

PERFORMING LEGITIMACY, TEACHING DEFIANCE?:
SWEDISH DRAG AND THE MAKING OF QUEER
PEDAGOGIES

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

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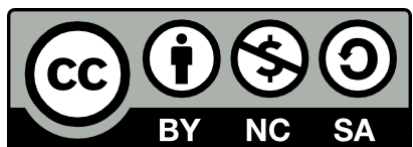
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how Swedish drag collectives navigate the politics of legitimacy to develop pedagogical practices in public cultural spaces. Guided by the question of how narratives about drag as legitimate work and art shape queer pedagogical approaches in Swedish drag, I draw on a multi-sited ethnography of two drag collectives, Bland Drakar och Dragqueens (BD&DQ) and CULT, alongside interviews with three professionals from the public education sector, to investigate how pedagogy takes shape through affective, aesthetic, and relational practices in libraries, schools, festivals, and queer performance venues. Rather than offering a fixed definition of “drag pedagogy,” I analyze how pedagogical meaning emerges unevenly across institutional, spatial, and audience contexts. My research situates these practices within shifting struggles for recognition in a national context where queerness is expected to appear non-threatening and culturally valuable while remaining legible to dominant norms. By building upon and adapting the concepts of drag pedagogy, norm-critical pedagogy, and decolonial drag, I demonstrate how pedagogy manifests in performance and how it’s shaped by the institutional and creative pressures impacting artists as they sustain and display their work. Even when not labeled as pedagogy, these practices generate forms of learning that challenge formal education’s emphasis on legibility and coherence. BD&DQ creatively aligns with institutional expectations through the language of literacy and inclusion, while CULT invites affective discomfort and political engagement as a way of building queer kinship. Both collectives, in different ways, reveal how pedagogy in Swedish drag is shaped by ongoing negotiation, where moments of refusal and compromise coexist within conditions that rarely offer stability. This thesis contributes to critical gender studies by foregrounding drag as a site of situated queer learning, where legitimacy must be continually performed and pedagogy becomes a terrain for navigating shifting conditions of cultural recognition and creative survival.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BD&DQ: Bland Drakar och Dragqueens

CULT: The CULT of Drag

DSH: Drag Story Hour

LGBTQI+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, and others.

RPDR: RuPaul's Drag Race

SD: Sweden Democrats

US: United States of America

1. Introduction

It was a Friday night in Gothenburg, and I was standing in a packed venue tucked into an old fishing harbor, wedged between the highway and a container yard, watching the CULT drag collective prepare for their “CULT of CARE” show. The event promised queerness at its loudest, with striking aesthetics, experimental formats, and unapologetic politics. The sold-out event, co-hosted by Reclaim Pride and the anti-racist initiative Dubbelexponerat, brought together an eclectic and expectant crowd. One week earlier, some 450 kilometres away, I had found myself in a very different setting, this time at the “Häng med festival” in Skärholmen, a suburban area in southwest Stockholm often framed as vulnerable in policy and media discourse. There, another drag collective, Bland Drakar och Dragqueens, had captivated a different audience of families, caretakers, and people with disabilities at the brightly lit communal culture house. The atmosphere was equally electric, but in a different register, with glittery costumes, interactive storytelling, and choreographed routines for a crowd that joyfully sang and danced while learning drag.

These two events were integral to my fieldwork and marked my introduction to the collectives, as they were my initial moments of participant observation. Both groups describe their work as educational and politically meaningful. Their connection lies not only in drag but also in pedagogy, serving as a method of public engagement, a means of teaching from a queer perspective, and a strategy for achieving recognition. Nevertheless, the settings in which they operate, such as a radically queer counter-Pride afterparty and a municipally funded community festival, influence the reception of their work, the forms of legitimacy they must perform, and the educational opportunities they can pursue. While both collectives engage in drag, they do so under very different terms and for distinct audiences. As I navigated between festivals, libraries, museums, and city squares, I began to pose questions: Who gets invited to perform where? Whose drag is perceived as inclusive, and whose as transgressive? What forms of queer pedagogy are possible, or even legible, within Sweden’s publicly funded cultural landscape?

These ethnographic insights illustrate just how differently drag can appear and function within Sweden’s publicly funded cultural sphere. While Sweden is often celebrated for its progressive politics and generous welfare state, recent years have seen an increasing politicization

of cultural funding and public institutions.² The principle of “arm’s length,” originally meant to safeguard artistic freedom from political interference, has come under pressure.³ Indeed, heated debates have emerged over the role and boundaries of publicly funded art and education, particularly in spaces like schools, libraries, and museums, raising broader questions about who gets to participate in cultural life and under what terms.

These recent tensions are not without precedent. Drag in Sweden has long oscillated between entertainment and political disruption. From early figures like ‘Lind?’ and the celebrity impersonators of 20th-century theatre, to After Dark and Babsan household fame, drag has moved from the cabaret stage into the cultural mainstream.⁴ Yet this visibility has come with tension. While After Dark’s glittering performances once brought drag into Swedish living rooms via ‘Eurovision,’ more subversive drag lineages, such as the ‘Surprise Sisters’ in the 1980s, or today’s punk- and genderfuck-inspired performers in Gothenburg’s underground scene, have continually pushed against gender norms and cultural respectability.⁵ This includes CULT, one of the collectives examined in this thesis, known for blending political critique and experimental aesthetics. In this longer trajectory, it is unsurprising that drag, particularly when aimed at children, has become a focal point in broader cultural debates over gender, sexuality, and national identity. In recent years, far-right actors like the Sweden Democrats have attacked public funding for drag performers, especially in schools and libraries, framing drag as a threat to children and Swedish values.⁶ These attacks form part of a broader genderphobic backlash against queer visibility in public institutions.⁷

Within this contested terrain, Swedish drag artists must navigate complex histories and shifting expectations as they strive to teach, entertain, and disrupt. Public support can offer visibility, stability, and resources, but often requires aligning with institutional norms around diversity, inclusion, and respectability. These norms are shaped by what many scholars have called Swedish exceptionalism: the belief in Sweden’s unique progressiveness, neutrality, and

² Tobias Harding, “Culture Wars? The (Re)Politicization of Swedish Cultural Policy,” *Cultural Trends* 31, no. 2 (August 29, 2021): 115–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2021.1971932>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Viktor “Caffeine” Skancke, “The Nordic Royal Families,” in *Planet Drag: Uncover the Global Herstory*, ed. Courtney Conquers (London: White Lion Publishing, 2023), 136–147.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Clémentine Punti, “Sweden Democrats Reveal Their Genderphobia,” *The Loop*, April 22, 2024, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/sweden-democrats-reveal-their-genderphobia/>.

⁷ Punti, “Sweden Democrats Reveal Their Genderphobia”; Katharina Kehl, “‘In Sweden, Girls Are Allowed to Kiss Girls, and Boys Are Allowed to Kiss Boys’: Pride Järva and the Inclusion of the ‘LGBT Other’ in Swedish Nationalist Discourses,” *Sexualities* 21, no. 4 (February 8, 2018): 674–91, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460717748621>

tolerance.⁸ Yet, such narratives often mask structural inequalities, particularly around race, class, and cultural belonging.⁹ As my fieldwork revealed, drag pedagogy is not only about what is being taught, but also about who gets to teach, where, and under what terms.

My research emerges from a multi-sited ethnography involving participant observation, interviews, and online material from two collectives, BD&DQ and CULT, whose work intersects with public education, queer activism, and institutional cultural labor. Rather than (re)defining drag pedagogy, I examine how it is produced, constrained, and imagined in relation to questions of legitimacy, audience, and public space. Thus, my central research question is: **How do narratives about drag as legitimate work and art shape queer pedagogical approaches in Swedish drag?** This inquiry unfolds across three analytical chapters, each guided by a sub-question. Chapter 4 examines how drag artists position themselves as cultural workers and how these positionings shape their claims to artistic, pedagogical, and political legitimacy. Chapter 5 investigates how spatial and institutional settings, such as Pride festivals and public schools, shape drag performances' pedagogical possibilities and constraints. Chapter 6 turns to the performances themselves, asking how pedagogy is enacted through play, aesthetic transformation, and accessibility, and what these practices reveal about the possibilities of queer education in Sweden.

In addressing these questions, I bring together scholarship from queer pedagogical theory, intersectional drag studies, and critical analyses of Swedish national identity. Central to my interpretive framework is the concept of drag pedagogy, which I draw from Harper Keenan and Hot Mess, but adapt to a Swedish context by examining how pedagogy functions not only in performances for children, but across diverse audiences and spaces.¹⁰ I place this in conversation with norm-critical pedagogy, a Swedish framework developed within public education and diversity policy, which has been both a resource and a constraint for drag artists navigating institutional norms.¹¹ I also build on intersectional drag theory, especially Khubchandani's concept of decolonial drag, to examine how performances are shaped by and respond to structures of race, class, gender, and national belonging.¹² Finally, I critically engage with the

⁸ Erika Alm, *Pluralistic Struggles in Gender, Sexuality and Coloniality : Challenging Swedish Exceptionalism* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

⁹ Ylva Habel, "Challenging Swedish Exceptionalism? Teaching While Black," in *Education in the Black Diaspora*, ed. Kassie Freeman and Ethan Johnson (London: Routledge, 2012), 110–33, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203152973-15>.

¹⁰ Harper Keenan and Hot Mess, "Drag Pedagogy: The Playful Practice of Queer Imagination in Early Childhood," *Curriculum Inquiry* 50, no. 5 (January 25, 2021): 440–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2020.1864621>.

¹¹ Eva Reimers, "Norm-Critical Pedagogy as Femo- and Homonationalism," in *Queer Studies and Education*, ed. Nelson M. Rodriguez et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 296–310, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197687000.003.0016>.

¹² Kareem Khubchandani, *Decolonize Drag* (OR Books, 2023).

concept of Swedishness, exploring its connections to whiteness and exceptionalism, to understand how cultural legitimacy is unevenly distributed.

This thesis explores how the impact of drag is influenced not only by the intentions of artists but also by the cultural and institutional contexts in which they function. Instead of viewing drag pedagogy as inherently radical or oppositional, I approach it as a situated and dynamic practice. In the subsequent chapters, I trace how drag pedagogy takes form in shifting spaces and audiences, focusing on its tensions, contradictions, and generative moments. Through this lens, I investigate what drag can reveal about the potentials and constraints of queer teaching, cultural legitimacy, and creative resistance in Sweden today.

2. Interpretive Framework

Literature Review

This chapter outlines the key fields of scholarship that inform my study of Swedish drag pedagogies. I engage with debates on drag's subversive and mainstream forms, its negotiation of legitimacy as labor and art, and its often-overlooked pedagogical dimensions. In particular, I draw on queer and intersectional critiques of drag that challenge narrow identity-based definitions and foreground questions of institutional recognition and cultural value. Situating my work within both Anglo-American and Swedish discussions of queer and norm-critical pedagogy, I trace the tensions and gaps that my research addresses, particularly the limited attention to drag's pedagogical dimensions, especially in the Swedish context, and the need for a more intersectional understanding of how legitimacy narratives shape what drag can do, teach, and disrupt.

Scholarship on drag has often centered on drag's "subversive" potential to destabilize gender norms, frequently drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity.¹³ For instance, earlier foundational scholarship, such as Esther Newton's "Mother Camp," as well as Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor's "Drag Queens at 801 Cabaret," focused on the assumed inherent potential of drag queens for subverting gender norms.¹⁴ Many scholars have since complicated this view by highlighting how drag can also reinforce gender norms.¹⁵ Even Butler remarked nearly two decades later, following the original discussion of performativity, "there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms."¹⁶

Yet, when addressing the limitations of drag, some scholars have mistakenly regarded it as inherently regressive by concentrating exclusively on sexism as the ultimate injury being done (for instance, the idea that drag queens merely mock femininity in their performances), thereby overlooking other sites of oppression, such as ageism or ableism.¹⁷ Kayte Stokoe identifies these two restrictive trends as the "subversive/reactionary dichotomy," arguing that drag scholarship

¹³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).

¹⁴ Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, University of Chicago Press (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

¹⁵ See, for instance, Katie Horowitz, *Drag, Interperformance, and the Trouble with Queerness* (London: Routledge, 2020), which explores how drag can reproduce norms despite its queer framing; and Kayte Stokoe, *Reframing Drag: Beyond Subversion and the Status Quo* (London: Routledge, 2020), who critiques reductive binaries in drag discourse and emphasizes that performances alone cannot disrupt structural norms.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (London: Routledge, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203828274>, 125.

¹⁷ Kelton Hollister, "If Gender Isn't a Binary, Neither is Drag: An Analysis of Drag, Progressiveness, and Activism". (Master thesis, 2022), 20.

oversimplifies the intricacies and possibilities of drag by framing it in a binary way.¹⁸ As I explore two drag collectives with different political engagements and legitimizing approaches, I strive to counter the hierarchical and binary perception of “subversive” drag as “good” versus “reactionary” drag as “bad” drag.¹⁹ Therefore, I will concentrate on the actual events and the people involved to outline what drag is, can be, and has the potential to achieve in the Swedish context. I will also pay particular attention to how the various forms of drag I observe can both uphold and challenge Swedish norms in (un)expected ways, primarily through their pedagogical approaches.

I also want to underline how I found a general lack of research on the solidarities across drag cultures and within drag communities. Academic discussions often perpetuate a conflict between drag kings and queens, insisting on an essential divide that fosters rivalry between them. This typically involves accepting one group’s assertions about another as fact without considering the opposing perspective.²⁰ Katie Horowitz counters this by showcasing examples of their supportive relationships through their shared use of the same queer bar, while still acknowledging the notable differences between kings and queens.²¹ Joshua Barnett and Corey Johnson also emphasize the relationality of drag kings and queens, as evoked by their title “We are all Royalty,” by notably observing how all performers engage their drag personas for political and activist purposes.²² My thesis extends these efforts by analyzing two seemingly opposing groups: one mainly consisting of queens and the other of kings, queens, and creatures, all while emphasizing their shared characteristics and the opportunities for solidarity among them. Nonetheless, I acknowledge their differences, though I do not see them as fundamental distinctions between queens and kings, and I embrace the variety of drag styles and methods (e.g., pedagogies) present in Swedish drag culture(s).

Moreover, my thesis maintains that drag can both intentionally and unintentionally subvert or reinforce various norms, extending beyond just gender norms. Indeed, returning to Butler’s theory on performativity, drag is often approached through this lens in scholarship as a means of exposing the socially constructed nature of gender, uncovering the construction and “repetition” that shape femininities and masculinities. This has equipped numerous scholars with the critical tools to grasp drag’s capacity to be both playful and politically disruptive, especially

¹⁸ Stokoe, *Reframing Drag*, 5.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Hollister, “If Gender Isn’t a Binary, Neither is Drag,” 16.

²¹ Horowitz, *Drag, Interperformance, and the Trouble with Queerness*.

²² Joshua Trey Barnett and Corey W. Johnson, “We Are All Royalty,” *Journal of Leisure Research* 45, no. 5 (November 2013): 677–94, <https://doi.org/10.18666/jlr-2013-v45-i5-4369>.

within LGBTQI+ cultural production contexts.²³ Nevertheless, framing drag as “gender trouble” often positions gender as the primary, if not the only, axis of analysis, overlooking Butler’s call to consider the “matrix” of power through which gender performativity is realized.²⁴ This has limited scholarly engagements with how drag performances and their reception are shaped by race, class, (dis)ability, and other intersecting power relations. Yet, a growing body of intersectional scholarship has complicated these readings.

