

ON HIGH HEELS: INTERTWININGS BETWEEN THE ART OF TRAVESTILITY, BECOMING-DRAG QUEEN AND SELF-AFFIRMATION

Aureliano Lopes and Anna Paula Uziel
State University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Abstract

In some of her writings, Judith Butler discusses the issue of parody of drag queens as potentially transformative constructions that can denounce the ways in which gender is culturally and discursively constructed and reiterated in the social setting. Such constructions would not be transformative in themselves, but through its openness to other possible modes of production of self. Based on some postulates of Félix Guattari, we could say that there would be a becoming-drag: an ever-present potentiality of ways of being that would update the very materiality of bodies. Figures as drag queens and other female impersonators have their bodies based on this transformative potential, but the possibility of being another would be present in any body; normative standards requires consistent legitimacy to those governing bodies, but always there is something that escapes the norm and may reaffirm it or deterritorialize it. This article presents a brief discussion of this becoming-drag and a political, ethical and aesthetical mode of subjectivation to reflect on social and gender patterns mainly instabilities and their transformative potential.

Key-words: Mode of subjectivation; Drag-queens; Becoming-drag; Gender; Corporeality.

ON HIGH HEELS: INTERTWININGS BETWEEN THE ART OF TRAVESTILITY, BECOMING-DRAG QUEEN AND SELF-AFFIRMATION

What processes unfold in a consciousness affected by the shock of the unexpected? How can a mode of thought, a capacity to apprehend be modified when the surrounding world itself is in the throes of change? How are the representations of an exterior world changed when it is itself in the process of changing?

(Félix Guattari, 1995: 11/12)

Ru Paul is a world renowned US drag queen who has the following maxim: “*You are born naked and the rest is drag*” (apud Vencato, 2002: 35). To be a drag queen is basically to transform oneself, or rather, to do a “female impersonation” process of oneself. Vencato (2002) considers that this process is an indicator of the act of drag corporeality. Thus, according to this view, this process as well as the personification performed by drag queens and female impersonators, involves not just putting on female clothes, make-up and accessories constituting in fact a process of becoming a female being and taking on this identity (which can be done in various ways with diverse nuances). Thus, a drag queen only exists in their transformation, in her¹ potentiality for being other (male or female) or others in becoming-drag. As put by Guacira Lopes Louro,:

What material, traits and remains does she use to make herself? How does she make herself? How does she construct her body? Where does she seek the references for her gestures, her way of being in a deep or transitory sense? Who does she imitate? What principles or norms does she cite and repeat? Where did she learn them? A drag queen makes gender’s constructivity patent. Wandering around an uninhabitable territory, confounding and stirring up a tumult, her figure indicates that the frontier is very close and can be visited at any moment. She takes on transitoriness, delights in unexpected juxtapositions and mixtures. A drag queen is more than one. More than one identity, more than one gender, purposefully ambiguous in her sexuality and affects. Made deliberately of excesses, she embodies proliferation and lives adrift, like a post-modern traveler

(Louro, 2004: p.21).

Generally, when we consider the figure of a drag queen or female impersonator, we have an almost naturalized idea that they are embodied – created and exercised – by an artist, who is usually male and homosexual. However this is not obligatory. In the case of a drag queen, the movement is that of a man impersonating himself as a woman, or rather, as a

1 We consider the proposal of use of the pronoun “hir” as adequate and interesting for our discussion, but drag queens commonly naming themselves just in feminine forms like she, her and others. Therefore we use “she” and “her” in this article, even if in some aspects pronouns like “hir” could be used in a potential way.

caricatural and/or spectacular feminine, whereas when a woman constructed herself as a man, she is called a drag king. But a male or female transsexual person can become a drag queen or drag king. This is extremely interesting because, although we believe that drag queens and drag kings call our notions of masculine and feminine into question precisely because they play with them, dramatizing and denaturalizing then by transforming them into material to joke or play around with, their construction logic is basically binary: men becomes drag queens and women become drag kings. The same logic applies when one includes the notion of sexuality: homosexual men become drag queens and homosexual women become drag kings. We also dare to affirm that these cases demonstrate the existence of a heteronormativity and a compulsory linear coherence in the sex, gender and sexuality system (Butler, 1990). What then is new about hir?

Perhaps a fundamental point of distinction between the logic that governs the creation of a drag queen or drag king and that underlying normativity as postulated by Judith Butler (1993) is that, in the former, this creation does not need to be rigid, whereas in the latter it is deemed to be obligatory and reiterated in various ways in everyday life. The artistic category known as drag queen contains various types of impersonations and intentions, such as homosexuals, *travestis*², androgynous people and even women. Or rather, many other trans artists (for example, a *travesti* that is a dancer or singer) that do not see themselves as drag queens can share the same space – and often the same stage – with them. The shows are somewhat different, with *travestis* putting on more spectacular shows with overdubbing, dances and choreographed movements and a focus on make-up and costumes that accentuate femininity. They do not produce a caricature of this femininity but rather appropriate traits that are so named and use them to construct their bodies through clothing but mainly through body changes.

