken as universal it denies many specific cultural ways of understanding gender non-conformity and sexuality. Some of Valentine's research participants for instance clearly stated that they were women and gay which can be easily posed as backward and confused from a positivist progress narrative taking gender and sexuality as separated. Valentine cautions us about the use of transgender as a pre-given form of being and not as a culturally specific conception and way of making sense of our lives. In line with Valentine's statement, Pablo described how he cannot really separate gender and sexuality in his experience and also how he finds it is not a distinction "on the street". Maddison in general criticized how the distinction between cis\* and trans\* denies specific cultural groups and their ways of making sense of life. She additionally pointed out how there is also no space for intersex people within this conceptual duality if it is taken as describing a category that may fit all people.

In this section I will investigate what the term transgender came to signify in the interviews I did for this research, to what extent it was used as an identity category, in how far it was a lens and expression of gendered difference beyond describing a set gender identity.

One conception of transgender that cropped up in all the interviews was to reserve the term mainly for people who want to live more consistently in a gender that they were not assigned at birth. The term was also closely linked to body changes by hormonal or surgical means. At times this understanding of transgender as an identity category was embraced and seen as important to be able to point out specificities of experiences and discrimination, at times it was also criticised. The way Kay talks about trans in the following quote highlights how he is drawn towards this way of defining the term transgender, as well as a second more wider ranging definition, were widely present in participants' narratives.

"Finally I found my identity, which is trans.. and I think there are.. for me it is super wide and it is just not fitting as a man or woman the way society defines... and you do not have to take hormones... or .. to do surgeries or whatever, as long as you do not see yourself in this binarity.. then you are somewhere in the middle eh.. and there are different things. And of course the trans position itself is special, as we take hormones and do surgery we have to deal with other things..like.. ah, medical stuff. and whatever that other people do not have to deal with and it is not easy and is not very accepted and if you don't know other people and you don't have any support, in France at least, you end up in these shitty clinics that will do messed up stuff with you.. so there are.. I see.. ehm.. I would say the spectrum is more like gender queer for me and trans is more the gender identity in this gender queer spectrum that has this particularity about having to deal with that and also your body changing and how it affects you, how you see the world changing around you, first time that someone calls you he and sir. I just had no clue, but it is super weird in fact." (Kay)

Kay starts off defining trans more broadly than he comes to define it towards the end of this quote. At the beginning he says that it is not related to surgery or hormones, but a more encompassing term for people that cannot fit into common definitions of man and woman. Later on, he says that he would rather use the word 'gender-queer' for this wider

spectrum of people and positions that do not fit the dominant definitions of man and woman, and reserves transgender for people who go through more extreme body changes. He however marks this as his personal understanding by saying that this perspective holds true for him ('for me') and in this way signals that he knows that other people might define these terms differently.

Calvin points out how a wide definition of transgender speaks to him. He describes it as spanning the spectrum from "ones that dressed up in drag from once a month or once in their life possibly would be from that to people who wanted to medically transition". One of the reasons is that he finds this important is in order to shift away the emphases from 'medically' transitioning as a kind of sign for being 'real' transgender.

"Yeah... but for me it has always been difficult, because of this thing with obviously with people who are wanting to transition or who identify as trans it is like completely different kind of concerns and I realized at some point just because that scene there were plenty of people who.. you know and you saw them over the period of 5 or 6 years of actually just transition or.. and it was interesting constantly that my concerns were not the same, that I did not want to, I did not wanna be a woman, but somehow.. I was... I was really interested in doing... ahah... in it or something. I don't know what it is... it is also interesting like... I think there is such a thing around being trans, especially in queer communities... so it is like... I don't know in some way I feel like a lot of time it is something... I am making massive generalizations, like it is too respected or something like, that it puts this huge emphasize on legitimate trans people I think to be honest, that many, many people occupy a transgender spectrum and I don't think that has to, I think in some, somehow also in queer spaces there is also still pressure,.. kind of through kindness to transition... you know like, oh, you know like... that... that... because it is always this kind of untouchable... oh this person wants to transition, oh that, then for sure, of course everything is there, we all will support you, help you transition and stuff. But you know it is also okay for people to have a desire to transition and then not or... a thing to occupy much more flexible ways in embodying genders." (Calvin)

Calvin describes here how he is drawn to trans\* without wanting to live as a woman. At many points during the interview, Calvin stressed how far from all people might find a 'final' comfort in being a woman or a man in a narrower sense and this seems to apply to himself first of all. He talked about a friend who transitioned, but also did not like it much, stopped taking hormones and continued his way somewhat more 'in-between'. Calvin on the one hand distances himself from being trans in that he says he knows that he has different concerns than many trans\* people he has gotten to know and might here speak in line with how Kay pointed to the experience of medical interventions and changes as a special concern of transgender people, however one could also see this in line with the argument of differences within trans\*. Calvin argued for further opening up the definition of trans. He seemed to sense a greater value in recognising a diversity of gendered experiences using the term. He spoke in line with Enke who argues that the term transgender should be kept open for its transformative possibilities.