For instance, José Esteban Muñoz emphasizes that the transgressive potential of drag, as seen in Vaginal Davis’ “terrorist drag”, is not equally accessible to all performers, particularly not to those who are racialized and identify with non-normative genders and sexualities.²⁵ Muñoz’s concept of “disidentification” further helps understand how drag may not neatly oppose dominant norms, but instead work within and against them to create alternative modes of survival and joy.²⁶ Thus, Muñoz’s queer of color critique foregrounds how drag (and its pedagogy, in my case) can both reproduce and resist dominant norms, especially when whiteness, middle-class aesthetics, and cis femininity/masculinity prevail in mainstream representations, as seen in Sweden. This highlights that access to spaces, recognition, and cultural capital is unevenly distributed. For my thesis, this raises questions about whose drag performances are legitimized and whose are marginalized or erased.

This issue of legitimacy leads me to consider the particular aspects of drag as cultural labor, which I found is still absent from recent literature. Feminist contributions to the field of cultural labor studies, such as Angela McRobbie’s and Rosalind Gill’s work, have critiqued how creative labor is often celebrated for its freedom and flexibility while masking the making of precarity through exploitation and structural exclusion.²⁷ Especially, LGBTQ+ (performance) artists are more subject to marginalization in this process.²⁸ These insights are interesting for approaching how drag performers position themselves within cultural economies, as *artists* and

²³ For a Swedish engagement with performativity, see Anna Olovsson Lööf’s analysis of how *Gender Trouble* was misread in early 2000s drag king activism, and how theories of drag and gender shaped feminist performance: Anna Olovsson Lööf, “The (Ab)Uses of Gender Trouble in Feminist Drag King Activism in Sweden in the Early 2000s,” *Lambda Nordica* 20, no. 2–3 (2015): 96–124, <https://www.lambdanordica.org/index.php/lambdanordica/article/view/450>.

²⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), 21.

²⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1999), 1–34.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ See, for instance, Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* (Cambridge, England: Polity, 2016); Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt, “In the Social Factory? Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 7–8 (December 2008): 1–30, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276408097794>.

²⁸ Matthew Chin, “Sacrificial Entrepreneurship: The Political Economy of Queer and Trans of Color Community Arts under Neoliberalism,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 68, no. 8 (December 13, 2019): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2019.1698912>.

cultural workers, through their notable collaborations with public cultural institutions. So, I am interested in how legitimacy negotiations encompass not only artistic merit but also recognition within broader systems of value, including funding bodies, media visibility, institutional partnerships, and access to (public) spaces. In Sweden, where cultural legitimacy is closely tied to state support and cultural policy frameworks, I found that drag collectives must often navigate contradictory expectations around neutrality and respectability on the one hand, and diversity and inclusion on the other, to access (public) resources.²⁹ This generates tensions between drag's radical roots and its current role in public culture, prompting me to examine how this context shapes emerging drag pedagogies, an issue that, to my knowledge, has yet to be explored.

These tensions have been explored in other contexts by scholarship on drag “mainstreaming”, which represents one of the few areas where issues of race, class, gender, and culture have been effectively examined through queer and decolonial lenses. This has often been achieved by engaging with the ambivalent and ongoing legacy of RuPaul’s Drag Race (RPDR), which is sometimes blamed and at other times celebrated for mainstreaming drag worldwide. For instance, Kareem Khubchandani has deplored how the show “reproduces the violent tendencies of empire in its capitulation to xenophobia, islamophobia, and fatphobia.”³⁰ The author also questioned the criteria for what constitutes drag, highlighting that the mainstream acceptance of drag has accentuated the distinctions between “good” and “bad” drag, or as Ian Rafael Ramirez calls it, “homonormative” and “alternative” drag.³¹ This, for instance, perpetuates racist beauty standards rooted in colonial systems. Khubchandani has further condemned the mainstreaming of drag, fueled by “RuPaul’s Drag industrial complex,” for leading to the neo-liberal co-option of its radical roots and subversive potential to make it more palpable to a broader audience.³² Ramirez adds that the mainstreaming of drag reveals “how subversive practices are easily captured into the fold of neoliberalism, whiteness, and global capitalism.”³³ While the rise of drag in the mainstream has opened doors and helped destigmatize the art form for many, it predominantly benefits artists who fit into homonormative cultures, often because of their whiteness, thinness, or lack of political radicalism.³⁴

²⁹ Harding, “Culture Wars?”.

³⁰ Khubchandani, *Decolonize Drag*, 88.

³¹ Ramirez, “Provincial Drag in the Philippine Tropics,” 102.

³² Khubchandani, *Decolonize Drag*, 89-94.

³³ Ian Rafael Ramirez, “Provincial Drag in the Philippine Tropics: Towards a Decolonial Queer Tropical Aesthetics,” *ETropic: Electronic Journal of Studies in the Tropics* 23, no. 2 (October 15, 2024): 100–123, <https://doi.org/10.25120/etropic.23.2.2024.403>, 119.

³⁴ Litwiller, “Normative Drag Culture and the Making of Precarity.”

However, the latter expectation that drag is inherently political also presents challenges. While some studies assume that all drag is political³⁵, I maintain that while drag can sometimes be rooted in LGBTQ+ activism, it can also be perceived as political due to its association with queerness, even though the performance itself might not challenge dominant norms. The ambiguity surrounding drag as a political concept, considering its growing mainstreaming, is crucial to my thesis. My data indicates that a key legitimacy issue for drag collectives is the perception of being either excessively or insufficiently political.

Beyond its role as entertainment or political activism, drag can also function as a form of pedagogy. This has been highlighted in a growing body of Anglo-American scholarship that often focuses on the American “Drag Story Hour” concept, where drag artists read stories to children, and the polemics around its pedagogical methods. Building on this idea, Keenan and Lil Hot Mess’s critical article on theorizing “drag pedagogy” is remarkable in its capacity to focus on the educational benefits and queer joy in drag story times, rather than its polemic.³⁶ In their work, drag becomes a site of informal learning, as it invites audiences to unlearn cis-heteronormativity, experience new forms of play, and reimagine social possibilities. Still, the article on drag pedagogy, along with other scholarship that approaches the drag artist as a “*queer teacher*,” overwhelmingly focus on the figure of the drag queen.³⁷ This aligns with a trend across drag studies where drag queens are over-represented compared to drag kings, while non-binary drag artists are grossly overlooked.³⁸ This omission is not representative of the diversity of the Swedish drag scene, where non-binary drag (e.g. drag “creatures” and “genderfuck” drag) is flourishing within a scene still dominated by “polished” drag queens.³⁹ Nonetheless, I found that non-binary drag stands out as a remarkably creative and powerful form, deserving of deeper exploration alongside more “traditional” drag, which I attempt to achieve in this thesis.

Returning the focus to Swedish research, it is unfortunate that scholars examining drag in public spaces have concentrated on how these events are received by the audience or perceived by funding institutions, thus sidelining the experiences of drag artists and their educational practices while overlooking the advantages of a pedagogical perspective on drag. For instance, Lisa Engström et al. have conducted research on drag story time in Swedish libraries, analyzing

³⁵ See, for instance, Edward F. Kammerer, Melissa R. Michelson, and Brian F. Harrison, “Politics Should Be a Drag: Why Political Science Needs to Take Drag Seriously,” *PS: Political Science & Politics*, January 20, 2025, 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1049096524001100>.

³⁶ Keenan and Hot Mess, “Drag Pedagogy.”

³⁷ Keenan and Hot Mess, “Drag Pedagogy,” 442.

³⁸ Hollister, “If Gender Isn’t a Binary, Neither is Drag,” 21.

³⁹ “Caffeine” Skancke, “The Nordic Royal Families.”

this event as a manifestation of conflict concerning identity and democracy, while overlooking the voices of drag artists and the potential benefits associated with the practice.⁴⁰ Therefore, noticing the lack of critical published studies, I sought out graduate students' theses to address the gaps, but this effort was unsuccessful. The few recent graduate studies in Sweden on drag story time also primarily utilized discourse analysis to underscore the mobilization of democratic principles, such as open dialogue, inclusion, and diversity, in debates surrounding the legitimacy of drag artists in public library settings.⁴¹ For instance, one study compared the narratives of Inga Tvivel, a drag artist participating in this study, alongside those of an SD politician, in an effort to understand both sides of the polemic around drag story time in libraries.⁴² Another study focused on how librarians engage with drag collectives, specifically examining whether they considered these collaborations to be political or not.⁴³ My thesis emphasizes focusing on the viewpoints of drag artists rather than the surrounding discourse, advocating for engagement with them instead of mere discussion. Still, I am also trying to understand how the perspectives of other actors within the pedagogical landscapes of Sweden influence drag artists' legitimizing strategies. For this, I draw on narratives from pedagogues working in public schools in the Gothenburg area.⁴⁴

Much of the Swedish graduate research on drag in public spaces invokes the term 'norm critique' when addressing the pedagogic potential of drag.⁴⁵ This brings me to the field of queer pedagogy studies in Sweden, a fruitful one, with its critical focus on the native strand of queer pedagogy in Sweden, called norm-critical pedagogy. Lotta Björkman, Janne Bromseth, and Helena Hill have emphasized that while this concept has been central within mainstream practices and discussions, especially around gender norms and harassment in education spaces, it

⁴⁰ Lisa Engström, Hanna Carlsson, and Fredrik Hanell, "Drag Story Hour at Public Libraries: The Reading Child and the Construction of Fear and Othering in Swedish Cultural Policy Debate," *Journal of Documentation* 80, no. 7 (May 17, 2024): 226–45, <https://doi.org/10.1108/jd-02-2024-0026>.

⁴¹ See, for instance, Lisa Hiselius, "Låt Barn Få Vara Barn! - Kritiken Mot Drag-Sagostunder I Sverige Och Dess Förhållande till Moralpanik [Let Children Be Children! - Criticism of Dragging in Sweden and Its Relation to Moral Panic]" (Bachelor Thesis, 2024); Frida Månsson and Fanny Spindler, "Inte Våra Barn! Relationen Mellan Den Globala Antigenusrörelsen Och Sverigedemokraterna: En Kritisk Diskursanalys [Not Our Children! the Relationship between the Global Antigenus Movement and the Sweden Democrats: A Critical Discourse Analysis]," *Lub.lu.se* (Bachelor Thesis, 2023).

⁴² Rebecka Landgren and Jennifer Nykänen, "When [Children] Encounter a Dragqueen They See a Fictional Character" – Drag Storytimes in Public Libraries." (Master Thesis, 2023).

⁴³ See, for instance, Valentina Mazzarelli, "Bibliotekariens Nya Handlingsfält : Mellan Neutralitetsnorm Och Agonistisk Kamp [the Librarian's New Field of Action: Between Neutrality Norm and Agonistic Struggle]," *DIVA* (Bachelor Thesis, 2023).

⁴⁴ It is notable that one other undergrad study focused on the intersection of drag artists and the education sector in Sweden: Capell Eling and Nyman Almstedt, "Regnbågens Ramar : En Diskursanalys Av Normkritisk Barnlitteratur I Förskolan [the Rainbow's Frame: A Discourse Analysis of Norm-Critical Children's Literature in Preschool]," *DIVA* (Bachelor Thesis, 2024).

⁴⁵ See, for instance, Roland Larsson, "The Place of LGBTQ+ People in the Municipal Library Plans," *DIVA* (Bachelor Thesis, 2022); Heidi Tikas, "the Wolf Is Kind Here" : An Interview Study of Four Public Librarians' Views on Norm Criticism in Relation to Book Selection for Story Times," *DIVA* (Bachelor Thesis, 2021).

lacks attention in academic discussions.⁴⁶ The term “norm-critical pedagogy” was developed in Sweden through the works of pedagogues and queer theorists, themselves heavily drawing from anti-oppressive and queer theories. Kevin Kumashiro’s theory of anti-oppressive pedagogy is frequently praised for laying the groundwork for norm-critical education pedagogy.⁴⁷ This theory focuses on stimulating students’ norm-critical thinking, enabling them to recognize how they are themselves subjected to various oppressions and disrupt the formal education system’s tendency to reproduce hegemonic norms.⁴⁸ Building on this, norm-critical pedagogy, as a branch of queer and critical pedagogy, seemingly opens pathways for exploring various intersections of norms. Yet, research indicates that these norms are not consistently examined and may be reinforced through the application of a norm-critical approach. For instance, Eva Reimers problematizes the effects of the normalizing and mainstreaming of norm-critical pedagogy, notably by relating to concepts of Femonationalism and Homonationalism in her research.⁴⁹ Hence, examining drag through this lens would be beneficial to address how Swedish norms, specifically of whiteness, race, and culture, are critically challenged or reproduced in my drag collectives’ pedagogies.

Taken together, the literature provides valuable insights into drag as a form ranging from entertainment and gender subversion to cultural labor and pedagogical practice. However, these strands are rarely brought into conversation with one another, particularly within the Swedish context, where drag is increasingly institutionalized through cultural funding and public programming. In this thesis, I conceptualize drag not as inherently subversive or assimilated, but as a dynamic and situated practice, at once aesthetic, pedagogical, and political. My working definition of drag encompasses a range of queer performative moves that mobilize play, exaggeration, and embodied transformation to provoke and educate. While foundational scholarship often emphasized drag’s capacity to trouble gender, I expand this framework by foregrounding how race, class, (dis)ability, and national belonging shape who can perform, be recognized, and teach through drag. My study notably addresses the gap in existing research by asking how Swedish drag collectives negotiate legitimacy and navigate public cultural spaces, and how these negotiations give rise to pedagogical practices that imagine alternative queer futures.

⁴⁶ Lotta Björkman, Janne Bromseth, and Helena Hill, “Normkritisk Pedagogik – Framväxten Och Utvecklingen Av Ett Nytt Begrepp I Den Svenska Utbildningskontexten,” *Nordisk Tidsskrift för Pedagogikk Og Kritik* 7, no. 0 (2021): 179-195, <https://doi.org/10.23865/ntpk.v7.2314>.

⁴⁷ Kevin K Kumashiro, *Troubling Education: Queer Activism and Antioppressive Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁴⁸ Eva Reimers, “Norm-Critical Pedagogy as Femo- and Homonationalism,” in *Queer Studies and Education*, ed. Nelson M. Rodriguez et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 296–310, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197687000.003.0016>, 297.

⁴⁹ Reimers, “Norm-Critical Pedagogy as Femo- and Homonationalism.”

Theoretical Framework:

This theoretical framework brings together queer pedagogical theory, intersectional drag studies, and critical perspectives on national identity. Central to this is the concept of drag pedagogy, which frames drag as an informal, affective, and unruly mode of education. I extend this concept beyond early childhood contexts to explore how pedagogy functions in Swedish drag performances across varied audiences and spaces. In doing so, I privilege theory “from below,” drawing on the work of drag artists and activists as central to queer knowledge production. I also center Swedish queer scholarship and the concept of Swedishness to understand how national belonging, race, and normative cultural values shape the recognition and pedagogical possibilities of drag. The following sections elaborate on these theoretical tools and their relevance to my analysis.

Drag Pedagogy

Drag pedagogy has emerged as a productive concept for thinking through the educational dimensions of drag performance. Developed by Harper Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess through their involvement in Drag Story Hour (DSH) in the United States, this framework positions drag as an affective and generative pedagogical practice that challenges conventional educational norms by emphasizing the value of queer learning.⁵⁰ Keenan and Hot Mess do not try to frame drag artists as formal educators, instead they emphasize the queer pedagogical practices already embedded in drag performance by proposing five pillars of “drag pedagogy”: play as praxis, aesthetic transformation, strategic defiance, queer ways of knowing, and embodied kinship. Each of these core principles challenges conventional assumptions about how, where, and by whom learning occurs, which I will return to in my analysis. In short, their argument is that drag can teach us how to “live queerly.”⁵¹

While their framework offers a compelling entry point into understanding drag as pedagogy, its focus remains primarily on drag queens, early childhood education, and story time programs in the U.S. My study builds on this work by extending the concept to a different context: Swedish drag collectives performing for a range of audiences, such as children, youth, and adults, in spaces that include schools, Pride festivals, underground clubs, and community centers. In this setting, drag pedagogy is not limited to one specific format or audience, but manifests in multiple ways. Therefore, instead of applying the singular framework of “drag

⁵⁰ Keenan and Hot Mess, “Drag Pedagogy,” 440-441.