Drag queens also make use of body changes, such as removing body hair (especially from their legs, armpits and face), using fake breasts or silicone implants and are particularly concerned with make-up, which functions as an agent to modify this body, as if enhancing its plastic possibilities. We mention *travestis* and transsexual women here because they sometimes do drag performances. However our intention is not to discuss these identities but rather the movement of drag corporeality undertaken by them. In reflections on the trans theme, it would be impossible to think of *travestis* and transsexual women as having the same identitary form or construction as drag queens or female impersonators, unless they are situated in this field of artistic performances. Here it is not so important that any given performer be a man or woman, homo or hetero, trans or not; the focus is on the act and process of constructing this kind of female/drag queen corporeality.

2 In Brazil there is a distinction between the name and identity *travesti* and transsexual women: some *travestis* affirm themselves like a third gender and transsexuals include themselves in the category of trans women. But this is a complex process and usually we use the term *trans* to encompass and respect all the trans identities. It happens inclusive in the LGBT political scene and social movements in Brazil (in this country we use the name LGBT for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, *travesties*, *trans women* and transsexuals men. In this paper we do not discuss these identities, but an artistic impersonation that is trans on the stage. It's common that trans identity and female impersonation coincides, but our focus is on the artistic process and product, not exactly in what is the identity of the performer.

Even if it is not possible to speak of a new kind of logic when we refer to drag queens, at least their defining limits are much more blurred and can therefore be constantly recreated. Doesn't this simply represent an opening up to possibilities that are characteristic of artistic creation itself, intersecting and intersected by these gender troubles (and also of sex and sexuality)? By constructing himself in this artistic drag corporeality, isn't a being simply reinventing herself stylistically and elegantly? Isn't this an aesthetic mode of subjectivation, the way we also construct our bodies in our daily lives?

Between transits and fixings: names and movements

Although we are speaking about drag queens and other characters that base their constructions on the production of various kinds of femininity, our focus is mainly on style: the artistic drag performance – which in this article does not involve a discussion of identities. Drag performance, an expression that we use throughout this text, perhaps refers more to a mode of subjectivation³ or identity than to an artistic and/or aesthetic manifestation and construction. We are more comfortable with the expression “drag performance” or “drag corporeality”, mainly because its meaning transcends the figure of drag queens and enables us to focus on a process of construction and transformation of self, especially for artistic ends. Our reflections are much more “drag queen” than “of drag queens” or “about drag queens”.

Regarding this possible potentiality of a drag queen impersonation, we find an idea put forward by Anna Vencato at the end of her study of drag queens extremely precise and instigating: “if someone asked me today *after all what is a drag queen?* I would reply by mentioning various field studies that were not able to find an answer to this question. Drags *are* not, they *are* in a transitory sense (In Portuguese – “Drags não são, quando muito estão”, “*ser*” signifies being in a deeper sense whereas “*estar*” refers to transitory states) (Vencato, 2002: 16, italics in the original). And this “*estar*” is their mode of “being”, and it is in this imprecise process that they are constantly making and remaking themselves.

Vencato suggests that we should speak of becoming-drag, which derives its mystery from “the actual uneasiness/curiosity created by the fact that the space of transformation is hidden (the presupposition here is that various territories are being hidden concomitantly: the temporal, spatial and corporal)” (Vencato, 2002, p. 36). When we come into contact with a drag queen, we are confronted with a fabricated body or corporeality, whose production we have no access to. It is perhaps due to this that its materiality can only be affirmed through the transformational potential that these figures present to their audience: what is exteriorized is a body that is offered as a spectacle through an artistic interaction that is established within various limits and degrees of interchange between artists and audiences.

This interaction between drag queens and their audience will always be renewed at the actual moment of contact, and the nature and form of the surprise as well, as what will

3 In a Foucault's sense (2006).

happen as a result, meaning that it will probably not be embraced completely. They are always moving and escaping from more precise classifications, not exactly in terms of the way they conceptualize and construct themselves, but rather through the kind of interaction they establish with their audience. The artist-audience relation involves an active mutual participation, even more so when one considers that an artistic manifestation only exists and acquires meaning if there is an audience to see it.

The becoming-drag refers exactly to this possibility, to a zone of indefiniteness that can be actualized at any moment. Dialoguing with forms and categories, becoming is of the order of relations, of “the *agencement* of people, functions, economic and social relations to serve a *global policy of liberation*” (Guattari, 1987:66, italics in the original). Perhaps we can say that the latter is situated in the “between”, that space where things connect with each other. For example, the relational space between a drag queen and her audience: it is only here that she will effectively make herself a drag queen; a drag queen will not exist in this form if there is no audience – even if it is composed of only one person – together with whom she will construct her performance. Is there any drag queen that impersonated herself and does not engage in *agencement*?

Guattari tells us that all becoming is a becoming-woman⁴, because the latter can only be in a minority and never coincident with phallic order or power. However, this does not mean that this becoming-woman is a response to phallic power – or heteronormativity if we wish to use Judith Butler (1990) and other feminist authors’ terms; it is the affirmation of difference and desires and affects that are always seeking a way, a body, a form and re-actualizations. In this author’s words, “in a more general way, all dissident organizations of the libido should thus share a becoming-female body, as a line of flight from the oppressive socius, as a possible access to a minimum of becoming-sexuated, and as a last resort confronted with the established order” (Guattari, 1987, p. 36). The becoming-woman is something that seeks desire and its fulfillment.