Another participant, Pablo said that he is "fascinated by transgender (...) how can you not be?" (Pablo). Pablo also mentioned how if transgender would refer to trans more

simply to what the word linguistically hints at, a sense of beyond and crossing gender, he would feel transgender. However he points at how in life the transgender movement has more restricted definitions and normativities connected to transitioning and who has done so and how.

Jan Sophia pointed out how in his environment transgender is a term that people decide to use for themselves and how a self-positioning and feeling of self with regard to the term transgender can be more complex than 'being it or not'. While we talked about how the term transgender is used in Berlin, I asked him if it would be problematic if a person who lives life as a man and does drag queen performances would clearly position themselves as transgender. His first reaction was "no", mainly because the term transgender is strongly upheld as a self-definition and something for people to position themselves with. He elaborated that he would suggest this person: "I would say: you are not transgender, but part of it!" (Jan Sophia).

With regard to his own positioning, Jan Sophia usually does not use the term transgender for himself. That however does not mean he minds being understood as such. "Many years ago somebody told me that he understands me as transgender and that made me happy, that depends on the context" (Jan Sophia). Transgender here is not one strictly defined set up of embodiment, but can 'suit' and not 'suit' a person in different situations.

The term transgender, discourses surrounding it and gender non-normativity in the context of the interviews that are part of this research stand out as areas of negotiation and means of communication and positioning. Jan Sophia for instance has positive as well as negative associations with his two names. Sophia which started being one of his first stage names stuck to him and he says that once you have such a name people use it a lot. His attitude is that he has those two names and usually leaves it up to people how they address him. He has the impression that being a guy with a female name is something that does not always work to his advantage for instance when looking for a date in the gay scene. He has started to be more conscious about the choices he has about his name(s) and says

"I started asking myself if with this connection to Sophia in the scholarly field, I am making public a more private part of myself, and if by that I am also making myself more vulnerable. I am outing myself that way as transgender, if you wanna see it that way, also if I would normally not name myself as such...eh... I anyways do not have any set labels, but anyways I am turning myself into a special kind of person and receive attention and actually I do not want that. And I had last weekend an education weekend with Eco with the new people in the team and there I have introduced myself as Jan and before I had talked about that with Eco, and kept it going like that and it felt kind of nice." (Jan Sophia)

Here it becomes clear how Jan Sophia is conscious of certain affects of concepts he uses and how he presents himself, the ambivalence he feels about such effects and the choices he has.

I asked Robyn who talks about themselves as partially trans\*, if identifying as transgender somehow makes it easier for hir to communicate to other people and find a

basis of understanding how she wants to be addressed and understood as a person; if it somehow made things easier for her. He answered that this is not really the case.

"The entire trans\* discourse is dominated by the psychiatric, medical perspective on trans\*, in which people arrive into, become placed into, with those narratives they become fed and to define oneself within the precarious trans\*, but at the same time define oneself outside of what comes along with trans\*, to wanna distance oneself from the hierarchies within trans\* and to wanna consider the perspective of state and medical power... through that I am precarious within trans\*. Because of that the self-naming as trans\* is not a thing where I say, wow, cool, and now the people understand me... because that is not like that at all. I have to explain in a lengthy way, if I want people to understand. That means I am cis-gendered, that means I am a woman, until I say that I am not. Then I am trans\* and then I have to say, that I am not transsexual, transident and that I reject the complete identity principle of gender, that I experience it as a form of being locked in by a power system and that I do not yet know what the solution is. Because of that also trans\* is for me, also depending on the context... but when it is somewhat supposed to be about how I personally position myself, I can label myself in a political discourse, especially if it is in dialogue with people who are not personally effected, then I can use it somehow. But despite all that I find the concepts of trans and so on, I mean especially in Berlin it is still quite progressive, I find, especially through organisations as triq etc... but also that is no place where I dare going and feel myself, because there are also these narratives present. They exist everywhere. So, it is better than nothing but it is not good."  
(Robyn)

In this quote it becomes clear how self-positioning oneself as transgender comes with implications some of which Robyn strongly rejects. This constellation makes it hyper visible how this position of what trans\* means and what can and is assumed when a person is perceived as such or presents themselves as such is a matter of assumptions and negotiations. In such negotiations the concept of transgender is a factor that plays a role in the lives of people who use it as an identity category in the most self-evident way. The interviews illustrated how the rise of the concept of transgender is one step that changes the language and building blocks available to all genders and also reconfigures other positions if it is taken seriously, related to and thought about.

## **Conclusion**

Thought on sexual difference, ideas on masculinity and femininity take different forms which becomes evident in Salamon's critical questions posed to some sexual difference theorists. Sexual difference, as that which has not been incorporated into the conceptual level, has not been socialised, contains the power to disrupt and effect the material and conceptual level and recreate the past in the present opening up the future. Difference to how we yet know ourselves and to the other next to us, is also that which makes existence, proximity and relation possible. Only in relation and sexual differentiation to the other we can find ourselves, our place. Sexual difference can be discerned at a material level, in corporeal style, in affection and in desires between people that make sense of themselves using the same gender identity. Salamon draws out the possibilities of being a

woman and femininity understood in another relation but sameness.