⁵¹ Keenan and Hot Mess, “Drag Pedagogy,” 448-455.

pedagogy,” I use the term “drag pedagogies” in the plural throughout this thesis to highlight the diverse ways my participants define and enact their pedagogical practices.

Although Keenan and Hot Mess focus on drag’s potential to challenge gender norms, as previously noted, they also acknowledge that gender intersects with broader structures of power, such as racial capitalism, colonialism, and ableism.⁵² Drawing on critiques from queer of color and trans/disability studies, they gesture toward an intersectional understanding of drag pedagogy, although I find that this remains underdeveloped within their framework. Still, building on these insights, I take up drag pedagogy as a practice shaped not only by gender norms, but also by race, class, (dis)ability, and national belonging, factors that I found deeply influence who is able to perform, be recognized, and teach through drag. While I take drag pedagogy as a starting point, I expand it through intersectional and context-specific lenses that attend to national, racial, and cultural logics of recognition. This includes building on Khubchandani’s concept of decolonial drag and engaging with the construct of “Swedishness,” both of which I will develop further in the following sections. I also approach drag pedagogy not only as a conceptual tool, but as a methodological orientation, one that informs my queer and decolonial approach to knowledge-making in this thesis, as I elaborate in the methodology section. Drag pedagogy thus provides a foundation for examining how knowledge is produced, shared, and embodied in drag performance. At the same time, it opens up questions around legitimacy and audience expectations: what types of pedagogical practices are recognized as valuable or “appropriate,” and by whom? These questions become especially pertinent in the Swedish context, where discourses of neutrality, diversity, and inclusion intersect with state-funded cultural initiatives.

Norm-critical pedagogy

The concept of “norm-critical pedagogy” provides a context-specific framework that has shaped how educational institutions in Sweden articulate inclusion and diversity. Developed within feminist and queer educational theory, norm-critical pedagogy shifts the focus from marginalized identities to the norms and structures that produce exclusion.⁵³ Instead of teaching about “the other,” it encourages learners to interrogate dominant assumptions (i.e., about gender, sexuality, race, ability, and nationality) and to reflect on their own participation in systems of privilege.

⁵² Keenan and Hot Mess, “Drag Pedagogy,” 445-446.

⁵³ Björkman, Bromseth, and Hill, “Normkritisk Pedagogik”; Reimers, “Norm-Critical Pedagogy as Femo- and Homonationalism.”

Although my initial approach to this research was shaped by Anglo-American queer pedagogies, norm-critical pedagogy emerged during fieldwork as a central framework through which institutions and pedagogues from the public education sector articulated and assessed the pedagogical value of drag. Initially introduced in scholarship as a radical pedagogical intervention, norm-critical pedagogy has since been institutionalized within Swedish public policy, teacher education, and state-funded diversity initiatives. As several scholars have pointed out, this institutionalization has led to both increased visibility and a certain neutralization of its critical potential.⁵⁴ In practice, norm critique is often framed as a tool for promoting tolerance and inclusion, aligning it with Sweden's national self-image as a progressive, *exceptional* society. As Reimers has argued, this institutional alignment can also reproduce nationalist logics, echoing critiques of homonationalism and femonationalism that are increasingly relevant within Nordic queer studies.⁵⁵

This alignment raises essential questions about how critical initiatives are absorbed back into dominant frameworks, what is lost when norm critique becomes an institutional requirement instead of a political stance, and what could potentially be recuperated through the teaching and learning of drag. Indeed, these tensions are particularly relevant for understanding how drag collectives in Sweden engage with pedagogy. Many performers work within or alongside institutions (i.e., schools, cultural centers, museums) that adopt norm-critical rhetoric while simultaneously upholding expectations of legibility, professionalism, and appropriateness. Drag collectives are often invited to promote LGBTQI+ “diversity” or “inclusion,” yet the same institutions may implicitly regulate what kinds of drag are considered suitable for public audiences (e.g., only inviting specific drag collectives viewed as moderate). Consequently, norm-critical pedagogy serves as both a resource and a constraint. Theoretically, it offers a means to express the pedagogical value of drag, yet it may also dilute its subversive and affective dimensions into more politically acceptable forms of cultural engagement. While the existing literature often focuses on teachers and classroom-based applications of norm-critical pedagogy, my research expands this scope by attending to how cultural workers, including drag artists and school staff, negotiate and reinterpret norm critique within broader public contexts.

In this thesis, I use norm-critical pedagogy not as a fixed model, but as a critical tool to analyze how drag collectives navigate the paradoxes of institutional recognition. This includes examining how performers may reflect on their roles as *queer* teachers, how they may adapt their

⁵⁴ Björkman, Bromseth, and Hill, “Normkritisk Pedagogik,” 185-187.

⁵⁵ Reimers, “Norm-Critical Pedagogy as Femo- and Homonationalism,” 306-307.

aesthetics and messages in relation to audience expectations, and how they may respond to being instrumentalized within state discourses of diversity. Placing norm-critical pedagogy in dialogue with drag pedagogy allows me to explore how drag performers engage, resist, or reconfigure educational norms in ways that are contextually specific and politically meaningful.

Swedishness

The concept of ‘Swedishness’ offers a way to consider how national identity and cultural values shape the conditions under which drag becomes visible and legitimate. Swedishness is often associated with values such as gender equality, tolerance, and social democracy, positioning Sweden as a moral leader in global narratives of modernity and human rights.⁵⁶ However, these values are frequently racialized and classed, and rest on implicit distinctions between those imagined to naturally belong and those who are welcomed into the national project as “others” who should be assimilated or invisible.⁵⁷

This concept is tied to Sweden’s heritage of “*folkhemmet*” and the image of the welfare state as a benevolent provider that grants rights to women and LGBTQ+ citizens, but often in ways that reinforce national pride through homonationalist and femonationalist discourse.⁵⁸ Indeed, as some scholars have pointed out, such narratives of progress often reproduce cultural hierarchies between “liberal” Sweden and racialized or “illiberal” others, both within and beyond its borders.⁵⁹ In this framing, queerness can be conditionally accepted when it aligns with respectability and neutrality, qualities that are themselves defined through whiteness and Swedish secular norms.⁶⁰ I found that these dynamics are deeply embedded in the production of cultural legitimacy. I will show how this has significant implications for drag performers, particularly when engaging with public institutions, since the latter have the power to regulate which forms of drag are deemed acceptable through their (lack of) granting of funding, often privileging

⁵⁶ Katharina Kehl, “The Right Kind of Queer: Race, Sexuality, and Gender in Contemporary Constructions of Swedishness,” *Ubg.u.se* (Doctoral Thesis, 2020), [https://doi.org/978-91-8009-098-8%20\(PRINT\)](https://doi.org/978-91-8009-098-8%20(PRINT)).

⁵⁷ Julia Lagerman, “Homonationalism on the Defensive: News Media Responses to Nationalist Anti-LGBTQ Attacks in Sweden,” *Antipode* 0, no. 0 (October 9, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12987>; Katharina Kehl, “Did Queer Muslims Even Exist?” – Racialised Grids of Intelligibility in Swedish LGBTQ Contexts,” *Social Identities* 26, no. 2 (October 1, 2019): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2019.1671183>.

⁵⁸ Reimers, “Norm-Critical Pedagogy as Femo- and Homonationalism.”

⁵⁹ Maria Carbin, Eric Carlsson, and Bo Nilsson, “Telling Feminist Stories in an Affective Atmosphere of Anti-Genderism: Swedish Gender Scholars Reflect upon Their Position,” *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 32, no. 4 (October 16, 2024): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2024.2413987>; Katharina Kehl, “In Sweden, Girls Are Allowed to Kiss Girls, and Boys Are Allowed to Kiss Boys: Pride Järva and the Inclusion of the ‘LGBT Other’ in Swedish Nationalist Discourses,” *Sexualities* 21, no. 4 (February 8, 2018): 674–91, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460717748621>.

⁶⁰ Habel, “Challenging Swedish Exceptionalism?” 100–107.

performances that align with sanitized versions of queerness and uphold a national image of progress and inclusion.

Swedishness also plays a central role in shaping perceptions of race, precisely through its disavowal. Indeed, Sweden's ongoing discourse of colorblindness and its reluctance to engage with race as a structural category serve to maintain whiteness as the invisible norm.⁶¹ This strategic ignorance affects public policy, education, and artistic and cultural life. In my fieldwork, I observed that both drag artists and their audiences were overwhelmingly white, yet race was rarely named explicitly in discussions of pedagogy or inclusion. Thus, I treat Swedishness as a set of national cultural norms that condition who can be seen, supported, and celebrated through drag. I will analyze how the research participants, whether intentionally or unintentionally, navigate these norms in their performances and pedagogical narratives. Some conform to dominant expectations to gain institutional access or funding, while others either subtly or overtly contest them. To analyze these negotiations as political acts and to highlight the uneven stakes of recognition, I turn next to the concept of decolonial drag.

Decolonial Drag

Next, I draw on Kareem Khubchandani's concept of "decolonial drag".⁶² Departing from the idea that drag is inherently subversive in the USA, Khubchandani, aided by his drag alter ego LaWhore Vagistan, positions decolonial drag as a performance strategy that resists colonial, racial, and heteronormative scripts while creating alternative queer worlds. The author(s) articulates that such a decolonial approach to drag involves four interrelated interventions.⁶³ First, it critiques the neoliberal logic of "hyper-professionalization" within mainstream drag culture, which often privileges polished aesthetics and advanced choreography as the only valid forms of drag for profit-making.⁶⁴ Second, it identifies the gender binary as a colonial tool used to discipline and marginalize gender nonconforming embodiments and identities.⁶⁵ Third, it insists on the interplay of multiple identity categories such as race, class, ethnicity, and religion, within

⁶¹ Minoo Alinia et al., "Coloniality, Whiteness and Systemic Racism in Sweden," in *Decolonial Sweden* (London: Routledge, 2024), 195–214, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003396611-12>.

⁶² Khubchandani, *Decolonize Drag*.

⁶³ Inspired by the theoretical framework of my peer Anugya Kunwar in their thesis "(De)colonial Drag: Gendered Analysis of the Drag Scene in Kathmandu (2001–2024)," I uphold that Khubchandani's (2023) decolonial approach to drag can be seen as building on four key aspects. See Anugya Kunwar, "(De)colonial Drag: Gendered Analysis of the Drag Scene in Kathmandu (2001–2024)" (master's thesis, Central European University, 2024).

⁶⁴ Khubchandani, *Decolonize Drag*, 14.

⁶⁵ Khubchandani, *Decolonize Drag*, 22–35.

drag performance, rejecting the idea that gender alone is the primary site of transformation.⁶⁶

Fourth, decolonial drag demands a broader conceptualization of drag itself, one that makes space for sidelined or non-normative practices that may not be legible within dominant understandings of what drag is or should be.⁶⁷

Khubchandani's intervention is especially valuable for my project because it reframes drag not only as gender play but also as a site where performers engage with the material and symbolic legacies of coloniality and nationalism. "Decolonial drag" thus becomes a lens through which to read performances that do not fit easily into categories of "radical" or "normative," but that operate through refusal, adaptation, and queer joy. In the Swedish context, this is particularly significant, as I found that drag collectives frequently need to demonstrate their legitimacy to obtain resources, all while managing the potential risk of being tokenized or exploited by public institutions. This lens brings these tensions into focus and positions moments of disruption and discomfort as pedagogical in themselves. By attending to the disidentificatory gestures, cultural references, and political refusals present in performances and interviews, I explore how drag pedagogy serves as a site of critique and creative survival.

Taken together, drag pedagogy, norm-critical pedagogy, decolonial drag, and the concept of Swedishness provide a framework for analyzing how drag collectives in Sweden navigate and contest dominant norms of legitimacy and pedagogy. These lenses allow me to attend to the contradictions, strategies, and cultural negotiations embedded in drag performances, particularly as they respond to institutional expectations within the Swedish context.

⁶⁶ Khubchandani, *Decolonize Drag*, 40-42.

⁶⁷ Khubchandani, *Decolonize Drag*, 37-40.

3. Methodology

Introduction to the field(s): Expectations and preparations

When entering the field, I initially intended to focus on Drag Story Hour (DSH) and Bland Drakar och Dragqueens' (BD&DQ) events in Swedish public libraries as sites where drag pedagogy might channel queer joy, particularly in the face of rising illiberal political discourse. However, this plan shifted in generative and necessary ways once I began engaging with participants and the field itself. Guided by feminist commitments to situated knowledge and feminist and queer methodological ethics, I approached this project inductively and relationally. Indeed, I remained open to the directions suggested by drag artists themselves, many of whom emphasized that their social media work, their drag workshops, or their access to public funding and spaces were just as central, if not more so, to their pedagogical practice than performances alone.

As a result, this study evolved into an ethnography of how drag collectives in Sweden articulate legitimacy, labor, creativity, and pedagogy across various settings. I contend that this flexible methodology was crucial for honoring the complexity of drag artists' work and for generating knowledge that is accountable to, instead of extractive from, the communities I study. To prepare for my fieldwork, I conducted a preliminary mapping of Swedish drag collectives active between 2023 and 2024, primarily relying on social media and press coverage. I reached out to performers and collectives via email and Instagram, sharing an overview of the project and asking about their participation, as well as their permission to participate and observe their events, and conducting interviews whenever convenient for them. Ethical approval was secured from the CEU Ethical Committee, and I designed information sheets and consent forms in Swedish and English to ensure accessibility and transparency.

Data collection: Multi-sited ethnography

In the summer of 2024, I conducted a multi-sited ethnography in Sweden, focusing primarily on drag collectives engaged in (drag) pedagogy and, to a lesser extent, on public education actors working with norm-critical pedagogy.⁶⁸ Guided by a "multi-situated" ethnographic approach, I

⁶⁸ For other examples of multi-sited ethnographies in Sweden, see Cathrin Wasshede's analysis of (dis)belonging at radical and mainstream Pride events; Ida Linander, Johanna Lauri, and Marcus Lauri's study of LGBTQ activists' responses to neo-Nazi threats; and Anna Olovsson Lööv's research on rural Pride organizing. See Cathrin Wasshede, "Rainbow Flag and Belongings/Disbelongings: Öckerö Pride and Reclaim Pride in Gothenburg, Sweden 2019," in *Pluralistic Struggles in Gender, Sexuality and Coloniality: Challenging Swedish Exceptionalism*, ed. Erika Alm et al. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 147–75, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-47432-4_6; Ida Linander, Johanna Lauri, and Marcus Lauri, "Swedish LGBTQ Activists' Responses to Neo-Nazi Threats," *Lambda Nordica* 27, no. 3–4 (March 13, 2023): 51–75, <https://doi.org/10.34041/ln.v27.830>; Anna Olovsson Lööv, "Vi gör det på vårt sätt":

viewed the field as a dynamic and emergent space, co-constructed through the movements, relationships, and interactions that unfolded across physical and digital sites.⁶⁹ This challenges fixed notions of “the field” and instead emphasizes knowledge as context-dependent and relational.⁷⁰ Rooted in feminist epistemologies of “situated knowledge,” this approach enabled me to trace how drag pedagogies take shape through spatial, cultural, and institutional entanglements.⁷¹

I spent approximately two months in Sweden, from May 24 to July 15, 2024, except for one participant observation on February 25, 2025. The fieldwork was conducted primarily in the metropolitan areas of Göteborg and Stockholm, with a focus on two drag collectives: Bland Drakar och Dragqueens and CULT of drag. These collectives operated across diverse settings, from small rural libraries to private queer venues in urban centers and each site presented its own unique spatial and cultural dynamics, which significantly shaped the content, audience, and pedagogical tone of the performances.