It is also interesting to consider that a becoming-drag is directly related to body changes, dramatizations, and aestheticizations. There is a body that is continually being changed: there is a persona that has a name, characteristics that are more or less fixed such as a certain way of dressing, speaking and doing her shows but with elements that are always superimposed on them, making what we are going to see always original – even that drag queen’s classic numbers and which she always presents constitute first performances in terms of the actualization of their becoming. And this is precisely the point: there is an inevitable actualization of self and perhaps drag corporeality/performance is much more about the movement of impersonating oneself and “*agencement* with” than establishing an ultimate form. Perhaps this is also why it is difficult to call someone a drag queen, or rather, only a drag queen. This naming process is fluid and negotiable; power interests and relations, in the Foucauldian sense, permeate its whole construction.

4 When using the term woman in the expression becoming-woman, far from characterize a woman or referring to a supposedly universal woman, Guattari seeks to express the flows, the particles, faster or slower, of the transits between the sexes, in this case a connection between minorities. It is a process of movement not fixing. This notion is clearer in his work with Gilles Deleuze, *Mille Plateaux* (1997).

It is in order to emphasize the process of impersonating oneself that we refer to these artists as a category that encompass, in their positiveness, all the heterogeneity of forms of female impersonations produced for artistic purposes: drag queens, *travestis* artists, a kind of actors, female impersonators, performers, and others. The name drag queen perhaps can not be recognized by those it intends to encompass. However, as mentioned above, we use it more as a theoretical way rather than for the everyday purpose of naming. Each person chooses the term that suits him or her best, very often depending on the moment and the type of performance. We think the term drag queen as we stand here maintains the notion of a fundamentally unfinished process and an affirmation of the act of impersonating oneself primarily for aesthetic purposes and its possible political, identity and various other consequences. It is a policy of self-affirmation, “a micro-political practice that will only acquire meaning in relation to a gigantic rhizome of molecular revolutions, proliferating from a multitude of mutant becomings (...) so many ways of inventing, of *machinating* new sensitivities, new intelligences of existence, a new sweetness” (Guattari, 1987:139, italics in the original).

There is something potent that will always escape from the norm in the constitution of our bodies. Our bodies are always being actualized in these norms that fix them while also constituting them as virtually open to possible and potential transformations. Perhaps this is the inscription of desire, the affirmation of a potency of life that enables “bodies, all bodies, to rid themselves of the representations and constraints of the *social body*, as well as stereotyped postures, attitudes and behavior” (Guattari, 1987: 43, italics in the original). We thought that we can affirm that drag queens and other forms of artistic gender expression are of the order of this becoming, because if we focus on the ultimate form with which we have contact – that specific drag queen impersonated there – we seriously risk categorizing her and reducing her potency of life by limiting her surroundings and potentialities to the image we freeze, as in the case of a photograph. Any being is subject to categorization and we live surrounded by categories; focusing on the process rather than the product leads us to the depths of becomings and not to a definition of what that figure is, supposedly an ultimate truth regarding this person and which is embodied in her.

We must also be careful not to be tempted to establish figures that point to gender transformations as the great prototypes or an “evolution” of the way our genders will be constructed. Drags “are” and will never “be”: we do not need to elect them as being those that naturally hold the mark of the possible and exercised transformations of our ways of being. The fact that they are only pointing towards the potentiality of such transformations, does not mean that they are the transformation itself; it’s a tenuous difference. Once again, what is important is the transformation process itself and not its possible end.

Perhaps it was due to an extreme care regarding these considerations that Judith Butler went from a kind of praise of drag queens at the end of her book “Gender Trouble – Feminism and Subversion of Identity” (1990) to adopting a more critical approach to these kinds of performances in the chapter “Gender is burning: questions of appropriation and subversion” from her “Bodies that matter – On the Discursive Limits of “Sex” (1993), affirming that not all drag performances are subversive and indeed often reaffirm the norm that they seek to/should subvert (Bessa, 2007).

In the book referred to above, “Gender Trouble – Feminism and Subversion of Identity”, Butler suggests that by constituting herself as a parody, the drag queen rejects the notion of the originality of her imitation and calls into question the non-naturalness of our gendered identifications. From this perspective drag points to the performativity of gender which occurs in an artistic way and through play. This author affirms that

(...) so gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin. To be more precise, it is a production which, in effect—that is, in its effect—postures as an imitation. This perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to re-signification and recontextualization; parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities. Although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization. As imitations which effectively displace the meaning of the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself

(Butler, 1990:138).