Salamon holds on to the spheres of masculinity and femininity, but endeavours to seek out how "the categories through which we make sense of sex might themselves be capable of reflecting the lived experiences of the non-normatively gendered" (Salamon 2010, p.168). In comparison, transgender is a new word or identity. It can be viewed as part of politics of recognition. It is critiqued on those grounds by difference theorists who view it only as a means to reincorporate in sameness and socialised smooth dimensions. Salamon's move of repositioning transgender in the sphere of sexual difference is an attempt to complicate the notion of transgender, to also move it into the material and affective level relating it to masculinity and femininity in order to create a greater space for an 'untidy and ambiguous' difference within the notions that bind us.

Salamon makes a strong claim that the multiplicity of viewpoints, dimensions, criteria, ways of knowing and being that Grosz calls for in 'The Force of Sexual Difference' needs to be thought out at the level of sex. Genders that do not find an easy home within binary conceptions of male and female are still driven by difference. If difference is given its full force the compossibility of male and female must be noticed.

Participants describe feeling 'different'. Difference is here talked about not in the sense of a difference between the masculine and the feminine, but a being different in relation to all kinds of categories. Some participants position themselves as part of a group of 'different' people in comparison to 'ordinary' people. Some participants however also question the notion of a norm or a majority and posit that everybody is different. The participants positioned themselves as different to categories, also to the category trans\* in Robyn's case for instance. They try to make the negotiations and the differences, the non-fittings, the non-visibility tangible by showing how they play with, wrestle with multiplicity. Some participants use both cis and transgender to position themselves and in this way also illustrate how those two notions are not exclusive and naturally given categories, but can be means of communicating one's privilege but also of communicating differences and uncontainability. Other participants highlight how they are strongly drawn towards trans\* even though their life narratives do not comply with the more common narratives of transgender. Notions such as cis and trans are part of the negotiations and communications about difference and positionality.

I think in line with both Susan Stryker and A. Finn Enke that it is important to keep terms such as transgender open for their unforeseen possibilities. The participants used transgender as a gender identity and as a means of communication. Using transgender in unexpected ways can extend our senses to perceive gendered difference in new places. Transgender is taken up in unexpected ways by participants who do not want to transition in surgical or hormonal ways, but still adopt the term and position themselves in relation and differentiation to it. Unforeseen ways of using transgender can also be related to gendered embodiments that appear rather familiar, but are reconsidered, reopened and their disciplining questioned and transgressed in ways that would not make it into sensationalist newspaper columns even though they are a perspective worth sharing.

## 6. Conclusions

What can I tell Sandy Stone or any other reader about the narratives on the experience of gender by people who 'do drag' in diverse ways, who point out trans\*/feminist/queer communities as important/relevant to their experience of gender and who I interviewed during the course of this research project? What kind of positive ways of self reflective positioning with regard to the gendered difference of oneself and others are being built in these narratives? I have illustrated how participants found ways to challenge their own understandings of gender, how they struggle with critically self-positioning themselves and strive to find ways of positively relating to gendered difference. I will present here the four most important conclusions.

Firstly, how participants narrated their story with gender highlights that notions such as cis and trans are part of negotiations and communications about difference and positionality, and are understood as not exclusive or naturally given also in narrative life accounts and not only in theory. Participants described themselves as different and positioned themselves in relation to, as well as simultaneously in difference to, categories such as cis and trans\*. The participants used such categories as a means of communication to highlight differences, privileges, resemblances, associations, uncontainability as well as ambivalent belongings, as Jan Sophia's suggestion "I would say: You are not transgender, but part of it!" emphasises and which became the title of this thesis. I argue that this way of framing trans\* in these 'unforeseen' ways as a tool of communication, and not as a set description of a pre-given identity or experience, is an entry point for positive relation. It highlights resemblances and affiliations that the participants shared with the notion of trans\* and posits the notions transgender and difference as part of their lives and not as distant and alien.

Secondly, within the context of the life stories of participants I read drag as a tool or mechanism through which participants challenge and affirm in an emancipatory way their own conceptions of gender. Drag was strongly related to trans\*/feminist/queer communities and described as a genre of stage performances, a concept/theory, a practice or a gender identification that allowed participants to critically engage with gender on a personal and embodied level, and re-work and -live gender in different ways. This highlights the possibility of an active rethinking of gender and how gender changes not only in the case of transsexuals.

Thirdly, the narratives illustrate how participants made use of the concept of the body image in their lives, a notion that is central in the writings of Gayle Salamon about (trans)gender embodiment. Participants used the concept to make sense of their desires and images of self in a way that extends Salamon's concept. Whereas Salamon talks about the felt sense of the body as immediate and explicitly only as singular, some participants highlighted how they have multiple body images and how a feeling of who they are and how they want their body to be is at times experienced as complicated, context dependent

and under change. Some participants described how they lived multiple body images and gendered/sexual roles, others described how they feel their materiality limits living the imaginaries they have of themselves.