I conducted eight semi-structured in-depth interviews with seven participants (including one follow-up interview), comprising four founders/members of the two drag collectives and three professional pedagogues from the public education sector.⁷² Interviews were conducted in both Swedish and English, depending on the participants’ preferences, and varied in length from 45 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants’ consent and subsequently transcribed.

Participant observation was a central component of my fieldwork. I immersed myself in the preparations, rehearsals, performances, and informal gatherings of the collectives. I alternated between being an active audience member, engaging in the participatory nature of the shows, and a researcher. I took extensive fieldnotes, which included descriptions of performance dynamics, audience reactions, spatial configurations, and off-stage conversations. These notes were written as quickly as possible after each event, based on jottings, to preserve detail and spontaneity.⁷³

Pride på *Bygd, av-urbanisering och de-centrering av hbtq-frågor,” *Tidskrift för Genusvetenskap* 41, no. 4 (2020): 89–112.

⁶⁹ Signe Bremer and Anna Olovsson Lööv, “Multi-Situerad Etnografi För En Sammantrasslad Värld [Multi-Situated Ethnography for an Entangled World],” in *Genusvetenskapliga Forskningsmetoder*, ed. Marta Kolankiewicz, Mia Liinason, and Maja Sager (Nordic Academic Press, 2024), 181–95, <https://doi.org/10.37852/oblu.260.c626>.

⁷⁰ George E. Marcus, *Ethnography through Thick and Thin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁷¹ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>.

⁷² For more details about the profiles of interviewees, see Appendix 1.

⁷³ Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, “In the Field: Participating, Observing, and Jotting Notes,” in *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 21–43.

Additionally, in response to participants' emphasis on their digital self-representation, I complemented the "in-person" fieldwork with a "netnographic" approach.⁷⁴ The founders and members of drag collectives clearly emphasized their use of official websites, Instagram, and YouTube as extensions of their labor and creativity in drag. I analyzed a curated selection of public posts, stories, and comment threads on their accounts, on top of their pages on their websites, during the same period.

Ethical concerns were ongoing and complex, particularly given the visibility of drag performers and the political sensitivity surrounding drag pedagogy in Sweden. I discussed with each participant what kind of anonymity they wanted, recognizing that some preferred to be credited, while others were indifferent. The members of the drag collectives chose to retain their real names, making this a condition for their participation. Although I initially proposed anonymity due to the politically sensitive nature of their work, they expressed that being named was crucial to their involvement, opting out of the study if anonymity were imposed. Meanwhile, the three participants from the education sector were anonymized, as I had pre-existing relationships with them. I was already familiar with Maria and Madeleine, which required careful preparation and reflection on the challenges of "negotiating the dual role of friend and researcher."⁷⁵ While the familiarity contributed to a more open and unfiltered dialogue, I also found it more difficult to critically engage with their responses at times, out of concern that doing so might jeopardize our relationship, highlighting both the benefits and limitations of interviewing within existing social networks.⁷⁶

Written and verbal consent was obtained at multiple stages, and I remained attentive to how consent is negotiated relationally over time, not only at the outset of the research. This was particularly important given that many participants are already under increased scrutiny from hostile actors. One example of this complexity emerged at the end of my fieldwork. Petter Wallenberg, founder of BD&DQ, threatened to withdraw the collective's participation if I also engaged with DSH, stressing his frustration over the media frequently conflating the two groups. To my understanding, this conflation was damaging BD&DQ's reputation, given DSH's negative press. Fortunately, I had already decided not to pursue collaboration with DSH, which allowed

⁷⁴ Thaysa Nascimento, Maribel Carvalho Suarez, and Roberta Dias Campos, "An Integrative Review on Online Ethnography Methods: Differentiating Theoretical Bases, Potentialities and Limitations," *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal* 25, no. 4 (2022): 492–510, <https://doi.org/10.1108/QMR-07-2021-0086>.

⁷⁵ Helen Owton and Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson, "Close but Not Too Close: Friendship as Method(ology) in Ethnographic Research Encounters," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 43, no. 3 (2014): 301.

⁷⁶ Yanyue Yuan, "Turning Friends into Research Participants: Rationale, Possibilities and Challenges," *Cambridge Open-Review Educational Research E-Journal*, September 1, 2014, 94, <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.40965>. Yuan discusses the issue and potential challenges of 'casualness' when interviewing friends.

me to reassure Petter of my commitment to BD&DQ's concerns. Nevertheless, this incident made me more aware of the power dynamics at play and the stakes involved in participating in research under politicized and precarious conditions.

So, respecting participants' time, boundaries, and emotional labor was a central concern throughout the project. For instance, I did not push when some drag artists declined to be interviewed. Another conflicting example involves my outreach to Sam Message, co-founder of CULT, regarding potential interviews with members of their collective. Sam offered to circulate an invitation internally but requested that I refrain from contacting members directly, and after two follow-ups, Sam informed me that no one had expressed interest. While we briefly discussed the possibility of a survey instead, I ultimately decided against it, as the format felt inadequate for the depth and nuance I sought through interviews.

Data Analysis: Thematic and Narrative Approaches

The analysis of the empirical material in this thesis employed a combination of thematic and narrative analysis. I transcribed all interviews verbatim, using Microsoft Word's transcription tool, which I later manually revised for accuracy and corrected any errors. For interviews conducted in Swedish, I produced bilingual transcripts. These were translated into English with the assistance of DeepL, while I ensured that key terms and culturally specific expressions were preserved in the original Swedish. To conduct a reflexive thematic analysis, I inductively coded the data by manually creating codes as I read and re-read the transcripts and field notes, gradually reflecting on patterns, tensions, and emotional tones.⁷⁷ Initial codes (e.g., "legitimacy concerns," "affective labor," "engagement with institutions," "play with aesthetics") were then grouped into broader themes through repeated clustering and re-evaluation.⁷⁸ Some themes were abandoned or merged in different forms as I moved between data types and analytical levels.

Alongside coding for themes, I paid close attention to the narrative structure and storytelling strategies used by participants. Analyzing how interviewees framed their work, politics, and identities was difficult yet crucial, as they often drew on layered stories combining humor, trauma, pedagogy, and cultural critique. So, I considered not just what was said but *how*

⁷⁷ Johnny Saldaña, "An Introduction to Codes and Coding," in *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2009), 1–31.

⁷⁸ Dr. Kriukow, "Qualitative Coding and Thematic Analysis in Microsoft Word," July 21, 2020, 27:57 min., YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOYhkUC21wQ&t=427s>.

and *why* stories were told in particular ways.⁷⁹ This focus on narrative also shaped how I engaged with the performances themselves and digital content. I approached on-stage drag as a form of embodied storytelling, paying attention to its aesthetics and audience interactions, and viewed social media posts as narrative tools in their own right, given their visual cues, tone, and interaction with followers.

Furthermore, I approached interviews, fieldnotes, and online content relationally. For instance, a theme such as “professionalization of drag” was evident across various contexts: in the tension revealed during interviews about recognition and funding, in observations of artists preparing for events, and in online posts where performers celebrated or defended their work. So, triangulating across formats enabled me to identify shifts in meaning depending on audience, platform, or context. During the analytical process, I moved between empirically grounded codes and broader theoretical concepts, such as “Swedishness” or “drag pedagogy.” This approach allowed insights to emerge organically while keeping a critical engagement with the conceptual debates that initially motivated the study.

Also, given the politically charged nature of drag in Sweden, particularly in light of right-wing hostility toward story time events, I was especially mindful of how I represented my participants. I offered the opportunity to anonymize or reframe sensitive materials and remained transparent about my analytic goals. Participants actively influenced the direction of the research, such as by emphasizing the educational function of their social media, which led me to incorporate netnographic analysis.

Queer and decolonial orientations

Doing a “queer ethnography” in this context has meant resisting extractive research logics and privileging forms of knowledge that emerge through relationality and improvisation. This enabled me to genuinely engage with the ambivalent aspects of drag work, ranging from joy and resistance to burnout and conflict, without simplifying these to legible activist narratives or predetermined educational outcomes. In the Swedish context, queer ethnography also demands attention to how queerness itself is racialized, normalized, and wove into national imaginaries of exceptionalism. This leads me to a necessary reflection on the decolonial aspirations I bring to this work. While I draw from decolonial scholarship in my interpretive framework, I do not claim

⁷⁹ Tina Miller, “Doing Narrative Research? Thinking through the Narrative Process,” in *Feminist Narrative Research*, ed. Jo Woodiwiss, Kate Smith, and Kelly Lockwood (New York: Springer Publishing, 2017), 39–63, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-48568-7_3.

to have carried out a fully decolonial methodology. A key limitation of this research is that all my interview participants are white. Despite efforts to include racially diverse drag artists, my study ended up reflecting, and in some ways reproducing, the whiteness that dominates the public face of Swedish drag. This is not only a limitation of my fieldwork but a structural feature of the landscape I was studying. Still, I believe this deserves inclusion and critical attention. Whiteness is not the absence of race but a racialized position with normative power, especially in a national context where “Swedishness” and whiteness are often conflated.⁸⁰ A decolonial orientation has nonetheless shaped how I ask questions: How are drag pedagogies shaped by collaborations with the State and public cultural institutions? How do collectives negotiate the politics of inclusion, such as who gets represented, which audiences are centered, and what aesthetics are legitimated? These questions require an intersectional lens that considers race, class, and cultural capital, even in the absence of explicit racial diversity data.

Reflexivity and Positionality

In reflecting on my position in the field, I want to be transparent about the complexities of navigating between insider and outsider roles throughout my research. I view myself as a kind of ‘halfie’ in Sweden, a term that captures the tensions of being both connected and disconnected to this context.⁸¹ While I am part Swedish by birth and speak Swedish fluently, as it is one of my mother tongues, I have never lived in Sweden and was raised abroad. This meant I didn’t grow up with many of the cultural references that shaped the everyday language, humor, or shared histories of my participants. Farhana Sultana has written about the problematic distinction between ‘field’ and ‘home’ in fieldwork, arguing that returning to one’s homeland does not necessarily mean returning home.⁸² Her reflections resonated with me since, at first, I struggled with whether Sweden could be considered ‘home.’ Although I could move through conversations fluently, I often found myself thrown off by slang or assumed knowledge, but because I speak Swedish without an accent, participants were usually surprised when I asked for clarification. I had prepared by reading academic texts in Swedish and practicing vocabulary, but I still found myself destabilized by these moments of linguistic uncertainty.

⁸⁰ Habel, “Challenging Swedish Exceptionalism?,” 100-107.

⁸¹ Binaya Subedi, “Theorizing a ‘Halfie’ Researcher’s Identity in Transnational Fieldwork,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 19, no. 5 (September 2006): 573–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390600886353>.

⁸² Farhana Sultana, “Reflexivity, Positionality and Participatory Ethics: Negotiating Fieldwork Dilemmas in International Research,” *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 6 (2007): 374–385.

Still, there were advantages to being somewhat of an “insider-outsider”.⁸³ My unfamiliarity with certain norms or references meant that participants often explained things to me as if they were providing a sort of cultural primer of “this is how things are in Sweden”. These explanations became especially valuable for my narrative analysis, as they revealed how participants themselves framed their experiences and located their practices within broader social and political contexts. At the same time, conducting interviews and observations in Swedish and English allowed participants to speak in the language they felt most comfortable with, and I believe this contributed to a more open and textured exchange. It’s also important to note that all participants were highly educated, and many shared an academic background. This enabled a shared vocabulary and mutual investment in feminist, queer, and at times anti-racist critique. Several interviewees drew on their own experiences conducting research or being interviewed, which shaped the co-production of meaning in our conversations.

While my queer activism offered some shared cultural and affective ground with some drag artists, I remained acutely aware of how my whiteness, non-drag identity, and insider-outsider status at times shaped how I was perceived, what I could access, and how I interpreted what I saw and heard in the field. For instance, my positionality as a non-drag artist meant I got to continually learn from participants’ ways of framing and engaging with drag. I was at times corrected or gently redirected in my assumptions, which I took as a crucial part of the pedagogical encounter embedded in the ethnographic process. A similar dynamic emerged during interviews with education sector professionals, as I lacked direct experience with Swedish schools. Participants frequently explained institutional structures and practices to me, assuming I had no prior knowledge. Although these moments could be awkward, they offered chances for reflection and connection, allowing participants to actively craft the narrative and frame their experiences to make a particular truth legible.

Finally, participating in the field as a researcher often meant holding conflicting affective responses, such as joy, discomfort, admiration, and exhaustion, which I documented in a reflexive journal throughout my fieldwork. When I felt moved or unsettled, it often revealed something about the stakes of drag pedagogies, such as their capacity to generate queer belonging or unsettle norms. In writing this thesis, I carry those moments with me, not so much as data, but as reminders of what was at stake for participants, for the queer communities, and for me, a

⁸³ Sultana, “Reflexivity, Positionality and Participatory Ethics,” 378.

researcher navigating a layered position between familiarity and difference in a time of heightened cultural and political tension.

4. Performing Legitimacy: Drag as Work, Art, and Pedagogy

What does performing drag in present-day Sweden entail, particularly when framed as labor, art, and pedagogy? In this chapter, I explore how drag collectives navigate the complex terrain of legitimacy as their work gains visibility within public institutions. As I will suggest, this visibility invites artists to articulate drag in ways that resonate with audiences, funders, and gatekeepers, yet these articulations are rarely straightforward. Instead, drag is often positioned as cultural labor, artistic expression, and informal education, with these roles becoming deeply intertwined depending on the context. Framing drag as legitimate may thus require artists to present it as simultaneously creative (art), purposeful (labor), and socially valuable (pedagogy). By analyzing the strategies employed by BD&DQ and CULT of drag, I consider how each collective defines its practice, claims value, and responds to shifting expectations. These negotiations, I propose, shape how drag artists teach, perform, and persist, while also revealing what becomes possible and what may be constrained when drag is made to appear comprehensible.

What's in a name?: Drag, queer performance art and drag-show theater

In this sub-chapter, I inquire into how “drag” is understood by collectives across the Swedish drag scene. These collectives perform in different localities and for varying audiences, each shaped by distinct aesthetic choices and institutional demands. Unsurprisingly, their relationships to the term “drag” are ambivalent. As with many queer practices, drag resists fixed definitions and yet it *must* often be defined. BD&DQ describe themselves as a theater group working with “drag-show” as an artistic medium, while CULT shifts between “drag” and “queer performance art” depending on context. I approach these naming choices not as inconsistencies but as moves shaped by audience, legitimacy, and the shifting demands of cultural work.

“Drag-show theater”: BD&DQ’s drag

The name of the collective BD&DQ includes the term “dragqueen,” yet the collective distances itself from “mainstream” conceptions of drag. Yet, I found that this is not always coherent in their narratives. The first way it does so is by defining its drag as “drag-show theater”:

I would say that drag-show theater for us is that we use drag to portray... um... like literature and theatrical narratives in a way that is a mix between children’s theater, clowning, literary experiences, live literature, and sensory theater and drag. (Petter Wallenberg, founder of BD&DQ)

The particularity of “drag-show theater” was insisted upon in my interviews with Petter Wallenberg and Jan Ericson (Inga Tvivel) and is also omnipresent in their recent social media content. For example, in their new YouTube series “BD&DQ Dragshow School,” the starring drag artists Björta and Inga Tvivel promise to teach viewers how “drag-show” works through five lessons released weekly from the beginning of March 2025.⁸⁴ In the first episode, Björta (B) and Inga Tvivel (IT) explain:

IT: Dragshow is theater where one plays with costumes-

B: Hair, makeup-

IT: Hats-

B: Glitter, color, form, and imagination. The only limit is your imagination.