Regarding this movement, she also says that “as much as drag creates a unified picture of ‘woman’ (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence” (Butler, 1990:137). We emphasize here that Butler seems to be referring much more to the process of impersonation of oneself and its identity imprecision than to the established figure of drag queens or even Esther Newton’s female impersonators (1979), mentioned in the preceding paragraphs of her text. In the case of drag queens, there is indeed – and perhaps to a lesser degree in other forms of gender impersonation – the creation of a unified feminine character and which, at a first glance, often denotes in its constitution a reification of the rigid norms that, in our society, govern and give legitimacy to female and male bodies and to those that are outside these two models but serve as parameters of validity and normality. However, what seems to be more interesting in this case is the becoming-drag that we mentioned above, the possibilities of transformation that will always be open “between the lines”, in the gaps and fissures of our bodies.

Judith Butler also says that these “gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm” (1993:10). Here, this author is speaking of the materialization of sex as a naturalized attribute of our bodies in a process that will never be fully completed and requires the constant reiteration of the norms that govern it:

That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled. Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory Law

(Butler, 1993:2).

*On
high heels*

A. Lopes
and A. P. Uziel

Gender and Sexuality

Perhaps we can affirm that Judith Butler's "gaps and fissures" are in consonance with Felix Guattari's becoming-woman (drag): the virtuality of what are bodies can be(come) actualizes the potency of what we are and opens us to movements of recreation and re-signification of modes of being and constituting ourselves in the world. Although this virtuality is not palpable as materiality and institutionally located as in the case of our biological, body or genetic data, it is perfectly real as a process of production of corporalities and circulation of desire, as affirmed by Deleuze in these somewhat long but beautiful and elucidatory words:

(...) desire implies no lack; neither is it a natural given. It is an *agencement* of heterogeneous elements that function; it is process as opposed to structure or genesis; it is affect as opposed to sentiment; it is "*haec-eity*" (the individuality of a day, a season, a life) as opposed to subjectivity; it is an event as opposed to a thing or person. And above all, it implies the constitution of a plane of immanence or a "body without organs," which is defined solely by zones of intensity, thresholds, gradients, flows. This body is as much biological as it is collective and political; the *agencements* of desire are made and unmade upon it, and it supports the cutting edges of deterritorialization or the lines of flight of the *agencements*. It varies (the body without organs of feudalism is not the same as that of capitalism). If I call it the body without organs, it is because it is opposed to all the strata of organization—those of the organism, but also the organization of power. It is the totality of the organizations of the body that will break apart the plane or the field of immanence and impose another type of "plane" on desire, in each case stratifying the body without organs

(Deleuze, 1997:189).

As well as constituting us as identitary forms or categories, this establishment and implementation of deterritorializations also blurs naming processes and causes tumults, perhaps the same as those generated by a drag queen regarding our embodied certainties and placed in relation to the latter in moments of interaction between artists and audience. Drag queens seem to clearly cast doubt on the normative mechanisms of gender and sexuality production. So isn't a drag, with her unassuming propositions and cocky artistic concern effectively playing with gender roles?

One should remember that for many *travestis* and transsexuals, perhaps mainly those who devote themselves to shows, the female impersonation process as a game at parties or in the theater may serve as a real exercise of body transformation, all kinds of ways of experimenting with desired gender that are different from those used to identify us through social norms and daily identitary constructions. The exceptional moment of the show opens up a space for creating and experimenting new bodies that may be assumed in daily life after the curtains fall or remain restricted to those brief moments. At least they have served to produce moments of extreme beauty, given that, in the words of João Moreira Salles "the universe would function perfectly well without cinema and without literature or the arts in general. I love that famous verse by W.H. Auden: *poetry makes nothing happen*. Poems, films and paintings are useless. This is what fills them with beauty in an absolutely utilitarian world" (apud Azeredo, 2010:182, author's italics).

Moments of beauty – and glamor – can also be found in the construction of a “mother camp”, title and discussion of the aforementioned study by Esther Newton (1979). In this ethnography of the 1960s, this author brings us the notion of *camp* as a kind of positivization of a negative stereotype of homosexuality through the aesthetic exercise of self. As we see in the account of one of Esther Newton’s female impersonators

A camp is a flip person who has declared emotional freedom. (...) the whole time she’s light-hearted. Very seldom is camp sad. Camp has got to be flip. (...) Now ‘homosexuality is not’ camp. But you take a camp, and she turns around and she makes homosexuality funny, but not ludicrous; funny but not ridiculous... this is a great, great art. This is a fine thing.. (...) It’s sort laughing at yourself instead of crying. And a good camp will make you laugh along with her, to where you suddenly feel... you don’t feel like she’s made fun of you. She’s sort of made light of a bad situation

(Newton, 1979: 110-111, italics in the original).

An aesthetic called camp or a stylization of self which could also be called camp, is perhaps initially motivated by a situation of vulnerability to discrimination that makes these “outcasts” join together and create a kind of positivized community and lifestyles. And these lifestyles and ways of relating are not merely a response to discrimination; they are veritable affirmations of self and construction of new codes that govern the life of that specific group. It is not only an expedient to be used against an oppressive and aggressive heteronormativity, as it is also not the mere possibility of impersonation oneself that subverts gender norms, locating these bodies in a binary relation of gender subversion or transgression.