Lastly, some participants described a gap between the felt sense of the body and the materiality that one finds, a gap that Gayle Salamon theorises as present for all embodiment. However, participant's main point of complaint was a gap located in the social realm between how they imagine bodies and their possibilities across gendered notions in comparison to the binary mode in which they felt society around them imagines bodies and subjectivities. This complaint connects to how Stryker talked about the invisibility of the transsexual. Most participants share to some extent a feeling that many other people around them cannot see in their body, how they themselves see their body and being, because people around them limit their view to one that sees all bodies through a binary lens and as a pre-given unit. That participants related to the concept of a gap/invisibility as well as the concept of the body image highlights how concepts which are associated with transgender lives connect to the life narratives of participants. This tracing and linking concepts is one way of thinking gendered difference, gender non-conformity as part of a multitude of gendered positions beyond the notion of transgender.

The concept of the body image has been a pivotal point of this research. I would like to deepen this specific research by doing more interviews and focusing my attention in the interviews as well as in the analysis on the concept of the body image. This concept is at the core of theories of embodiment and at the same time resonates strongly with different moments of the interview narratives. Within the life narratives it had emancipatory value as it gave participants a tool to make sense of and insist on their experiences as non pathological, but sensible. Already within this research project I was able to expand on existing theories on body imagery. It would be fruitful to build on a greater diversity of narratives as well as to confront also other theories on embodiment and the body image with the interview narratives. This will allow me to analyse the narratives in more detail and to formulate in more depth how the narratives of people who do drag and are connected to trans\*/feminist/queer circles make use of and resonate with the concept of the body image as formulated in trans\*/feminist/queer theory.

Such an extended research project would open the possibility to additionally rework extracts of the interview narratives into a set of probes for further interviews with people who do not explicitly voice that they 'do drag' and are not connected to trans\*/feminist/queer circles. Such probes can serve as material to discuss with participants in how far they can relate to such life stories and if they have stories of their own life that come to their mind when reading those. Such a set up would most of all allow to discuss in how far life stories as the ones presented in this research can work as building stones for understanding gender and difference in ways that do not alienate sexual difference and would also allow a further analysis of how people position themselves with regards to their own and others gendered/sexual difference. During such interviews it would again be central to talk about participants' gendered life stories and

socio-historical context in order to be able to situate these interview narratives.

The set up of this present thesis project, for instance its choice of participants and theories, aimed to counter dominant dynamics and the disciplining of what we are accustomed to hearing or not hearing about people's experience of gender, which kind of stories are talked about and who talks. I talked to the participants about a multiplicity of moments which they understood to be a form of change, development, exploration and negotiation on the level of gendered embodiment and difference. In this thesis, talking about gender is adopted as a means of opening the question how we experience and feel about gender and a means of highlighting possibilities to reflect on and rethink assumptions about gender that dominate many everyday life spaces.

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## 8. Appendix

### 8.1. Interview Overview

All following descriptions and statements are based on what participants said during the interviews. I asked them for background information on their life and how relevant they think such was for what we talked about in the interview and where they stood in their lives. Some took up this idea of talking about how relevant certain biographical details were for the interview more than others. The main information covered are year of birth, nationality, social network, location, education, class, economic background. The interviews are here ordered chronologically.

**1. Interview together with Goda** on Nov. 13, 2012 from 18:30hrs – 20:30hrs. I was in my room in Granada and Goda at a friend's place in Utrecht and we talked online via skype.

Goda's engaging replies and elaborate answers gave me courage that my project would speak to people. She organises queer performance nights in Utrecht and I had the pleasure of seeing her perform on stage a couple of times. Goda used to feel that she fails to be coherent and bring about a feminine subject. She has come to think of herself differently now and is affirmative about a feeling of in-betweenness that she feels has been hunting her whole life. She takes great pleasure in drag and body experimentation. To her it is one way of expressing herself and exploring different roles.

Goda was born in Lithuania and in her mid 20s at the time of the interview. She has a university education and Her studies involved courses in Gender studies, on subjectivity and self. She is a working student and supports herself. Goda does not know so much about LGBT or queer scenes in Lithuania, because there she has never so much been part of it or kept up to date. She could imagine that there she would do very different activism and not necessarily indulge in queer performances as much. She kind of wants to move back to Lithuania someday.

The interview with Goda is explicitly mentioned on pages 19, 31, 33, 37, 42, 48, 54, 55, 56, 64, 68, 73, 81.

**2. Interview together with Nic** on Friday Jan. 11, 2013 from 13.hrs – 15hrs in Nic's office in Utrecht which was her suggestion for a meeting point.

Nic lives a multitude of different imageries she has about herself and they are very much dependent on the context she is in, on which lover she is with or in which kind of environment she is in such as a graduation, with friends or an intimate situation. She uses different gendered labels such as woman, lesbian, butch, gay for herself depending on such situations and contexts. She would not want to transition to live as a man. Knowledge about gender gives her a different understanding and language also for her own experiences. Especially feminist groups and collectives boosted her confidence also particularly about gender. Yet she feels she does not talk often about how she experiences gender with her friends and appreciated the interview for that.