IT: You can dress in boy clothing or girl clothing-

B: Or, like me, something in between.

IT: You can call yourself “dragking” or “dragqueen”

B: Or as me, “dragshow artist.”

IT: The important thing is to have fun and try things out for yourself!

While the format echoes typical drag performance elements (i.e., costumes, makeup, gender play), the framing of these videos as instructional, child-oriented lessons marks an important shift. From the outset, BD&DQ position their drag as not only performative but pedagogical, even as they package it as “just theater.” Under each video, the same standardized description explains that BD&DQ “shows you everything that belongs to the art form of drag shows during these lessons. You will learn tricks about everything from makeup and costumes to artist names and choreography. You can create your show through fun exercises!” This emphasis on what *belongs* to their drag form suggests clear boundaries, and by extension, exclusions. These boundaries take on added significance in light of the sustained harassment BD&DQ has faced, much of it driven by public confusion between them and Drag Story Hour (DSH). While DSH has been at the center of far-right defamation campaigns, targeted for what critics (i.e., Sweden Democrats) claim are inappropriate aesthetics, methods, or drag names, BD&DQ seeks to distance itself entirely from these associations. During my fieldwork, Petter emailed me to express concern over my prior public defense of DSH and clarified that BD&DQ would withdraw from my study if I also collaborated with DSH.⁸⁵ He emphasized that their collective

⁸⁴ “Episode 1,” *YouTube*, aired March 2024, accessed March 17, 2025, <https://youtu.be/D1anOPSuF0M?si=8yI5VH9WCkkwPOfu>.

⁸⁵ See my blogpost for a defense of DSH against SD’s genderphobia: Clémentine Puntí, “Sweden Democrats Reveal Their Genderphobia,” *The Loop*, April 22, 2024, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/sweden-democrats-reveal-their-genderphobia/>.

uses different methods, original Swedish literature, and a self-described “Swedish pedagogy” distinct from both the U.S.-based DSH and the Malmö-based duo performing under that label. His message, sent shortly after he had publicly claimed to have reported over a hundred accounts for online harassment, underscores how central this distancing is to their survival strategy. This rejection of DSH, framed as a drag practice less professionally adapted to children and more entangled in “sexualized” aesthetics, also shapes their broader refusal of “club drag,” to which I now turn:

I would say that we don’t work with club drag or the kind of drag that...what to say... RuPaul’s drag race and pop culture drag is more...*club* drag, I would say, while our drag is maybe a little more...It’s these ingredients that we have that are very much about the audience’s perspective, where we work very target group-adapted and audience-adapted, with these ingredients that are like clowning, interactive theatre, and live literature. So, I would say those ingredients in drag that make ours into a theatre form.

Petter’s words suggest that *other* forms of drag are less adapted to specific audiences. He later criticized how DSH performers in the US, and their Swedish branch in Malmö, engage in drag “for themselves,” driven by activist intent, whereas BD&DQ claim to center the target audience’s needs first. This rhetorical move, which cautiously positions their approach as more altruistic and pedagogic, also aligns with ideals of Swedishness, which I return to in the final section. When I asked Jan Ericson about this, he noted: “Since we work with dragshow as an art form, we are part of the drag show culture, whether we like it or not. So, that’s how you become part of that, regardless of whether you *want* to have a lot of interaction with...others.”

This suggests that being part of the Swedish drag culture is rather a constraint for BD&DQ within the highly competitive and politically ambivalent context. As Mark McCormack and Liam Wignall emphasize in their study of British drag, while the mainstreaming of drag is often celebrated for increasing visibility and offering social and economic opportunities to performers, it has not benefited all artists equally.⁸⁶ Instead, access to media attention and financial stability often depends on conforming to dominant aesthetic and cultural norms, which can intensify competition and marginalize those whose practices fall outside of these expectations.⁸⁷ This dynamic echoes Khubchandani’s argument that the neoliberal mainstreaming of drag privileges polished, legible performances while sidelining practices that are less assimilable

⁸⁶ Mark McCormack and Liam Wignall, “Drag Performers’ Perspectives on the Mainstreaming of British Drag: Towards a Sociology of Contemporary Drag,” *Sociology* 56, no. 1 (May 6, 2021): 003803852110083, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385211008387>.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

or more explicitly political.⁸⁸ I had expected to hear more about solidarity between collectives facing similar threats, but fear of being misunderstood or misrepresented seems to prevent deeper collaboration. While solidarity is not a given, competition among drag artists serves critics more than performers.

One contradiction around the mainstreaming of drag surfaced during my interview with Jan Ericson (Inga Tvivel). While we were discussing the role of the audience's feelings in a drag performance, I somewhat clumsily asked: "Would you say that for children, is it important to feel – I don't know if that's the best word, but 'safe' in an environment – to be able to express all their feelings, and all the reactions they have?" I then shared that I had sensed the public's excitement and anticipation before the show "Little Me and the Dragons' Queen," and mentioned overhearing how some children, just before Inga Tvivel's entrance, were wondering aloud what the drag queen would "look like." Rather than affirming or expanding on this, Jan Ericson seemed momentarily thrown off by my anecdote:

Ummm...Yes...What can I say...No, because today, drag shows are quite "mainstream." It is a generally accepted concept. People—kids kind of know what drag shows are if they just turn on TV, TikTok, or whatever...And they have a completely different approach to it than when we started 7 years ago, 15 years ago, or 30 years ago! It has changed all the time...In the last few years, it has become very trendy...And this reflects upon the audience, of course. Then there are certainly those who, when they come today, have a great idea of what will happen, and then there are those who have no idea! And what *we* can do is, as I said, to work on *our* brand and try to get our image out there as we want it to be understood...that this is *children's theater*.

I read this moment as an effort to reassure me, or perhaps himself, that BD&DQ's performances are safe, precisely because drag is now seen as "mainstream." Yet I also recognize that my own use of the word "safe" may have unintentionally echoed the very discourses that have been mobilized against drag in Sweden. It is possible that Jan Ericson misread my question as a concern aligned with the moral panic surrounding drag's place in public education, rather than as a prompt about emotional atmosphere and audience engagement. His emphasis on branding BD&DQ as "children's theater" may thus reflect not only a desire to protect the integrity of their pedagogical work but also a strategic response to an environment of heightened scrutiny. In this context, defining their drag becomes a careful negotiation, not only with children as their primary audience, but with institutional funders, media, and political critics. Here,

⁸⁸ Khubchandani, *Decolonize Drag*.

legibility involves not only being comprehensible but also ensuring understanding that safeguards access, funding, and so survival.

“Queer performance art”: CULT’s drag

For CULT, drag can also be defined in terms of its artistic nature. Like BD&DQ, they relate drag as an “art form” that must be individually defined. For instance, Sam Message (the Meat Baby) describes it as an “artistic medium” to achieve *something* through bodily transformation. Sam emphasized how “drag” is generally hard to define:

I think it’s— in some ways, it’s very much like identity, like you can’t really tell someone if it’s drag or not drag. They are deciding. But I think of it as very broad; it’s like- somehow physically transforming yourself into a character of sorts, or not necessarily a character, but into *something else*, with the goal of using this character to *say* something, *do* something, *be* something.

For the founders of CULT, the “something” should always point to the political. On their website, they stress that “CULT is always unapologetically political, outrageous and entertaining.”⁸⁹ They often reference the “queer community” and those still marginalized within it, which the founders Sam and Inga, along with the other CULT members are proudly part of. CULT becomes, in this context, a much-needed “drag family,” with the founders as the “drag parents,” which subscribes to the enduring practice of creating drag families⁹⁰. This echoes Petter’s earlier critique of activism-led drag as being too centered on LGBTQ+ struggles, but CULT does not attempt to conceal its activist commitments. In our interviews and their social media, Sam and Inga recurrently express that there is little done for the queer community in Sweden, pointing especially to the lack of funding for queer initiatives. They write on their website:

Drag is a powerful medium. It is electrifying, engaging and gets an audience screaming and shouting. Done right, it’s a loud and proud expression of queer and trans joy which reaches across the broad spectrum of the LGBTQ+ community. Drawing on drag’s long history of subversion and boundary crossing, we subscribe to the school of thought that drag should be funny and playful, outrageous and loud, but also fiercely political and deeply empowering.⁹¹

⁸⁹ “CULT,” *Status Queer*, accessed April 23, 2025, <https://statusqueer.com/local/cult/>.

⁹⁰ Davide Passa, “‘You All Are Sisters! We Are All Family!’ the Construction of Parenthood in ‘RuPaul’s Drag Race,’” *Linguaculture* 12, no. 2 (December 31, 2021): 127–44, <https://doi.org/10.47743/lincu-2021-2-0199>. This tradition is often attributed to the 20th century American drag ball culture. For example, Davide Passa argues that this practice subsists in mainstream drag in his analysis of Ru Paul’s Drag Race episodes which recurrently refer to the original N.Y. house and ball culture.

⁹¹ “CULT,” *Status Queer*, accessed April 23, 2025, <https://statusqueer.com/local/cult/>.

Similarly to BD&DQ's narrative of what "belongs" to drag, CULT also frames drag as something that can be "done right." This implies going beyond the *proper* and *acceptable* to tap into the *truly* queer, placing *LGBTQ+* perspectives at the center of their drag practice. The phrase "drag as a medium" is as compelling as it is strategic:

We have to be very careful, like Sam is very careful to not overuse the word "drag" in applications, because people already have an association with it that might not be favorable to us. So, talking about it as like "queer performance art" "using the medium of drag," changes the whole meaning of the profession. (Kolbrún Inga Söring, Sinfluencer)

CULT's founders demonstrate a clear awareness of operating in a cultural climate where drag is often seen as too queer or unserious to receive funding. This quote emerged during our discussion about drag's position within the fine arts field, which they described as deeply hierarchical. This distinction between what counts as "Art with a capital A" (Kolbrún Inga Söring) and other forms of "art" shapes how drag must be justified. Even within the drag circles, limitations persist that influence how CULT defines drag. Hence, one motivating factor for creating their own collective was the lack of diversity in Gothenburg's drag scene:

So, INITIATIONS, we basically started because we realized there wasn't a type of stage with the kind of drag that we wanted to do, that was non-normative, subversive, you know, different kinds of bodies that's not just like, you know, the showgirls with the human hair wigs doing the Gaga medley. No shame to the Gaga medley; I love it for the pictures, you know! *That's* drag. [laughs]. (Sam Message, the Meat Baby)

The irony behind "*that's* drag" is apparent here. While CULT's drag might be interpreted by some as "club drag," Sam and Inga still differentiate between styles within that category. In our interviews, they distinguished between what they called the "radical, underground, freaky" kind of drag that, often perceived as "low brow," and the more "polished" drag queens who "look like the RuPaul's Drag Race cast" and perform choreographed numbers in nightclubs. This second category, described as the mainstream "gay drag scene," is where CULT positions itself in contrast. This resembles Ramirez's distinction between "homonormative" and "alternative" drag within the global trend of drag mainstreaming.⁹² The difference, as Ramirez argues, is not only stylistic but deeply tied to legibility and socio-economic privilege, where those who conform more easily to mainstream drag aesthetics tend to benefit disproportionately from its visibility.

⁹² Ramirez, "Provincial Drag in the Philippine Tropics."

While I align with Ramirez’s caution around who gets to define “alternative” drag, I remain attentive to what this concept might mean in the Swedish context.

For CULT and BD&DQ, the boundaries between “homonormative” and “alternative” are not always clear or coherent, depending on the project and comparison point. Nonetheless, what CULT and BD&DQ share is the practice of defining drag through what it is *not*. While CULT emphasizes their uniqueness within the Gothenburg scene, their founders also foreground community over individualism. This was clear both in interviews and in their social media presence, where they repeatedly highlight the goal of building a “more inclusive society and a more intersectionality diverse, sustainable, and supportive LGBTQ+ community in Gothenburg.” When I asked Kolbrún Inga Söring if there was a broader sense of drag community in Sweden, they responded:

Yes! I think...there are communities for sure. [...] But we don't mix it so much with them. We have tried. I know that Sam has on multiple occasions invited them to come to our show for free. I think some of them have come, which is nice because we want to...we want to be a community with them.

It becomes evident that the “community” is split between different claims about what drag is and how it should be done. This connects to Khubchandani’s argument that the mainstreaming of drag, driven by neo-liberal principles of visibility and value associated with RPDR’s franchise, promotes individualism rather than communalism.⁹³ When I asked Sam to define CULT’s drag style, they did not mention any specific aesthetic. Instead, they spoke about the collective’s values, emphasizing how these nurture each member’s individual drag. They explained CULT grew out of their *free* “INITIATIONS” drag school, where Sam and Inga taught participants to develop their own drag personas with the option of joining the collective after “graduation.” Making the school *free* was central to reducing barriers to entry and supporting what Khubchandani describes as the “community-based work of drag”.⁹⁴ So, while each CULT member has a distinct aesthetic and approach, they all operate within the collective’s shared frame.

⁹³ Khubchandani, *Decolonize Drag*, 98.

⁹⁴ Khubchandani, *Decolonize Drag*, 97.

Drag as work and art: Maneuvering the ambivalences around the mainstreaming of Swedish drag

During discussions with the drag collective's founders and members, the tone fluctuated between lively and hesitant, with pedagogy rarely standing out as a straightforward method. Instead, it emerged indirectly, entangled with questions of cultural labor, artistic legitimacy, and institutional visibility. When I asked about their teaching practices, they spoke instead about funding applications, misunderstood performances, and more broadly, what it means to be seen as an artist in Sweden today. These responses illuminate the conditions under which drag becomes legible, or not, as art, work, or informal education, depending on the shifting expectations of funders, institutions, and audiences, and how such recognition can function as a gatekeeping mechanism. This sub-chapter follows these threads by asking: How is drag situated within the Swedish cultural field? What meanings are attached to “work,” “drag,” and “pedagogy”? Who has the authority to define these categories, and who risks exclusion? What factors render some collectives legible as cultural workers and pedagogues, while others remain marginal? In the following sections, I trace how BD&DQ and CULT negotiate these ambivalences of legitimacy and how their practices take shape within an unstable field of recognition.

The “hustle” of drag and “eldsjäl culture”: CULT's narrative

I do think that there is this reticence to fund specifically drag as a medium. I mean, I don't *know* that, but I have a feeling about that. When I write something for funding applications I often say like “queer performance art” as opposed to drag [...] because funders specifically won't fund what they define as “entertainment”. So, cabaret and nightlife. So it has to be – they normally say in applications, “artistic work of *hög kvalité*” [high quality]. So, then you're like trying to say things like “CULT is an internationally renowned, award winning, queer performance art collective”. Just trying to use their bullshit academia to justify what we're doing. (Sam Message, The Meat Baby)

Yeah, and it's this culture of being a celebrity with a capital C, or like doing art with a capital A, and then once you do anything underground or DIY, then all of a sudden it's like *lesser*. Or because payment is *lesser*. Or like there are so many reasons you know why it's difficult for us to get funding because they don't think that it's *Art*, or whatever. (Kolbrún Inga Söring, Sinfluencer)

These quotes open a window onto how CULT frames drag as both art and labor, shaped by institutional pressures, cultural hierarchies, and burnout. Indeed, across my interviews with Sam and Inga, recurring themes included the challenges of self-employment, mainly due to

inconsistent funding, and the emotional toll of sustaining queer cultural work. To be considered a legitimate artist “with a capital A,” one must look the part *and* learn to speak in institutional terms. This linguistic shift, from “drag” to “queer performance art” is not merely semantic, as it reflects a necessary strategy to render one’s work *legible* and *fundable*.