The notion of camp (Newton, 1979; Sontag, 1967) refers to an aestheticization of self, a way of apprehending oneself and certain relations in aesthetic and fictional terms. In this sense, aesthetics and fiction are not representations or interpretations as we traditionally view artistic and/or theatrical creation; camp refers to a style that is embedded in that person’s mode of subjectivation itself. We will not prolong this discussion of the conceptualization of camp but explore in greater detail the idea of an aesthetic mode of subjectivation, which cannot be reduced to an aesthetic sphere of life separated from others that are not. Drawing on Guattari (1992), we hold that all subjectivation is aesthetic as well as ethical and political, and what should be emphasized about camp here is that it is deliberately constructed and exercised as an aesthetic with artistic tones. All existences are ethical-aesthetic-political, however some are a little more literally “aesthetic” in an artistic sense.

In *Bodies that matter* (1993), Judith Butler re-analyzes some of her ideas regarding the drag queen and artistic gender impersonation theme, clarifying some of her viewpoints which perhaps had not been interpreted to her liking:

Although many readers understood *Gender Trouble* to be arguing for the proliferation of drag performances as a way of subverting dominant gender norms, I want to underscore that there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and

On
high heels

A. Lopes
and A. P. Uziel

that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms. At best, it seems, drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes

(Butler, 1993:125).

Butler continues her argument and reaffirms the notion that if this impersonation is an imitation of gender, so indeed is heterosexuality and that the latter needs constant reaffirmations to constitute itself in the way we conceive it socially. For Butler, female impersonation reinforces the idea that “hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality” (Butler, 1993:125).

However, the exercise of this artistic impersonation is marked by ambivalence and consequently can be as much an appropriation as a subversion or “sometimes it remains caught in an irresolvable tension, and sometimes a fatally unsubversive appropriation takes place” (Butler, 1993:128). There is no necessary direction in the female impersonation process and, thus, gender parody it’s an ambivalent possibility, which actualizes itself in various forms and in different contexts. This ambivalence of the gender performance artistically constructed by the drag performance can be related to both the previously mentioned notion of becoming (Guattari, 1987) and this author’s actual definition of subjectivity.

In an attempt to avoid psychological models centered around universalizing concepts and categories, Guattari (1995), while criticizing these models, proposes the substitution of these universalisms based on the notion of a subject defined as “the ultimate essence of individuation” (1995, p.22) by a “a partial subjectivity – pre-personal, polyphonic, collective and machinic” (1995, p.21). No longer a conception of “subject” but rather “subjectivity”, as the latter – and also the former, in his sense – constitute a process that does not have a deterministic beginning or a fully closed and finished end. In this view, subjectivity is conceived as being plural and constituted by complex relations, which are neither univocal nor fully identifiable in individual, collective and institutional spheres (Guattari, 1995).

Guattari affirms that subjectivity is an aesthetic paradigm, because it is “production *sui generis*”, a unique creation of “new modalities of subjectivity in the same way that an artist creates new forms from the palette” (Guattari, 1995, p. 7). This is not the same as denying the existence of personal characteristics and/or the historic trajectory of life of a person participating in this subjectivation process: Guattari holds that “1. signifying semiological components which appear in the family, education, the environment, religion, art, sport... 2. Elements constructed by the media industry, the cinema, etc., 3. A-signifying semiological dimensions” (Guattari, 1995, p.4) will combine heterogeneously in the composition of this subject/subjectivity. However, this will not be a process that is per-determined by psychic structures deemed to be prior to the “assumption” of a universal subject.

Although we identify certain subjectivities as being standardized or normatized, this is due to the particular aesthetic form they have taken and not because this is the only possible model of subject. Consider the standardized form of gendered subjectivation we are in thrall to: we create and legitimize forms of being masculine or (opposition constructed as

mandatory, in this case) feminine that are perceived as being unique, natural or exemplary. We believe in and give existence to, for example male/masculine and feminine “primary instincts” such as “natural” male/masculine aggressiveness and compulsory female/feminine maternity. These may even be construed as being legitimate but are far from being the only ones possible. So do we really have only one notion of subject, psychic structure and subjective trajectory possible.?

These modalities of being, primordially male/masculine and female/feminine, deemed to be the only ones possible that the drag performance draws attention to in its body, its relation and its modality of being: indeed, on a stage that that is closer to life that one would suppose at first glance. Even though normative modalities of being and subjectivities are reaffirmed, they open during the briefest of moments to a becoming and other always possible agencings. And this also happens in the case of the production of subjectivities: one can have both the impossibility of fulfillment and the simultaneous coexistence in the same construct of emancipatory and conservative desires and aspirations (Guattari, 1995). This seems to bear witness to both the complex nature of the production of a specific subjectivity and the lack of precision in the direction of the desire that drives this subjectivity.

Similarly to the way we are using the drag performance to highlight the fictitious and localized aspect of the production of subjectivities – and here specifically gendered subjectivities – Felix Guattari used the learning process of a family therapist through the creation and filming of psycho-dramatic games and scenes.