Nic was born in Italy and was in her mid 30s when we did an interview. She says about herself that she comes from a high educated family and feels that this enhanced her freedom and is related to the fact that she feels that her parents were not overtly strict or normative in their approaches. She ranks her family middle class. She had resources available, financially and culturally. In her current working environment she feels comfortable with her gender expression which is an important point about her current employment. She does not worry about gender or gender expression so much, also because she is in the Netherlands, if she would live in a country, in Italy or somewhere else where gender is more normative she would think about her gender more.

The interview with Nic is explicitly mentioned on pages 1, 2, 3, 11, 15, 19, 20, 32, 33, 36, 38, 49, 57, 68, 75, 80, 81.

**3. Interview together with Ona** on Saturday Jan. 12, 2013 from 11hrs – 13hrs at Ona's house in Utrecht.

When she was a child it happened that she was taken as 'such a nice boy'. She and her parents always took it more as a joke and did not worry about it much. It still happens. Once even during a longer conversation a group of guys on the street thought she was a guy, too, and a friend once told her that she is not really like the other girls, but more like a "sexy boy" to him. It has also happened that people think because of the way she looks that she is a lesbian and just does not know it yet. In her teenage years Ona did not like getting a curvy body. She would have liked a more plain body; she did not like getting breasts. Today, if she had a free wish from a fairy so she could have a different body for a day, she would not want to have a male body, though perhaps a more ambiguous one. She has never felt a conflict between being a woman in a woman's body, but she feels she gives it a different meaning and interpretation than other people do.

Maybe sometimes she happens to blur gender boundaries, but it is not something she does consciously. She does not actively do it as a political act; she just does what she does and would therefore also not use the label drag for anything that she does, even though other people might. How far is she on the boundaries of categories? That depends, she says, on how you even define those boundaries, from a more mainstream or a more queer perspective. As she perceives it, some people think that she is on the boundaries of things; others would laugh and say, well, there are people that are so much more on boundaries.

It is not surprising to Ona that stereotypes do not work and some people with a male body do not want to be a man or with a female body do not want to be a woman. The world is more complex and stereotypes simply do not always fit. Listening to people and hearing about their experiences is something very valuable to her, as is getting to know oneself better and finding different perspectives and ways to understand oneself. This is also what she liked the most about the interview: by seeing which questions I asked, she gained a new perspective on her own life.

Ona was born in Lithuania and was in her mid 20s at the time of the interview. She has a university education on the MA level that is not explicitly gender related. Her family has a middle class background. Her family was always very open minded and relaxed about gender issues, which also gave her a relaxed attitude. Ona is working and economically dependent and maybe wants to live in South America in the future.

The interview with Ona is explicitly mentioned on pages 21, 22, 36, 40, 74, 75, 78, 79.

**4. Interview with Alice** on Thursday Feb. 21, 2013 from 11hrs – 12.15hrs at Alice's friends place in Granada where we were on our own.

This interview was a very spontaneous one. I had not planned to do interviews in Granada, but after Alice had mentioned things about sometimes feeling in drag when she wears very feminine clothes for the attention she receives as well as that it seems at times more feminine than she feels, we decided to do an interview just before she was leaving Granada. She talked about how she wanted to be a boy when she was a child, how this changed over time and how feminist and queer environments were an important factor in how she now lives her femininity. When she was a child she was not very boyish, but wanted to be. Lately a friend had told her that she looks androgynous and she was surprised as she does not perceive herself as such.

We met in Granada, but have also seen each other in Utrecht before and Alice also has stayed in Berlin for several months before. She even knows some people, I have interviewed in Utrecht, for years. In that sense she is connected to the networks in Utrecht and Berlin where I found other research participants. Alice was in her mid 20s at the time of the interview. She has University education, MA level, in Gender Studies. Alice has been living in different countries over the last two years for her studies. She enjoys finding

feminist, queer, anarchist communities wherever she lives.

The interview with Alice is explicitly mentioned on pages 11, 15, 39, 56.

#### **5. Interview with Calvin,** Mar. 27, 2013 from 19hrs–22hrs at his house in Amsterdam.

Calvin has performed as a drag queen also as a job for years. He now actually experiences being a drag queen as being quite “easy” and want to do something where he feels he can express himself more. Calvin has differently gendered body images of himself. He feels that his masculine body is sometimes in the way of looking the way he wants even though he also likes his body the way it looks. Calvin feels transgender should be a very open term and thinks that the emphasis on transitioning in certain ways is too strong in queer communities he has been in.

Calvin was born in a town in England and in his mid twenties when we did the interview. He has a middle class background, while living in a working class place with a very small gay scene. Growing up he discovered the local small, gay pub and drag queen culture. He thinks that there is a connection between that personal history and that he likes the bad queen, the punk queen persona. Growing up he had a stable financial situation and his parents were always very supportive, also of his drag performances, giving him eyelashes for last Christmas.