As Sara Ahmed writes in “The Language of Diversity,” working at the institutional margins requires persistence and a capacity to inhabit and adapt vocabularies that were not made for you.⁹⁵ CULT shows an acute awareness of this, crafting their performances around terms that resonate with funders:

I’m being strategic about designing projects that specifically fit the very strict criteria of these funds. So that’s a process. But you know, if it’s a show-by-show basis, it’s a *full* application that needs to be written. *And* it has to be reported *and* administered, *and* submitted. (Sam, the Meat Baby)

Hence, this process demands a lot of unpaid labor (i.e., writing, reporting, and managing applications). At the same time, cuts to public cultural funding have drastically reduced the availability of grants and heightened competition. Between our first and second interviews, Sam’s tone shifted: in our follow-up conversation, squeezed into their lunch break at their other job, they shared that a key long-term funder, ABF, had just withdrawn support.⁹⁶ This wasn’t due to a change in CULT’s programming, but to new restrictions banning support for events that resemble “entertainment.” CULT’s drag shows often end in queer after-parties, which had previously posed no problem. But now, with “the government breathing down their necks,” as Sam put it, ABF was no longer willing to take that risk. With its low-budget aesthetics and unruly politics, “DIY” drag no longer fits the updated definition of “artistic art of high quality.” Kolbrún Inga expressed similar frustration at who gets visibility and recognition:

I was also looking at the QX Gala kind of winners of the year. I don’t know if you were following this, and they rewarded that person, like “året’s HBTQI” [LGBTQI person of the year], and it’s one of the Drag Race girls that went on Drag Race the world, or something. And her only qualification is being on television. It outrages me! Because I know so many people who are working so hard for rights! Like *transhälsoplattformen* and all kinds of organizations that

⁹⁵ Sara Ahmed, “The Language of Diversity,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 2 (March 2007): 235–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870601143927>.

⁹⁶ The Arbetarnas bildningsförbund [Workers’ Educational Association] (ABF) is the educational section of the Swedish labor movement.

so deserve this title of “årets HBTQI”.⁹⁷ And they give it to some fucking random bitch that was on television?!?

The type of Swedish drag that is booked and celebrated is highly commercialized and aligns with mainstream aesthetic expectations. This reflects what Sam and Inga repeatedly referred to as Sweden’s “eldsjäl culture.” An eldsjäl, literally “fire soul”, is someone who volunteers time, labor, and energy, often without compensation.⁹⁸ In Gothenburg, they noted, queer projects rarely last long because they depend on a few individuals’ unpaid dedication and usually lack continuity. Being a “revolutionary at heart” can thus lead to burnout, something that Sam (the Meat Baby) relates to when telling me about the impact of “eldsjäl culture” on their work:

I don't know, like how much of the struggle that I'm going through for me, is to do with the funding cuts, and how much is the fact that I'm so jaded and overworked for years that I'm not keeping up in this difficult environment. You know, so I think it's a compounding factor. Of course, in a way, it's like that minority stress of anything that happens, you read into it this negative connotation. So there is definitely a personal bias. Well, it's created structurally, but it has that effect on my ability to be able to function within this very tight sector for sure.

Angela McRobbie’s work on creative labor helps contextualize this. As she argues, young artists often internalize the demand for entrepreneurialism, masking structural precarity with the language of professionalism.⁹⁹ CULT’s project-driven hustle illustrates this trend, where value is tied to artistic merit and the ability to perform cultural fluency. Only through this process can their drag pass as “Art of *high quality*”. In this sense, they become what McRobbie calls “creative entrepreneurs”: performers who survive through self-exploitation, even as they are worn down by the very system they’re attempting to navigate.¹⁰⁰ Sam and Inga, who both come from outside Sweden, still recognize this as a culturally specific problem. They point to the national ideal of *föreningsliv*, which refers to voluntary organizing through associations, as a double-edged sword. While often celebrated for its democratic ethos, *föreningsliv* relies on unpaid labor and lacks

⁹⁷ *Transhalsoplattformen*, accessed June 1, 2025, <https://transhalsoplattformen.se/>.

⁹⁸ Tiina Rosenberg, “Från Eldsjäl till Genusvetare [from Passionate Activist to Gender Researcher],” in *Genusvetenskap, Politik Och Samhällsengagemang: En Skriftserie Om Genusvetenskap*, ed. Anna Lundberg and Ann Werner, vol. 1 (Göteborg: Nationella sekretariatet för genusforskning, 2022), 44.

⁹⁹ McRobbie, *Be Creative*.

¹⁰⁰ McRobbie, *Be Creative*, 28-29. McRobbie talks particularly of young women and middle-class graduates, but I find that here her argument stands for young trans artists too.

sustainable handovers.¹⁰¹ In Kolbrún Inga Söring's experience of queer activism, this also means that people drop out of projects just as easily:

It is very outgoing driven. I mean everything in Sweden. I have a lot of...opinions on this [laughs]. I think föreningsliv is a little bit dangerous these days. [...] I think in a way, it's also why we have kept it quite...quite a lot to ourselves, this work, you know? Like it's just Sam I, and sometimes we have other people involved, but it's like not relying on the föreningsliv because it's just a big fucking disappointment in my experience.

Queer culture organizing at the local level then becomes a vicious cycle for artists and cultural organizers without a “well-paying job” on the side (Inga). Highly aware of the limitations of both “föreningslivet” and “eldsjäl culture,” terms they consistently used in Swedish even as we spoke in English, Sam and Inga expressed a desire to break this pattern by building more lasting forms of queer community through their projects. Yet, they struggle to trust members of their collective to share responsibilities due to past experiences and the “hierarchy of knowledge” (Inga) between the founders and other members. Hence, while they have succeeded in creating queer drag space from scratch, the cost has been high.¹⁰² CULT's founders are themselves burned out, and as they pause or abandon certain projects, they unintentionally reproduce the same unsustainable eldsjäl logic they critique. For instance, Sam Message pointed out that they are currently unable to fund a third edition of their drag school “INITIATIONS,” emphasizing that they have previously operated it without payment: “We tried to get funding for years, but no one wanted to give us any money because... that's how the cookie crumbles in Sweden; Gothenburg's a little bit conservative for what they think is not. So, we ran it off our own backs.”

Throughout its two editions, the drag school became a platform for building up, and passing on, CULT's approach to queer culture. It involved more than teaching makeup or stage presence, it was about cultivating practices of mutual support and creative defiance, a model I will return to in Chapter 6 when discussing queer pedagogic work. The quote above underscores how fragile such projects are, relying heavily on unpaid, unsustainable labor. In this context, the very possibility of pedagogy is precarious. Who can afford to teach and learn drag? Those with a “real” job on the side? What is being taught, and to whom, through this form of cultural labor?

¹⁰¹ Definition from: “Volunteering in Sweden: Föreningslivet,” *Sweden Herald*, accessed June 1, 2025, <https://swedenherald.com/article/volunteering-in-sweden-foereningslivet>.

¹⁰² On how queer and trans (of color) artists create spaces of belonging through grassroots cultural labor despite personal and structural costs, see Chin, “Sacrificial Entrepreneurship.”

As CULT themselves ask in one of their shows: “Who gets the honour of being called a professional?”¹⁰³

This aligns with Khubchandani’s framing of a “career in drag is a hustle,” highlighting it as a precarious and competitive type of cultural work shaped by systemic inequalities and institutional expectations.¹⁰⁴ In the Swedish context, this becomes particularly visible in how artists like Sam and Inga navigate the pressures of self-employment and unpaid activism. They insist that although their drag may at times feel “too queer” to institutions, they are not alone in this struggle, noting that all self-employed artists face similar pressures.

So it's really trying to balance, like how much is it worth putting in time and energy to make these applications, versus how much do I need to save my own skin and start applying for jobs. It's not really possible to balance those two things in a sustainable way. So that's been...yeah, that's been challenging. (Sam Message, the Meat Baby)

They want to keep doing it their way and are well aware of the cost. When I asked whether drag artists need side jobs to make ends meet, Sam Message emphasized that surviving solely on drag is possible, if one can secure institutional work that pays according to the artist union’s standards. Through their Status Queer organization, they aim to access such roles by performing in museums and cultural venues that value a more “academic” artist profile, the kind that might secure what Sam described as a “higher brow academic artist kind of salary.” Yet, as Kolbrún Inga Söring underlined, even if their drag takes different forms depending on the space, whether underground or institutional, it remains equally critical, and equally queer.

“The show must go on!”: BD&DQ’s narrative

On a Tuesday morning in late September 2024, at the Swedish Riksdag, politicians from all parties, along with civil society representatives, fumbled as the parliamentary session on freedom in public culture began.¹⁰⁵ All eyes lay on the drag artist Inga Tvivel, dressed in a ‘robe à la française’, an 18th-century cream-colored dress with a colorful floral pattern. Her red hair was combed in a matching high hairstyle, with long curls left hanging at the nape of the neck, and

¹⁰³ Status Queer, “CULT of Professionals”, 2025, <https://statusqueer.com/>.

¹⁰⁴ Khubchandani, *Decolonize Drag*, 99.

¹⁰⁵ This description is based on the YouTube video published by BD&DQ and on public coverage of the event in QX. The material forms part of the netnographic strand of this study, which includes BD&DQ’s online presence and public communications. See: Bland Drakar och Dragqueens, *Sagan om Hat och Hot – Sveriges Riksdag*, YouTube video, 8:52, posted September 24, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZezxeRj_Ik. Accessed April 11, 2025. See also, Ronny Larsson, “Läs och hör Inga Tvivel läsa Sagan om Hat och Hot,” QX, September 25, 2024, <https://www.qx.se/samhalle/sverige/276931/las-och-hor-inga-tvivel-lasa-sagan-om-hat-och-hot/>. Accessed April 11, 2025.

adorned with glancing pearls, pink flowers, and colorful ostrich feathers. From her bold red lips, she greeted the sea of concerned faces: “Today you are going to be part of something unique, for this will be the first story time in the Swedish Parliament!” Her serious tone clashed with her extravagant aesthetic. The message was clear: you can do both! And so, she started telling the “Tale of Hate and Threat,” written by Petter, to the crowd of solemn politicians, who replaced the usual audience of excited children.

Figure 1: BD&DQ’s “Sagan om Hat och Hot” / “The Tale of Hate and Threat.”
Translated by the author. Some lines have been adapted to preserve rhyme and rhythm.

Sagan om Hat och Hot	The Tale of Hate and Threat
Det var en gång två troll som hette Hat och Hot De bodde i en by med glitrande feer mitt emot Feerna läste sagor för både stora och små Detta tyckte Hat och Hot var så konstigt så Nånting är skumt sa Hat. Nånting är fel, sa Hot Dom är inte som vi, fast de bor mittemot. Trollen de skrämdes, de hota och lät Tills alla barnen blev rädda och grät Men då fick feerna nog och sa: nej! För om våra sagor ej passar dig Så finns det ju annat du kan göra Än att vår sagostund förstöra Alla i byn sa: feerna har rätt Att hata och hota är ett elakt sätt Trollen de fick sig en tankeställare De lärde sig nog att vara snällare Glädje och sagor, det ger oss hopp Men bara om vi kan sätta stopp För dumheter, bråk och dålig koll Från alla små arga och elaka troll Vad gör vi med <i>hat</i>, vad gör vi med <i>hot</i>? Vi <i>sätter ner klacken</i> och <i>står emot</i>!	Once upon a time, in a village quite bright, Two trolls named Hate and Threat came into sight. They lived across from a house full of spark Where glittering fairies would read until dark. The fairies told stories to young and to old, Which Hate and Threat found a little too bold. “Something is off,” said Hate with a sneer. “Something feels wrong,” said Threat full of fear. “They’re not like us, yet they live right there! Something about them just isn’t fair!” So the trolls got louder, they growled and they spat, Till the children all trembled and cried where they sat. But the fairies had had quite enough of their show. “If our stories don’t suit you,” they said, “you can go! There’s no need to threaten, to ruin, or shout You could simply just leave, or choose not to hang out.” The village then echoed: “The fairies speak true! To hate and to threaten is a cruel thing to do.” The trolls took a pause, a deep breath, a thought And maybe they learned to be just kind enough. For joy and for stories can fill us with cheer, But only if meanness is no longer near. So what do we do with <i>hate</i> and with <i>threat</i>? We <i>stomp our heel down</i> and <i>stand up to them</i>!

The use of trolls and fairies in “Sagan om Hat och Hot” draws from Nordic folklore, a cultural repertoire widely recognizable across generations in Sweden.¹⁰⁶ Such familiar figures, associated with national storytelling traditions, help position the fairytale as family-friendly and culturally resonant. This framing is significant, as it helps establish the drag performance as a valid pedagogical act. Furthermore, the message takes on greater symbolic significance when a drag artist narrates the tale in the Swedish Parliament. Beyond narrating a fairytale, Inga Tvivel and Petter actively engage with and subtly transform the symbolic language of “Swedishness.” Indeed, by drawing on cultural forms like fairy tales, they invoke state-supported traditions of public education and engagement. However, this alignment is not merely passive. Through infusing themes of hate and fear of exclusion into this familiar format, they subtly encourage their audience to consider who is granted belonging, who is perceived as a threat, and whose voices are acknowledged in public discussions. Thus, what may seem like ‘innocent’ folklore becomes a medium for political critique. Instead of rejecting prevailing norms, Inga Tvivel and Petter choose to operate within them. Muñoz’s concept of disidentification helps illuminate this move not as compliance, but as a strategy that works within and against dominant norms to craft alternative forms of survival, recognition, and joy.¹⁰⁷ Through these familiar formats they access institutional arenas that might otherwise marginalize queer pedagogies, particularly in political environments influenced by the Sweden Democrats. Still, their performance does not entirely escape the logic it seeks to challenge. The troll remains a symbol of danger, rather than being reimagined or reclaimed, though BD&DQ have explored such reclamation elsewhere, notably in their show “Dracula,” which I analyze in Chapter 6.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, although threatened, the fairy is encouraged to speak out, a narrative that resonates with dominant Swedish ideals of civility and social cohesion. This aligns with norms of acceptable educational discourse. Hence, these choices reveal a tension between critique and constraint within the expectations of institutional legitimacy. This highlights the limitations of mainstreaming drag through state engagements and the risks of institutionalizing queer pedagogies.

I want to use this affair further to understand BD&DQ’s drag shift to the political out of necessity, while maintaining their family-friendly style. After Inga Tvivel recited the tale, Petter

¹⁰⁶ Ann-Sofie Lönngren, “Trolls!! : Folklore, Literature and ‘Othering’ in the Nordic Countries,” in *Rethinking National Literatures and the Literary Canon in Scandinavia*, ed. Ann-Sofie Lönngren et al. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 205–30.

¹⁰⁷ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*.

¹⁰⁸ For broader discussion on how drag artists have reclaimed the monster figure to explore fluidity and non-normative identities, see Russ Martin, “Dragula and the Expansive Queerness of the Drag Supermonster,” ed. M.S. Schotanus, *Emerald Publishing Limited*, October 3, 2022, 103–20, <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80117-027-720221007>.

Wallenberg, wearing a loose black shirt, took over the attention by addressing the crowd about the hate his collective had endured in recent years. This was not his first time being invited by institutions to discuss the harassment and discrimination they face, but it is the first time in such a symbolic space as the national Riksdag. Petter sees BD&DQ's work as a layered cake when reflecting on this event. First and foremost, it should be appealing to children. Then there are deeper layers in the cake to inspire "positive social change". But, he adds, if the top layers of that cake are not good, then no one will eat it. The activist component lies at the bottom, only accessible after the audience has enjoyed the upper layers. Although Petter portrays himself as a passionate activist in his other projects, he and the drag artists of BD&DQ have long refrained from engaging with the political through drag. He emphasizes how they were "forced" into becoming a politically active collective due to the societal changes of the last seven years since they started:

For a long time, we said no to that! For a long time, we didn't want to do it! As an artist, you don't want to bring your art into a political arena because then we've already kind of told people what to think and feel. And that's the opposite of what free art should be. Free art is supposed to encourage free thought. But because we are also human beings, and LGBTQ people, and have been exposed to so much hatred and threats, where it is so linked to our art, and to Bland Drakar och Dragqueens, we have had to become politically active to fight against the hatred. And fight against the prejudices, ignorance, and hatred of adults, so we can continue spreading joy to children.