Here, the scene implies a layering of enunciation: a vision of oneself as concrete embodiment; a subject of enunciation which doubles the subject of the statement and the distribution of roles; a collective management of the game; an interlocution with observers commenting on the scene; and finally, video which through feedback restores the totality of these superposed levels. This type of performance favors the relinquishment of a ‘realist’ attitude which would apprehend the lived scenes as actually embodied in family structures. This multi-faceted theatrical aspect allows us to grasp the artificial and creative character of the production of subjectivity

(Guattari, 1992, p.8).

These also appear to be ambivalent questions, similarly to the potentiality of drag queens and their parodistic gender expression. They may reinforce a stereotype or social norms as well as promote important resignifications. There is also a component of pleasure in these gender constructions and in the act of impersonating oneself that cannot be ignored, likewise these possibilities are constructed by a moving desire.

Creationist, fictitious and performative. According to Butler (1998), the body is the unceasing materialization of possibilities, which is why she proposes what she refers to as “an ontology of gerunds”. The author distinguishes theatrical performances from gender performances, affirming that the latter are governed by more punitive and regulatory conventions. She adds that, in the theater, it is possible to de-realize the act, supposing that it is possible to separate acting from reality, thus generating tranquility.

*On
high heels*

A. Lopes
and A. P. Uziel

Drawing on Butler (1998) we affirm that the drag queens movement challenges the distinction between appearance and reality, because “only what can be acted is real” (p.309). The author affirms (Butler, 1998) that gender was established to fulfill the model established by the truth/falsehood binomial/duality thus exercising/fulfilling the social control of gender, in opposition to its performative fluidity which is constitutive of the very gender notion and gender expression.

Subjectivation process on high heels

Although her main theme is different from Judith Butler, the person who can perhaps contribute to this discussion regarding the ambivalence of parody and aesthetic exercise of construction of self and their appropriations of femininities and masculinities in the drag/artistic performance phenomenon is Donna Haraway and her ironic political cyborg myth:

Blasphemy has always seemed to require taking things very seriously. I know no better stance to adopt from within the secular-religious, evangelical traditions of United States politics, including the politics of socialist feminism. Blasphemy protects one from the moral majority within, while still insisting on the need for community. Blasphemy is not apostasy. Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humour and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method, one I would like to see more honoured within socialist-feminism. At the centre of my ironic faith, my blasphemy, is the image of the cyborg

(Haraway, 1990:190-191).

It is not necessarily Haraway's image of the cyborg that engages in a dialogue with the many persons that we encounter in the drag nights of nightclubs and other spaces of homosexual sociability; what seems to dialogue is the possibility of parody and blasphemy, the seriousness to perform in a non-serious fashion when confronted with a series of social institutions and conventions, apparently out of simple pleasure or apolitical motivations, in the way that Susan Sontag (1967) views camp. It is the idea based on Oscar Wilde's “style at the expense of content” (Sontag, 1967:278), a maxim that can be rewritten in the following way: “it is the victory of style concomitantly with content”, but affirmed theatrically as style.

There seems to be a subtle difference between affirming the ambiguity and potentiality of lifestyles and experimenting this difference in our lives. Are we capable of abandoning logics such as those of tolerance or respect to effectively desire difference and get close to what we cannot stand, as suggested by Deleuze and Parnet (1977)? How can we let ourselves be touched by the potentiality of the drag performance without making it conform to the logic that governs our lives which considers that a process is a means to an end? To what extent does the movement of drag corporeality question us in the sense of reminding us that we are constituted by it and that the apparently final form is insufficient? How do experiment territories in such a way that the deterritorialization and reterritorialization processes can be productive instead of threatening us?

Analyzing the relations between her feminist theorizations and the desired possibility of social transformations, Judith Butler once again discusses the potentiality of the drag performance and, more than this, on the place of subjects who are in some way transgender and their relation with politics (2004). She reiterates the idea that a drag performance does not reveal some kind of ultimate truth, but rather that this type of construction enunciates the terms through which the knowledge-power relations that constitute gender relations and figures are structured and maintained in our society. Butler draws on Michel Foucault's theorizations and incites us to invest in the fissures that, besides enabling us to "understand how the terms of gender are instituted, naturalized, and established as pre-suppositional" mainly put us in contact with "the moments where the binary system of gender is disputed and challenged, where the coherence of the categories are put into question, and where the very social life of gender turns out to be malleable and transformable" (Butler, 2004: 216).