As soon as he could Calvin put a lot of pressure on himself to be independent. He really wanted that and in this way he ended up with a whole row of different jobs and moderating as a drag queen was one of them, as there apparently is a market for gender which is amazing and fucked up at the same time. He is living in Amsterdam at the moment to study art. Art school is a place where being exceptional is kind of appreciated which makes it easier to live and experiment with gender in unconventional ways.

The interview with Calvin is explicitly mentioned on pages 20, 30, 31, 32, 35, 36, 49, 50, 55, 56, 64, 68, 74, 75, 79, 80, 81, 83, 84, 86, 91.

#### **6. Interview with Pablo** on Thursday Mar. 28, 2013 from 17hrs – 19.20hrs. We met at Pablo's house in Nijmegen. I had met Pablo once before through common friends in Utrecht.

Pablo talked about how he is in a knitting club and in a feminist reading club, he likes going in drag to punk nights or just walk down the street in his drag outfit before going to a party and actually he feels he is always in drag, when he is punk, when he wears his mum's jacket in everyday life, whenever. At times these situations are daring. His philosophy is not to take up the position of the victim. If somebody looks at him weirdly, he looks bad in a weird way. He just feels different and wants to live that. Pablo feels that he cannot really separate gender and sexuality the way he experiences his life and also thinks that this is not a distinction that work 'on the streets'.

Pablo was born in Brazil, at the North-East coast where there are no winters and people run half naked all year around. There he lived 20 meters from the beach and could do whatever he wanted as he says. He thinks that this freedom while growing up has influenced a lot how he sees himself nowadays, “in not being what I am, but what I do”. When he realized being a teenager that what he was doing is called homosexuality and a sin, he tried to fight against it and by doing so was the “most anti-homosexual macho guy there is in the world”.

His family would say they are high middle class, but from Pablo's perspective they are just rich. And he himself belongs to the lower class. He identifies as a worker, but not the traditional communist worker, but an intellectual working class, or anarchist activist working class. He has however right now the privilege of getting a scholarship from the government, which should not be denied. He does not have a boss who tells him what to do.

At the time of the interview he was in his early 30s, living in a shared house. He feels this house is a very “progressive” place which not only himself, but also the others use to be able to experiment. Pablo studies philosophy and people in his institute “are

curious about life so that they have an open attitude” and he also has a teacher there who is a feminist and motivates him to be radical. Before reading that he is not 'the only one' and that there are frameworks to think differently, he thought he was crazy. Reading is incredibly important to him, because he is a person who likes to understand things, and theories help him.

The interview with Pablo is explicitly mentioned on pages 2, 20, 32, 62, 67, 68, 69, 75, 79, 80, 85, 86.

### **7. Interview with Robyn, April 23, 2013 at 13hrs – 14.40hrs at Robyn's house in Berlin.**

Robyn moved to Berlin during hir study time. I know Robyn from activist work we did together; from the many intense discussions about queer politics we have had. Robyn has a very critical, analytical perspective on drag and our interview was characterised by this and mainly focused on a discussion of drag as a tool for performances and its pros and cons. Robyn felt that drag understood as an exceptional performance reinforces the idea that on the opposite side, a common, real, everyday life gender identity exists. Drag in this sense does not break with the logic of identity, which is something Robyn aims to criticise with hir performances. Robyn posits that “simply not everybody is allowed to do everything” and thinks a lot about accountability and privilege. Robyn identifies as partially trans\* in transition to something.

Robyn was born in Germany, in an area with a strong carnival culture, which s\_he saw as somewhat relevant for hir drag practices. S\_he describes the habitus of her family as middle class, but it was always clear that they also had debt. He had many opportunities and if money was needed she could always ask a family member. She said that s\_he was born in Germany with its psychiatric and bureaucratic system for sure is relevant to hir experience of gender. Robyn moved to Berlin, with its queer scene which is very relevant as it is a context in which there are a lot of drag practices and where gender norms are strongly questioned. If he would have stayed in a small town in the very West of Germany, all those things would have not reached hir. Robyn has a Diploma in Psychology and wrote a thesis about a psychology-critical analysis of a trans\* diagnostic in Germany. As Robyn said, having been volunteering for a queer organization in Berlin also is a very relevant experience, because this is a place where gender is talked about on a personal level. In this context one has to position oneself also with regards to gender. What probably touched hir most while working in this organisation was the presence of trans\* people and having transgender issues as a frequent topic of discussion.

The interview with Robyn is explicitly mentioned on pages 1, 17, 18, 30, 32, 39, 42, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 56, 57, 62, 63, 80, 81, 87, 88, 89, 92.

### **8. Interview with Jan Sophia, April 23, 2013 from 20hrs–22hrs at her house in Berlin.**

Jan Sophia feels that no label really fits his life, not feminine man, not drag queen, not transgender, not Jan, not Sophie. His strategy is more one of fluidity. Lately he wonders whether his life would be easier if he would for instance only have one name or could settle for one way of thinking of himself.