From this quote, I return to the role of education as a legitimizing label. Again, all three drag performers of BD&DQ are *professional* artists, comedians, and pedagogues, Petter Wallenberg himself being a professional illustrator and playwright, which is repeatedly mentioned on their website and social media. This insistence on professionalism suggests that their education in performance arts and teaching legitimizes their work not just as drag artists but as *drag pedagogues*. Their repeated assertion seems to be that we should not have to become political to protect our right to do what we're trained for. Still, as Petter points out, "as LGBT people our existence is politicized whether we like it or not".

For example, Jan Ericson (Inga Tvivel) is a busy high school Swedish teacher who publicly embraces both teacher and drag artist roles. In his narrative, I found that his teaching job informs and legitimizes his drag, which focuses on promoting "reading joy" through pedagogy. While he asserts teaching as a passion, the medium of drag seems almost incidental, as he insists "I could have been a clown, a sword swallower or a ballet dancer and incorporated reading into

it.”¹⁰⁹ This suggests a framing of drag as just another performance medium arguably downplaying its queer and subversive potential. This, too, may reflect both a survival strategy and a mainstreaming effort that helps drag more easily assimilate into Swedish culture.

Nonetheless, BD&DQ takes pride in saying they have never cancelled a show, and never will, no matter how intense this harassment gets. Petter frames this as a mark of professionalism: “We are ‘show business,’ we are used to solving problems. You can have a hell backstage, but the show must go on!” Though the cyberbullying Petter has endured has deeply affected his mental health, he continues to advocate for dialogue with their critics. He believes that hate often stems from fear and ignorance, which can be countered with information. In doing so, he positions himself and BD&DQ as defenders of democracy and the Swedish cultural model itself. In his words, this gives them the strength to “stamp our heel down and stand up to them!” To conclude, what stigmatizes them also legitimizes them within this framework. This performance highlights how drag collectives negotiate their legitimacy as pedagogues not by rejecting the norms of the cultural field, but by strategically engaging them.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored how Swedish drag artists negotiate legitimacy as cultural workers, navigating a landscape shaped by evolving standards of what qualifies as art, labor, and pedagogy. Through interviews and performances, I traced how drag is framed and practiced in relation to institutional visibility, cultural funding, and public scrutiny. These negotiations materially shape the possibilities and constraints of doing drag. My analysis shows that defining “real” drag, “quality” art, or legitimate pedagogy is a deeply situated process informed by language, audiences, and broader social anxieties. The collectives I collaborated with demonstrate distinct strategies: BD&DQ emphasizes institutional credibility, professional training, and pedagogical clarity to ensure access and survival in mainstream cultural venues. CULT, on the other hand, embraces drag’s political potential, articulating their practice as a form of queer resistance, even at the cost of greater precarity. However, these positions are not fixed as both groups continuously adapt their framings to navigate the risks and demands of visibility. Together, these cases reveal how legitimacy must be continually earned and defended, particularly when drag is made legible through institutional frameworks. This chapter has addressed the sub-question: How do drag collectives in Sweden strategically negotiate legitimacy as cultural workers? It indicates that

¹⁰⁹ Quote from Jan Ericson in “Inga Tvivel ger läsningen draghjälp,” *Vi Lärare*, accessed April 11, 2025, <https://www.vilarare.se/amneslararen-svenska-sprak/lektionstipset/inga-tvivel-ger-lasningen-drag-hjalp/>.

legitimacy must be performed and sustained, often at the expense of more radical or unpolished forms of drag. These dynamics, in turn, shape the pedagogical potential of drag: not by dictating its outcomes, but by framing what becomes intelligible, fundable, and survivable. The next chapter builds on this by examining how drag pedagogy unfolds across various institutional and spatial settings, from clubs and libraries to schools and museums.

5. Navigating Pedagogic Landscapes: Making Space for Drag

This chapter explores how Swedish drag collectives engage with public space and education, and how their pedagogical practices unfold across different institutional and cultural terrains. From Pride stages to school classrooms, drag artists encounter shifting expectations about what drag is, what it can do, and how it should, or should not, be made accessible to various publics. These settings invite reflection on how drag pedagogy is shaped not only by its content, but by where it takes place and how it is framed. Building on the previous chapter's focus on legitimacy, I now turn to the spatial and institutional contexts in which drag artists work, asking how pedagogical claims are made, interpreted, or contested in practice. To guide this inquiry, I ask: How do drag collectives navigate institutional norms and public pedagogical spaces in Sweden, and what does this reveal about the spatial politics of drag pedagogy? While I begin by examining how both CULT and BD&DQ engage with Pride and public cultural events, the chapter centers on BD&DQ's school-based programming, which offers a window into how drag is introduced, embraced, or resisted within Sweden's education system, often through the expectations of norm-critical pedagogy. I suggest that norm critique, as a dominant framework in public education, plays a key role in shaping how drag becomes legible as a pedagogical practice. Finally, I trace how drag pedagogy unfolds in relation to educators, institutional norms, and broader ideas of Swedishness, particularly its expectations of neutrality, following how different spaces invite or constrain pedagogical possibilities, and how artists respond creatively to these conditions.

Negotiating access to the public space: Pride(s) as a meeting ground?

Pride events in Sweden function as both stage and battleground for queer pedagogies. While these festivals ostensibly celebrate LGBTQ+ visibility, they also expose tensions between radical and mainstream visions of queerness, and by extension, of what constitutes legitimate or teachable drag. Similar to how Cathrin Wasshede explores the tensions of (dis)belonging across mainstream and radical Pride in Gothenburg, I found that CULT and BD&DQ occupy these different circuits in ways that shape their pedagogical strategies and public legibility differently.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Cathrin Wasshede, "Rainbow Flag and Belongings/Disbelongings: Öckerö Pride and Reclaim Pride in Gothenburg, Sweden 2019," in *Pluralistic Struggles in Gender, Sexuality and Coloniality: Challenging Swedish Exceptionalism*, ed. Erika Alm et al. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 147–75, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-47432-4_6.

Hence, this section briefly examines how public visibility becomes both a pedagogical tool and a site of strategic negotiation.

My fieldwork intersected with several Pride events, from the radical, antiracist “Reclaim Pride” to the mainstream “West Pride” in Gothenburg. CULT performed their “CULT of Care” show at a queer afterparty linked to Dubbelexponerat, a Reclaim Pride project centering the intersectional marginalization of queer people of color and religious minorities.¹¹¹ Meanwhile, BD&DQ has performed at Stockholm Pride, a similarly mainstream and institutionally supported festival, including drag storytime events for children. In interviews, members of both collectives expressed ambivalence toward these settings: CULT aligned more with radical politics but welcomed institutional exposure, while BD&DQ valued visibility but critiqued the tokenism and superficiality of mainstream inclusion. This highlights how drag collectives curate their pedagogical messages depending on the setting. For CULT, alternative Pride events become a platform for political pedagogy rooted in radically queer activist networks. BD&DQ, by contrast, emphasizes accessibility and consistency across venues from Pride stages to schools.

CULT’s founders, Sam (The Meatbaby) and Inga (The Sinfluencer), further demonstrate how drag can act as spatial pedagogy. Through their project PEEK! Live, they occupied shopping centers, public transport, and later, museums, queering space through performance and visual installations.¹¹² Their interventions disrupted normative assumptions about visibility and inclusion, challenging who cultural spaces are for. They argued that these disruptions made institutions more accessible and appealing to new audiences.¹¹³ While their work occasionally drew criticism for being *too queer*, operating under the umbrella of their parent association “Status Queer” allowed them to navigate public scrutiny and protect CULT’s reputation. By contrast, BD&DQ’s founder Petter Wallenberg rejected the idea that context substantially changes the pedagogical intent of their work. “Whether it’s Pride or a themed week for people with disabilities,” he said, “the feeling is still the same.” Jan Ericson (Inga Tvivel) echoed this sentiment when reflecting on regional differences: “Children are children,” he laughed, recalling consistent reactions across urban and rural areas. While audience composition varied (i.e., urban settings were more diverse while rural ones overwhelmingly white), their performances maintained a high-energy participatory style regardless of setting.

¹¹¹ “Dubbelexponerat,” *Dubbelexponerat*, 2024, <https://www.dubbelexponerat.com/>; “Reclaim Pride,” *Reclaim Pride*, 2020, <https://www.reclaimpride.se/>.

¹¹² Status Queer, “PEEK! Live,” 2025, <https://statusqueer.com/>.

¹¹³ Ibid.

These differing strategies illustrate how the pedagogical work of drag adapts to and resists the pressures of institutional legibility. CULT's spatial interventions function as site-specific critiques, challenging the dynamics of queer hyper-visibility, while BD&DQ's consistency across contexts reinforces their claim that queer pedagogy can be fun, accessible, and omnipresent. In both cases, the politics of where drag is performed and for whom shapes how drag becomes intelligible as cultural work and public education. Moreover, how drag is received in public space often reflects broader assumptions about Swedishness. While many interviewees claimed that drag controversies were stirred only by "fringe" actors like the far-right, others hinted at more diffuse anxieties. Some pointed to "immigrants" or "religious fanatics" as presumed sources of resistance, while others argued that public discomfort arises when queerness becomes too visible in "neutral" spaces like schools or libraries. These narratives reinforced the image of Sweden as tolerant yet depoliticized, accepting queerness only when it remains discreet or properly timed. In this context, Pride becomes not just a festival but a lens through which to examine the spatial politics of queer and drag pedagogy. Who gets to be visible, where, and under what conditions? Which performances are embraced as family-friendly diversity, and which are dismissed as too radical? CULT and BD&DQ answer these questions differently, but both expose how pedagogical legitimacy is contingent on spatial recognition. Their work reveals that queer teaching does not begin or end in the classroom, rather, it unfolds in marches, afterparties, and public institutions, wherever drag artists claim space and reimagine its terms.

Negotiating access to the classroom: The paradoxes of "norm-critical pedagogy"

Shortly after I finished my fieldwork last Summer, BD&DQ began promoting its new initiative, specifically designed for schools and kindergartens. Children collaborate with drag artists over 4-5 weeks to create their own fairy tales and performances. In their brochure, BD&DQ describes various engaging exercises to assist children in developing literacy, creativity, and cooperation while building confidence and appreciation for differences.¹¹⁴ The project is further positioned as supporting "value-based work that aligns with the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child." This school-based programming underlines the distinctive features of BD&DQ's pedagogy by framing drag as a tool for developing confidence, collaboration, and literacy through imaginative play.¹¹⁵ Hence, this new program's advertising clearly shows that BD&DQ understands the codes and expectations of school and kindergarten settings. For example, their

¹¹⁴ Bland Drakar och Dragqueens, *Vårt utbud 2025 [Our Offer 2025]*

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

mention of the Convention on the Rights of the Child gives great credibility to their approach for its alignment with the public school's values and mission to combat harassment and discrimination, as stipulated by the convention. So, they can tailor their offer to the institutionalized standards for learning and highlight intended outcomes and learning skills to a greater extent than with their programs in other spaces. Yet, they do not define this pedagogy as “norm-critical” here.

This surprised me because during my fieldwork, the main topic of discussion around drag events in libraries and pride festivals was “norm-critical” pedagogy, also referred to as “norm-critique” or “norm-creativity”. Why did the actors collaborating with BD&DQ label their work as “norm-critical” if they did not embody it themselves? While I awaited Petter for an interview, I chose to investigate how pedagogues from the public sector interpreted their experiences with “norm-critical” pedagogy and how this influenced their understanding of BD&DQ's practices. I interviewed three professionals—Maria, Madeleine, and Karla—who work in the Västra Götaland area near Gothenburg; however, none have collaborated with BD&DQ. Thus, their insights reflect their experiences with “norm-critique” rather than any direct work with drag collectives. It's also important to note that despite my extensive interactions with the actors, I did not have the chance to observe a school setting or BD&DQ's program in educational institutions. Nonetheless, through these interviews within the public education sector, I can begin to outline a portion of the “formal” pedagogical landscape that drag collectives engage with to varying degrees.

The imperative of “norm-critique”

A recurring theme in the interviewees' narratives centers on norm-critique as a duty and legal obligation for all school staff. At the beginning of my interview with Maria, I mentioned that I was still confused about what norm-critique entails in practice, for its function and efficiency are still debated academically. Later, Maria comes back to this point and states:

I do not recognize that there is a “debate”, for both teachers and schools' student health teams *should* work preventively and proactively to counteract discrimination and abusive treatment. And that includes spreading norm-critical approaches, and that happens both indirectly and directly. Directly through the curriculum, and indirectly in situations that arise and in conversations that occur at school. So, there's no... It's *established*. Then, of course, everyone, every person, is an individual and does things in different ways. But we have a common curriculum to stick to.

Maria, who only recently started working as a co-principal for a suburban elementary school, kept coming back to the “curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class, and school-age educare 2022” in our interview, emphasizing that to think and act norm-critically is something that the school and teachers *must* work continuously with.¹¹⁶ Nonetheless, all three interviewees stressed that teachers are free to incorporate norm-critical pedagogy as they please in their teaching, as long as it aligns with the curriculum’s stipulations. According to Maria, this is arguably a good thing, where trust in teachers’ norm-creativity is crucial for them to do a good job, and norm-critique is a goal to always strive for, albeit in different ways. While this is necessary to avoid the state spelling out what is critical “enough”, some scholars have emphasized that this “freedom” is also a weakness of norm-critique, since it relies so much on the teacher being norm-critical themselves.¹¹⁷

Karla and Madeleine echoed Maria’s view but emphasized how norm-critical pedagogy plays out unevenly in practice.¹¹⁸ Karla (who is training to become a preschool teacher) noted that the curriculum is “open to interpretation,” depending largely on individual teachers. Meanwhile, Madeleine (who works in after-school care in a “free-standing” school) observed that some staff treat norm critique as a checklist to be ticked off rather than a continuous effort (e.g., only do one session about say “racism”). The fact that the curriculum is so ambiguous paradoxically gives school staff a lot of room for setting up their courses however they see fit, depending on the needs of students, yet it only sets a loose frame with high expectations on *how* this looks in practice. Lazy teachers might get away with doing the minimum norm-critique, while ambitious teachers may suffer from the impression of never doing enough. So, I want to highlight here that the norm-critical pedagogy frame does leave enough space in theory for collaborations with drag collectives. Kindergartens and school staff are free to invite drag collectives such as BD&DQ into their classroom or the after-school recreational center to explore norm-critical pedagogy from another angle or add more play and glitter into the mix.

¹¹⁶ Translation from the Swedish National Agency of Education in their webpage on “School Terms in English”. <https://www.skolverket.se/skolutveckling/anordna-och-administrera-utbildning/administrera-utbildning/skoltermer-pa-engelska>

¹¹⁷ Lotta Björkman, Janne Bromseth, and Helena Hill, “Normkritisk Pedagogik – Framväxten Och Utvecklingen Av Ett Nytt Begrepp I Den Svenska Utbildningskontexten,” *Nordisk Tidskrift för Pedagogikk Og Kritik* 7, no. 0 (2021): 179, <https://doi.org/10.23865/ntpk.v7.2314>.

¹¹⁸ For more detailed information about the interviewees, see Appendix 1.