It is this possibility of transformation that is present in the constructions based on this artistic impersonation and which are political because they permit a continuous re-arrangement of possibilities:

How is it that drag or, indeed, much more than drag, transgender itself enters into the political field? It does this, I would suggest, by not only making us question what is real, and what has to be, but by showing us how contemporary notions of reality can be questioned, and new modes of reality instituted. Fantasy is not simply a cognitive exercise, an internal film that we project inside the interior theater of the mind. Fantasy structures relationality, and it comes into play in the stylization of embodiment itself. Bodies are not inhabited as spatial givens. They are, in their spatiality, also underway in time: aging, altering shape, altering signification—depending on their interactions—and the web of visual, discursive, and tactile relations that become part of their historicity, their constitutive past, present, and future

(Butler, 2004: 217)

Judith Butler recognizes the element of pleasure that is present in drag performances and also tells her readers about the attraction she has always felt for this kind of show throughout her trajectory, reading Hegel during the day and at night going out to gay bars that were invariably transformed into drag environments (Butler, 2004), promoting potentially transformative colorful simulacra. Very often the pleasure of a certain act or creation lies simply in its experience, without any need for explanations or coherent justifications. In its fashion and framed by various pressures, marginalizations and oppressions, the *drag performance* produce life around it and the artist and the whole audience realize themselves and create their joys and forms of happiness, which seems to us to be much more affirmative than conformed to an inferior/lower position in a possible social hierarchy. This minority becoming can be more substantial than the social devaluation of these bodies.

These bodily constructions and their moments of spectacle seem to realize utopias in the real life, promoting a kind of colorful potentially transformative simulacra. We are interested in this construction and spaces of creation: are they in fact libertarian? Here we do not regard libertarian as being an intrinsic quality, but merely as a type of position that is

On
high heels

A. Lopes
and A. P. Uziel

adopted that may or may not be so. It is the assumed risk of creation, encounter and sharing that can be nothing more than a movement that is materialized and then lost to give way to the next, changing its function during the actual moment of its rigid institutionalization.

Inciting fantasy and making it real, drag performance permits another logic, in which all “bodies matter” and not only those that are socially legitimized as the only ones possible and hierarchically superior to those that are relegated to a place of abjection. Butler denounces the violence suffered by bodies that are considered to be unreal (abjected): in this sense they suffer a high level of violence that we can not considered they are not oppressed, because for this to happen they would have to exist like human and this is a status that they do not have socially; “to find that one is fundamentally unintelligible (indeed, that the laws of culture and of language find one to be an impossibility) is to find that one has not yet achieved access to the human” (Butler, 2004:218). The violence is the non possibility of being possible and legitimate in the culture; this life can not affirm his/herself and his/her desire.

This aesthetic and politics embodied and affirmed as potency of life leads us to the “question of survival, of how to create a world in which those who understand their gender and their desire to be non-normative can live and thrive not only without the threat of violence from the outside but without the pervasive sense of their own unreality, which can lead to suicide or a suicidal life” (Butler, 2004:219). Beyond survival, the full affirmation of life in a way that even that bodies socially considered unreal can achieve their own legitimacy.

Drag queens are also a kind of wandering artist who wanders around places and non-places: ambiguous or multiple, always unfinished and open to the possible. They are characters, perhaps some of the freest and most complex, and not exactly reconfigurations of gender; it's theatrical and, in this sense, the words spoken by Agrado, transsexual character in Pedro Almodovar's “All about my mother” (1999) are extremely true: “the drag queens are wiping us out. I can't stand the drag queens. They're sleaze bags. They confuse transvestism with a circus. Awful”. If they confuse transvestism with a circus, this is because their art and impersonation do not present cohesive lifestyle proposals that, who knows, are better or more just and, as Guattari affirmed about the French group Mirabelles, “they do not want to be taken seriously; they are fighting for something that is more important than seriousness!” (Guattari, 1987:44).

The various types of female impersonation reveal the artificiality of our modes of subjectivation; nothing is natural or pre-determined, everything is constructed in networks of power. In drags this falsification and aestheticization of life takes an exaggerated form, amplifying in an artistic performance aspects that go unnoticed in daily life. Expanded and aestheticized, these constructions are displaced and rearticulated so that we can see them in another manner, with another color, another tone. And this is not necessarily done intentionally or received by the audience in this way. Drag queens play with ambiguity and assume the risk of creating multiple meanings of themselves and their art so that “the point about drag is not simply to produce a pleasurable and subversive spectacle but to allegorize the spectacular and consequential ways in which reality is both reproduced and contested” (Butler, 2004:218).

Perhaps the importance of drag queens and other types of female impersonation lies in the fact that they point to the possibilities of the constitution of self and our quotidian theatricalities. As Jack Babuscio, said “Indeed, life itself is role and theater, appearance, and impersonation” (Babuscio, 1993:24): everything is constantly constructed and maintained, even the most natural biological assumptions, for example. We are not denying instincts, the biological functioning of bodies, amongst other things. We must only be aware that these premises were created in a specific historical context and are part of a discursive world that sustains them. Isn’t everything created? Names, characteristics, norms of functioning, etc., are all conventional. And everything could be different, with another logic, another name. We live indeed in a real fiction.

Drag queens seem to cross the line that supposedly separates fiction and reality, just because we are not sure what belongs to the character or belongs to the person that is embodying it. There’s not a “real” self underneath, but there’s a person that we consider real (the performer) who is so imbricate in this kind of performance that he/she is also transforming her/himself and offer to the audience issues about her/his “real life” or “real community” at the moment of spectacle. And we don’t know what could be considered “real” and what it’s primarily “fiction”; this is the appeal of this live performance.