Jan Sophia was around 30 years at the time of the interview. He was born in East Germany in the former GDR. He once had a first drag persona, Maddison, who came from Eastern Germany, but he stopped being Maddison as he did not like being a parody of what people from Eastern Germany 'are like'. Older drag performers might have a larger spectrum of experiences with drag, whether their definition of drag is different because of that is not so sure for Sophia.

His parents have a small pension so that he got state funding for his study which allowed him to not work, and maybe in connection do drag performances instead. However, he will have to pay back parts soon. He could never buy expensive make up or a lot of wigs, but that was never a real issue, because in his environment most people did not do it and it was never about outracing each other with wigs etc. Where he wants to apply for a job, people also know him as Sophia, but he is thinking about in how far he wants to be 'out' there, or in how far he wants to create more of a private safe space. In

the dissertation he also will not write Sophia, only Jan.

Jan Sophia lives in a shared flat with six people, in a stable environment, which is important to him. It is a politically left oriented and also queer environment. At the moment there is actually nobody who exclusively practices heterosexuality and sometimes they drag up (German: auffummeln) together, exchanging wigs or alike.

The interview with Jan Sophia is explicitly mentioned on pages 1, 11, 16, 18, 19, 20, 31, 32, 34, 50, 56, 67, 68, 69, 70, 74, 81, 87, 93.

**9. Interview with Kay** on April 26, 2013. We met at 13hrs in Kay's place in Berlin and spend the afternoon. The interview lasted for 80min in the park and then was continued in his place due to rain for another 90min.

Kay wanted to transition already when he was 20, but was taken aback by the compulsion to go for the 'complete' surgery and did not do so. Then he did transition around his 30s and is happy that he has finally found and can live his identity as a trans\*guy. He describes himself on his tumbler as "French trans writer, performer, collaborative artist (...) and sex worker who loves to make porn" (<http://kaygarnellen.tumblr.com/>). We talked at length about the various queer performances he does on stage and how also drag fascinates him. He loves to go shirtless in the summer and also show his naked body on stage. He sees his body as a tool to make people question their conceptions about bodies, sex and gender. Kay thinks everybody is different in their own way.

Kay grew up in Southern France and was in his mid 30s at the time of the interview. When growing up he lived with his mother and a sibling on the minimum wage that his mother was earning. Kay earned a degree in and worked for the financial sector, but stopped working there before his transition. His current economic situation is not the most stable, but Kay sees richness in other things and is happy to be able to do what he wants. Kay mainly lives in Berlin and often travels around for his performances. We first met in Utrecht where he came to perform at a festival. Kay performs in and outside of the queer scenes, but is currently most present in a sex-positive queer scene in Berlin.

The interview with Kay is explicitly mentioned on pages 1, 2, 3, 31, 32, 33, 37, 38, 55, 61, 62, 68, 69, 73, 81, 82, 85, 86.

**10. Interview with Maddison** on May 4, 2013 from 14hrs till 15.30hrs in a park nearby Maddison's house in Utrecht.

Maddison grew up in California, United States. Now she lives in Utrecht. She first found as she says 'queer family' in the US while studying at a small, critical, queer liberal arts college. Maddison identifies with and through being a drag queen and for her drag is a celebration, it is about adorning oneself with beautiful things, being proud and out there about things in everyday life. Identifying as a drag queen is primarily about emancipation for Maddison, about being confident and fine with how and who she is even though this might not be the way 'society' wants her to be. Thinking about drag as a concept she thinks first of the saying "we are all born naked, the rest is drag" by Ru Paul, her "favorite person on earth". Trying to see what somebody 'drags' in their daily gender performance, what kind of genres, images and ideas people are serving is something that Maddison likes to look out for in people and already as a kid she loved extreme presentations that she saw around her, and gender presentations which clearly reference a style or an era.

Maddison pointed out how in the US, for instance in her queer community in Chicago there is a different kind of femme and drag appreciation, whereas in Budapest or Utrecht she is kind of the only drag queen girl, if not the only drag queen girl. Growing up in the United States, especially California did also influenced things such as that she got a nose job done. That she was born in her generation, post 1991 performative theory, "whether or not we read them" is relevant to her understandings of gender/sex/difference.

The interview with Maddison is explicitly mentioned on pages 1, 2, 3, 11, 13, 15, 20, 32, 35, 36, 42, 43, 55, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 68, 74, 75, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 92.

## 8.2. Call for Participants

Dear All,

Newspapers writing phrases like 'he wants to be a girl now', a woman being asked in the men's store if she is looking for a present for someone, some people being more paralysed than others at articulating a response to the question "who am I", signals how it is hard for many on different levels to make sense of and recognize lives that have a history of mixing up traditional distinctions of male and female. Lives that bend categories happen to end up being thought of as weird, not proper or monstrous. I want to discuss and affirm living sex/gender in alternative ways through my research for my master thesis in gender studies.

In specific I would like to talk to people who also do gender drag – in a wide sense of this word. One example could be experimenting with gender through stage performances or for other occasions as parties or demonstrations. Your drag, gender bending, gender play can also be more related to everyday life and how you dress, feel or express yourself in your daily life. What your gender trouble looks like can have all kinds of different forms or might also not be all so visible to others. I want to highlight a multiplicity in ways how we live gender, masculinity, femininity...

