



FAKULTA
HUMANITNÍCH STUDIÍ
Univerzita Karlova

**Struggles Over Queer Space: Drag Kings' Appropriations of Performance Events
in Prague**

Emma Ayars

(BA Thesis review)

The discussed BA thesis is coming as a part of a marked shift in interest in drag shows carried by junior upcoming researchers. Among them (at FHS), Emma Ayars managed to get access to the drag performances and performers of non-femininity and masculinity (drag king performances) that continue to be rarer, and thus also so much harder to access and record. As they themselves share, Emma Ayars has been part of one of the drag king collectives which allowed them a direct access and experience of drag king conceptualization, preparations, access to back-stage dynamic as well as audience reaction. All this is well-reflected and worked-through. At the outset, I want to emphasize that Emma Ayars's thesis is a pleasure to read (also thanks to its prose), and it undoubtedly exceeds the expectations and standards of BA thesis. Most importantly, the analysis based in participant observation and questionnaires is artfully intertwined with theoretical literature and author's dialogue with other studies of drag kinging.

With no hesitation, thus, I recommend the thesis for defense and suggest the **grade of A/excellent**.

Below, I offer few remarks in case the author would consider expanding the thesis into a publication:

1. Given the careful work on positionality, laying out the thesis' methodology and the skillful art of describing various locales and events through which the author and the thesis moves, I am surprised by the author's choice of "questionnaires" to incorporate the voices of other performers. I would also recommend letting them 'speak' more. I do appreciate that the author is not overpowered by the 'data', but at times I felt the voices of the other performers might be a tad outpowered by author's own voice.
2. Given the author's interest in engaged intersectional analysis of drag kinging and its in/accessibility and its relation to places (imaginary or material), I offer few extensions:
 - a. As the author focuses on class, social and economic capital necessary to access spaces that allow drag kinging on stage, various forms of disabilities and access would be important to include too – and not only the physical accessibility (thresholds, stairs, bathroom) but also query how the spaces and the performances themselves rely on notions of compulsory ablebodiedness and ablemindedness (in terms of sensory standards, and neurotypicality). This seems even more pressing as many trans*, ngc, non-binary people are experiencing marginalization through notions of neurotypicality.
 - b. Prague: great number of the performers belong to the expat community. The author gestures to this at the very end of the thesis when they ask "is it

possible that Americans use this settler notion of ‘distance’ to extricate themselves from the messy history of the USA and the obligations that come with having been born on stolen land?” I believe, the thesis needs to dig deeper and ask also about the ‘positive’ fantasies attached to the space of Prague as the postsocialist ‘Eastern European’ glocale and question other forms of fantasies, affective attachments and ‘Orientalising othering’ that happen here. As much as the reliance on CTR and anti-settler decolonial thought is so important and so helpful in many aspects throughout the thesis, I would argue that without engaging with queer and other theories coming from the spaces and engaging with the context, the sharpness of decolonial theorizing is lost and can in fact work counterarily and against itself. In simpler language, I urge the author to engage with works reflecting the feminist and queer critique of the postsocialist spaces.

- c. To build on the last point, historical context – how much does the drag kinging draw on the predecessors that were developed in the state socialist context? How much are they in dialogue with other forms of drag that explicitly work with the socialist past (e.g. work of Jill Pope on ‘Yugoslav drag’)? And what does it mean that there is silence, and no contact with the previous histories of gender performances?
- d. It is really refreshing to read an analysis of drag shows that brings in issues of race, or more specifically whiteness and offers its analysis. However, at times, I got the impression that the notion of ‘whiteness’ becomes too stabilized and withdrawn from the context. Who are the “straightie-whities” (p.46) that need to be kept out of the club? What whiteness negotiations are happening in Prague clubs between the (varied) audience, performers (who are partly expats and partly Eastern Europeans)? And what does it mean to use the appellation “straightie-whities” as a negative foil to position oneself as a queer expat/Czech in Prague?

Closing, I want to reiterate how much I appreciate author’s work, their critical distance from the drag kinging they are part of, in particular as drag performing (even dragkingin) is currently appropriate by commercial media, or conversely romanticized. I have also enjoyed the layered discussion of authenticity and realness that the author offers. In this context, works of José Muñoz whose queer of color theorizing is drawing heavily on queer performativity and drag performances/performers might be important for further elaboration, as well as *Queer Child: Growing Sideways* by Katherine Stockton might offer some backing in exploring the feelings of sadness, frustration and/or gender dysphoria (and euphoria).

In Prague

June 12, 2024

Kateřina Kolářová

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'K. Kolářová', written in a cursive style.