Let us consider, for example, the various places they occupy: nightclubs, theatres and artistic spaces, the LGBT Pride Parade, street carnival, ballroom carnival and samba school parades, nightclub entrances, various events and party entertainment. What is common to all these places is perhaps the participation of LGBTs, but the place occupied by drag performance differs according to the location: a nightclub is a place of work for her, but is she working when she parades during the carnival? Is this work or play? We believe that she is not there merely there for self-promotion purposes, in order to show herself to the world in the midst of the colors and joyful atmosphere of the carnival. But she doesn’t go this party as a mere carnival reveler. At the risk of establishing her as the prototype of artistic gender transformations, we affirm that nothing is what it appears to be when the subject is drag queens and this is her great potentiality: the places occupied, the way they are occupied, the constitution of self, the relations established...everything is ambiguous and seems to be open to resignification. But this vivacity is not given a priori just because she is a drag queen; it is produced in the exchanges between participants, in that space of creation and relation between the drag and whoever happens to be there, playing and joking together with her. So is the drag queen therefore exercising and opening up a space for the embodiment of a becoming? But is an embodied becoming still a becoming?

We think that “being” (“*estar*”) a drag queen is a complete act of affirmation: the affirmation of an artistic category that their peers do not consider to be art; the affirmation of other modes of constituting oneself in terms of gender assuming that one is playing with gender and, above all, an affirmation of self, her art and values in a society that provides us with daily examples of violent and tragic homophobic, sexist, and racist behavior, as well as various other kinds of absurd discrimination. To affirm oneself as a strange and exaggerated being, even if restricted to a specific community group that accepts and encourages this, constitutes an act of bravery. Although believing that drag queens are fundamentally aesthetic subjects, we cannot separate the aesthetics of ethics and politics. We think there’s

On
high heels

A. Lopes
and A. P. Uziel

an implication of aesthetics, ethics and politics in an artistic form – which sometimes can be considered just aesthetical in a first look because it's a form of art/performance.

“Being” (“estar”) a drag queen, even with a subtle trace of this character in our memories and lives, is an invitation that all these artists that during those brief moments fill us with pleasure and entertain us with their brilliance and colors. Would we be dare of standing up on those high heels?

References

- Azeredo, S. M. M. Encrenca de gênero nas teorizações em psicologia. *Revista Estudos Feministas*, v. 18, p. 175-188, 2010.
- Babuscio, J. (1993) Camp and the gay sensibility. In: Bergman, David (Org.). *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1993.
- Bessa, K. (2007). Os festivais GLBT de cinema e as mudanças estético-políticas na constituição da subjetividade. *Cad. Pagu*, n.28, p.257-283, jun.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1998). Actos performativos y constitución del género: um ensayo sobre fenomenología y teoría feminista, *Debate feminista*, p.296-314.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. New York: Routledge.
- Deleuze, G. (1997). Desire and pleasure. In Davidson, A. I. (Ed.), *Foucault and his Interlocutors*. London: University of Chicago Press.
- Deleuze, G; Parnet, C. (1977). *Dialogues*. New York: Columbia University.
- Deleuze, G; Guattari, F. (1997) *Mil Platôs*. São Paulo: Editora 34.
- Foucault, M. (2006). *Ética, sexualidade, política*. Rio de Janeiro: Forense Universitária.
- Guattari, F. (1987) *Revolução molecular: pulsações políticas do desejo*. São Paulo: Brasiliense.
- Guattari, Félix (1995). *Chaosmosis – an ethico-aesthetic paradigm*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Haraway, D. (1990). A Manifesto for Cyborg: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century. In: Nicholson, L. *Feminism/Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge.
- Louro, G. L. (2004). *Um corpo estranho: ensaios sobre sexualidade e teoria queer*. Belo Horizonte: autêntica
- Newton, E. (1979). *Mother Camp: Female impersonators in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Sontag, S. (1967). Notes on Camp. In: Sontag, S. *Against interpretation and other essays*. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode.
- Vencato, A. P. (2002). *Fervendo com as drags: corporalidades e performances de drag queens em territórios gays da Ilha de Santa Catarina*. Dissertação (Mestrado), Faculdade de Antropologia, Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Florianópolis.

Correspondence

Aureliano Lopes

Email address: aurelianolopes@gmail.com

Anna Paula Uziel

Email address: uzielap@gmail.com

Authors information

Aureliano Lopes

Psychologist, Ph.D student in the Postgraduate Program in Collective Health of the State University of Rio de Janeiro (IMS/UERJ) and member of LIDIS/UERJ - Integrated Laboratory on Sexual and Gender Diversity, Politics and Rights. Areas of activity: subjectivity, sexuality, gender, education and health.

Anna Paula Uziel

Psychologist, Ph.D. in Social Sciences at the State University of Campinas (Unicamp) and associate professor at the Institute of Psychology of the State University of Rio de Janeiro (IP/UERJ). Coordinator of LIDIS/UERJ - Integrated Laboratory on Sexual and Gender Diversity, Politics and Rights and a research associate of the Latin American Center on Sexuality and Human Rights (CLAM/IMS/UERJ). Areas of activity: juridical psychology, family and sexuality.

*On
high heels*

A. Lopes
and A. P. Uziel