I am curious to talk to people who can relate to notions of experimenting/bending/living/dragging gender, whether people identify as transgender, cis gender or something else. I would like to talk about your experiences with gender and ways of expressing yourself. Importantly, I want to explicitly invite people to participate, who do NOT identify as transgender, or not in a very clear way. This matters to me in order to potentially highlight that also cis gender people relate to gender in ways that are thought of as 'unconventional', can experience gender as troubling and try to find their ways of living gender in a critical way. In this way I want my research to challenge future readers to see the gender trouble, the gender 'monster', in their own lives and to highlight and contribute to an alternative culture of thinking gender.

I am a student in a gender studies master doing a dual programme in Utrecht and in Granada, Spain. Right now I am studying in Granada, but I am in the Netherlands now for the first half of January and would be up for doing interviews! From March onwards I will be living in the Netherlands again and this will be another chance to do interviews in March.

About myself: I grew up in Germany and have lived in the Netherlands for four years now. Before I came to Utrecht I lived in Berlin and worked for an organisation that does queer education in schools. I am looking forward to do more interviews and exchange experiences. To me it has so far been intense and nice to explicitly talk about this topic with people. I am fairly cis gendered in my appearance, living masculinity and femininity both matters to me and can give me a lot of pleasure. For me it would be best to do interviews in English.

Feel free to contact me at [a.zundorf@students.uu.nl](mailto:a.zundorf@students.uu.nl) with questions or ideas and to forward this call.

Anne

## 8.3. Interview Guide

Place of the interview:

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Starting Time: \_\_\_\_\_ Ending Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Can you tell me your story of your experience of gender? How you have felt with regards to gender? (*overarching question to be kept in mind*)

### **Experiences with 'drag'/what is drag to you?**

- Can you tell me about when you last did something that can be linked to the idea of gender drag or crossing the traditional boundaries of femininity and masculinity? Where was it? How was it?
- What 'name' do you give to your gender subversive moments?
- What does drag mean to you? how do you use the word drag?
- Where do you often do gender drag?  
on stage/at job/university/around friends/everyday life
- How do you feel when you go out in drag? On stage or leaving your house?  
(nervous, excited)
- Which was a moment that you enjoyed, where you had fun that had something to do with crossing traditional gender lines/ gender drag? Tell me about any moment/situation that comes to your mind.
- Would you say that it is important for you to do gender drag? How?
- Does your gender drag represent something of yourself? How does it so?

### **Body Image/Body Modifications**

- Is there a specific outfit, character, role, style that you like to do?
- What do you like to modify, play with on your body? E.g. facial hair, make up, breasts, hips, posture. Is there something you have often done?
- Are there certain images, dreams of your body, your image that sometimes come to your mind that you would like to try once? Impossible and possible ones. Do you have new plans for a show?
- What is it like to see yourself in the mirror when you dress up?

### **Relating to Gender/Sex categories**

- Do terms like woman/man, feminine/masculine, butch, dyke, femme, describe you? How do you relate to them?
- What makes you feel masculine or feminine? In what kind of situations do you feel masculine or feminine?
- How do you feel if somebody remarks to you that you look very feminine or masculine (for instance in a specific shirt)?
- Do you feel like people sometimes misunderstand your gender/self expression? And what do they read into you? Why does this happen?
- Do you sometimes feel like you do not fit in? Did you make positive/negative experiences with that? How do you feel about it?
- Are there things about gender that you find confusing/hard to make sense of sometimes?

### **Beginnings**

- Can you tell me about when you first did something that you consider gender drag / crossing traditional gender lines?

- How did it happen? How did you come up with the idea?
- How do/did other people react to it? How does your family react to it?

### **Support / Drag Scene-Culture / Sources of Inspiration**

- How did you first come up with the idea to do a performance or to dress up for a specific event? What instigated/inspired you? Where other people involved?
- Is there something like a drag scene, queer scene, many performances or certain styles that are gender dragging? Do you feel that there is something like that?
- Is there something that is important to you in the history of drag? For instance a book or an event, a person?
- Do you think gender drag performance or gender drag in general is a big thing at the moment in your context?

### **Problems / Regulations**

- What do people around you think about drag? How do they react to you doing drag?
- Have you talked to a lot of people about doing drag? Your family? People at work?
- Have you experienced moments related to dressing up in drag that were not nice? Can you tell me about it?
- Did you ever feel like somebody was implying you are sick/mentally ill?  
*Comment: I ended up asking this question only in one interview, when one participant jokingly said, "well nobody has send me to a doctor for this, though" I asked in reply if ever anybody has implied that she was sick in relation to her gender which she negated.*

### **Socio-economic background**

What do you think is important in what brings you where you are now.

Please answer the following questions, but also elaborate on how they are relevant to the interview discussions and topics.

- When and where were you born? What is your nationality?
- Where do you live at the moment and with whom?
- What are you doing at the moment?
- What is your educational background?
- How would you describe your economic background? That of your family?
- What is your main source of economic income?