The storytime: To read and discuss norm-critically together

As an essential component of the educational resources in both public libraries and schools, the “story time” represents the typical Swedish approach to teaching young children. In this subsection, I analyze the usual functioning of story-time within a school context to understand how the introduction of drag artists into this ritualized practice of the “norm-critical” pedagogy handbook might challenge and queer this story-time. By revealing this, I can contextualize BD&DQ’s mixed narratives regarding the success of these “drag story times” and the surrounding harassment related to these events.

In theory, a storytime in school is expected to always be norm-critical. When I ask Karla what the difference is between one that is norm-critical and one that is not, she argues:

I would say that almost all [story times] can become norm-critical if one talks about – well, there is a big difference between reading a book aloud and actually *involving* the children in the reading and *talking* about it. Anyone can sit and read a book from cover to cover and then say that’s the end of the story! And then you don’t get much norm-critique, I think, even if you read a “norm-critical” book.

The choice of book is important, but how the reader interacts with it matters more. Even if a child reads a highly significant book, the absence of conversation about it means they won’t think critically about the story or the world. As Karla points out in our discussion, every child brings their own norms and assumptions, shaped by their home environment, into school. For instance, if a story features two fathers, a child might perceive them as friends rather than understanding the deeper implications; in their experience, two loving fathers may not exist. However, discussing the story with children creates an opportunity to challenge unusual norms and encourages them to question these norms in a safe school setting. When I ask Karla about practical applications of this idea, she mentions various approaches but emphasizes that meaningful dialogue with children is crucial for effective norm-critical storytelling. She also notes that this process can be time-consuming, and since it isn’t easily result-oriented, unlike, for instance, learning to read, many teachers may not give space to these exploratory story sessions.

However, story time isn’t limited to the classroom; it also takes place at the after-school recreational center where Madeleine works. This setting allows for fun activities that may not yield a traditional productive outcome, yet it still adheres to a norm-critical framework. While the after-school environment might seem “freer” in theory, Madeleine does not envision open-ended conversations in the same manner as Karla. She clarifies her openness to dialogue but prefers to

keep her responses brief on topics “not up for debate”. Madeleine notes that she doesn’t engage in conversations initiated by “leading” questions from children, like why two mothers are in love, because, in her view, this should not be a significant issue. This approach is influenced by her usual work with older children, typically in elementary to middle school, contrasting with Karla’s focus on preschool to elementary age. Additionally, she critiques the norm-critical books available on the “apple shelf” or categorized as “rainbow books” in public libraries. She believes these books often overtly showcase diversity and exemplary practices, which undermines their credibility and ultimately fails to engage children. Madeleine critiqued many so-called “rainbow books” for being overly moralistic and obvious. Based on her experience reading with her daughter, she felt they portrayed queer families as unrealistically perfect: “They have to be vegetarian, sort their waste, and have an electric car, that is, if they don’t cycle!”

Madeleine’s frustration with the need for everything to be norm-critical indicates that this pressure may also affect many others. I previously noted the expectation for teachers to be critically “sufficient,” but we can also see that teachers carry their normative biases from home, similarly to children. They are very aware of this, which can lead to significant anxiety, as expressed through the blunt humor Madeleine displayed. This tension was evident throughout the interview, as Madeleine frequently questioned whether her responses were “correct” or if she was “probably over-generalizing,” while continually emphasizing that this was merely her perspective. Through various anecdotes, such as supporting a young teenager’s transition, comforting another when he was outed by a friend, or discussing media news with students, a consistent theme emerged: anxiety over being “critical enough.” Considering how these anxieties influence my interviewees’ readiness to introduce drag artists into their schools is crucial.

The classroom as a (un)safe space: Exploring norm-creativity with drag

As BD&DQ is the only drag collective in Sweden openly engaging with children in libraries and schools, apart from the controversial duo behind DSH Sweden, I presented the “Create your own story!” brochure shown above to Madeleine and Maria.¹¹⁹ This initiated a discussion about the potential involvement of a drag collective like BD&DQ in public kindergartens and schools. However, our conversation shifted from specifics of BD&DQ’s program to the broader considerations and politics of inviting any drag artists into the public-school environment. This change in focus occurred mainly because the interviewees were unfamiliar with BD&DQ and preferred to share their personal opinions rather than professional

¹¹⁹ I did not ask Karla because back when we had our interview this program was not advertised publicly yet.

insights. When I asked my interviewees if they considered the work of drag artists in schools to be norm-critical, they answered:

I know so little about them, but I would say that they are norm-critical. That...Dragqueens...hum...they want to promote a norm-critical approach, and influence students, children, to step outside the box through what they do. (Maria, principal)

Yes, absolutely, just on the level of seeing different types of people [...] but I would say that everything that is *not* the norm *is* norm-critical. (Karla, student-teacher)

Regardless of whether their responses were hesitant or confident, all three interviewees agreed that drag artists inherently challenge norms, especially through aesthetics and participatory performance, and therefore align with norm-critical pedagogy. When I asked Petter whether he defines BD&DQ's work in these terms, he reflected on the limits of the concept, describing norm-critical pedagogy as itself "normative." "We who are already norm-breakers, as queers [we] are norm critique on legs" he explained. For Petter, drag is often booked by institutions for its perceived norm-critical value, but he suggested this framing doesn't always match either the audience's experience or the artists' intent. He emphasized that children are often aware that the performer is a man in drag, yet they remain indifferent. What matters to them is the content, the form, and the enthusiasm that carry the performance. Meanwhile, for the artists themselves, the motivation is not to perform norm critique per se, but as Petter puts it, "the driving force is often creativity." This exchange points to a recurring tension: school and library staff often frame drag as norm-critical because of its queer aesthetics, while BD&DQ's own framing emphasizes creative play and collaborative learning. While the interviewees generally accepted the educational value of drag, their willingness to invite drag artists into school settings remained shaped by a mix of practical concerns.

For instance, Maria emphasized that within the framework of norm-critique, the school first needs to have a clear *need* for hiring such a drag collective, as with any other actor. That "need" could be determined if multiple teachers have reported cases of harassment with suspected homophobic motives, for example. Yet, BD&DQ does not claim explicitly to work with LGBTQI+ or queer values, but rather to playfully promote *all* diversity, to protect children's rights to be themselves and to respect others. In that way, there is not necessarily a specific situation where BD&DQ claims to fit in beyond stimulating literacy and joy, which is always a priority for kindergartens and pre-schools. Nonetheless, inviting external groups into the schools has a cost. From a principal's perspective, it is obvious that such budget decisions need to be

justified by responding to a “need”. When I inquired how schools could justify inviting a circus, yet hesitated to welcome a drag collective, Maria explained that drag programming might be seen as politically charged, triggering additional scrutiny under expectations of neutrality. She referenced a school that faced consequences for excluding “a certain political party” (implying the SD) from student programming, suggesting that similar principles could apply to outside groups like drag collectives.

From such a perspective, within the “democratic mission” of the school, as mentioned multiple times throughout my interviews, all parties should critically question and examine *everything*. That is also one of the major lessons the school wants to convey through the concept of norm-critique. Although the interviewees are convinced that the work of drag artists is norm-critical by principle, they must work around critiques and argue with or against them based on this supposedly neutral curriculum. Karla further stressed that any activity in a classroom setting is obligatory, so teachers and principals alike should be ready to address parents’ concerns and justify why any activity is obligatory for their child. Such critiques are assumed to arise when inviting drag artists into public schools. This encourages school staff to courageously counter uninformed criticisms and embrace drag artists, all while avoiding the appearance of taking a political stance, which can be a challenging balance to maintain.

Another consideration that arose is whether classrooms serve as suitable environments for drag artists to engage, rather than libraries, given the perception of classrooms as a “safe space” for exploring such topics. Ideally, the classroom should act as a safe space, provided it continually works to fulfill its curriculum obligations to combat harassment and bullying by implementing norm-critical pedagogy. Maria emphasized that her school is a safe haven for LGBTQ+ youth; however, she felt there was no need to book a drag collective like BD&DQ since trained staff are already available to address issues pertinent to BD&DQ’s curriculum. Thus, Maria believes drag collectives should be regarded like any other group, and their participation in school projects is equally acceptable as long as it meets the unique needs and maintains the political neutrality required of public schools. Karla pointed out that the advantages of inviting drag artists into the classroom lie in the familiar structure they provide for exploring exciting new concepts without overwhelming the students:

And then it’s great just to see and experience [drag] in like a controlled, calm, a bit close environment. Then it’s not some random person over there who looks a bit dangerous, but that it’s someone you talk to and sort of get a feeling of, so that you realize that yes, it’s an ordinary person under the wig! [laughs] It’s nothing strange!

Jan Ericson noted that classroom dynamics are shaped by pre-existing social roles among students, unlike libraries, where children arrive without those internal hierarchies. These dynamics influence how students engage with performers and with each other. Yet, whether the classroom is suitable for these interventions depends mainly on the children's age. Karla, who works in kindergarten (ages 2 to 6), was generally positive. Meanwhile, Madeleine and Jan, who work with pre-adolescents and adolescents, were more hesitant about the benefits of the classroom setting. For Madeleine, it is best to address "norm-critical issues" before children fully grasp their meaning. She expressed interest when I told her that BD&DQ primarily works with children aged 3 to 9 in school and library settings. Nonetheless, she raised concerns about "free participation," as activities are mandatory in schools but voluntary in libraries. Ideally, she felt this should not be a concern, and that a drag theater group should be welcomed like any other, as long as their programming aligns with the school's mission, and based on BD&DQ's brochure, she believed it does.

To conclude, public schools reflect the contradictory logics of norm-critical pedagogy since they mandate inclusivity while often delimiting how queerness can appear in practice. When viewed through this lens, BD&DQ's classroom initiative offers valuable support for teachers and schools seeking to foster critical reflection on norms. At the same time, how such collaborations are received or resisted depends on how schools interpret their responsibilities and assess potential controversy. Still, as explored further in the following chapter, the flexible pedagogical toolkit developed by BD&DQ enables drag artists to creatively adapt their interventions to the diverse needs of different classroom environments.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how drag pedagogy unfolds across public cultural spaces and formal educational institutions in Sweden. In response to the sub-question guiding this chapter, "how drag collectives navigate institutional norms and public pedagogical spaces and what this reveals about the spatial politics of drag pedagogy," I have shown that these spaces do not simply host drag pedagogy but actively shape how it is made (im)possible. CULT and BD&DQ operate across different terrains, but both strategically navigate what is considered appropriate or legitimate. While CULT's performances at Pride events and in cultural institutions often emphasize disruption and queer affect, BD&DQ's programming in schools reveals a more subtle approach. Their work aligns with many institutional priorities, such as child-centered learning and participatory pedagogy, but they do not describe their work as "norm-critical." Instead, they present it as a drag show grounded in creativity and inclusion. Thereby, they manage to "pass"

within the educational field while maintaining their framework for what “dragshow” pedagogy is and does. This reflects broader dynamics explored in the previous chapter, where legitimacy was shown to depend not on strict adherence to institutional norms but on the ability to frame drag in ways that resonate with dominant expectations, without being entirely defined by them. What emerges is not a single model of drag pedagogy, but a shifting and negotiated practice shaped by institutional settings, audience expectations, and the artists’ own commitments. Norm-critical pedagogy plays an ambivalent role here as it legitimizes drag in schools while also narrowing its scope, offering entry points without naming or fully embracing queerness. By tracing how a collective like BD&DQ moves within and around these constraints, this chapter contributes to the thesis’s broader argument that legitimacy is actively negotiated in relation to institutional expectations and the shifting cultural conditions that define what is seen as pedagogically acceptable.

6. Drag Pedagogy (Re)Visited: The Plurality of Swedish Drag Pedagogies

In their article on drag pedagogy, Keenan and Hot Mess ask, “What if we took play, defiance, and imagination seriously as forms of knowledge production?”¹²⁰ This question serves as a starting point for this chapter, where I explore how Bland Drakar och Dragqueens (BD&DQ) and CULT engage with pedagogical practices in ways that challenge conventional ideas about who teaches, what is taught, and how learning occurs. Hence, I observe how these collectives articulate and implement drag pedagogy not through explicit instruction, but through more subtle and emotionally engaging strategies. Instead of starting with a fixed notion of what drag pedagogy is, I trace how it emerges through practice, through moments that center on play, aesthetic experimentation, and commitments to accessibility. In my fieldwork, these three themes emerged as central, serving as recurring sites where pedagogical meaning was created, negotiated, and at times contested.

While this chapter focuses on how drag pedagogy materializes through play, aesthetics, and accessibility, it is worth noting that the drag collectives themselves do not always name these practices as “pedagogical.” Rather, they speak of “teaching and learning with drag” in more fluid terms, shaped by the audiences they engage and the institutional expectations they must navigate. BD&DQ, who work closely with schools and libraries, frequently frame their work explicitly as pedagogy, aligning with the professionalized language of cultural institutions. In contrast, CULT, who work in informal, queer adult spaces, rarely use the term “pedagogy” to describe their practice, even when it clearly involves teaching and community-building. This naming gap reflects broader tensions in how legitimacy is negotiated, a theme I also explored in Chapter 4. What follows, then, is not an analysis of self-identified pedagogues but of how pedagogy emerges through performance, affect, and audience interaction.

Each section of this chapter takes one of these themes as a lens through which to ask: What does it mean to teach and learn through drag in Sweden? What kinds of knowledges, bodies, and emotions are (not) legitimized within these practices? In pursuing these questions, I bring the collectives’ own narratives into conversation with the theoretical framework of drag pedagogy, as developed by Keenan and Hot Mess, while also drawing on the concept of decolonial drag to consider how drag pedagogies can both challenge and reproduce structures of race, class, and national belonging. Once again, my goal is not to pinpoint a single model of drag

¹²⁰ Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess, “Drag Pedagogy,” 443.

pedagogy but to explore how it materializes in situated and sometimes conflicting ways that reveal not only the joys but also the tensions of teaching queerly.

Play:

BD&DQ:

Figure 2: Children wait in line to receive “magic wishing glitter” from Björta during a BD&DQ storytime performance.

Photograph by author, Upplands Väsby Library, February 2025.



The ABBA room of the library was slowly filling with glitter on a gloomy February morning. It was Glitter Week, part of the winter break program at Upplands Väsby, about 30 km northwest of Stockholm. The ABBA room, generally used for film screenings, had been transformed into a soft space with floor cushions, a reading chair, and a table lined with flowers and BD&DQ books. Children arrived dressed in sequin crowns, Elsa costumes, rainbow Star Wars hoodies, and Hello Kitty skirts, with caregivers trailing behind, many holding babies in carriers. Glitter-adorned librarians managed the door, greeting families by name and waving in late arrivals with warmth. After several failed attempts to summon the performer—“Bjöörta!” the children cried, louder each time—the door finally burst open, and the artist came in a bright orange glitter explosion and top hat. “Is it here?! I heard someone calling my name!” Björta exclaimed. “There you are! I’ve been looking for you—I got lost in this fantastic library!” They swooped to the

chair, dramatically relieved, and introduced themselves with a wink. Then came the “magiska sagoväska,” their mysterious fairy-tale case filled with plushies and objects from beloved classic Swedish children’s stories: Findus, Mamma Mu, a glass slipper, a red apple, a gold coin. Each one sparks a question: “Where is this from? Who might it belong to?” The audience answered eagerly.

“Now there are so many great stories!” Björta continued, eyes wide. “And we all love stories here! And stories are made up of words, which are made of letters. Right?” The children nodded, hesitantly. “Now,” Björta asked, “do you have a favorite letter?” One by one, the children replied, almost all choosing the first letter of their name. Björta squealed back in excitement at each contribution. “My favorite letter,” they suddenly declared, “is B! And I’m going to sing you why!” A jazzy soundtrack kicked in, and Björta belted out: “B as in the beginning in... Björta! Book! Bananal Bun!”¹²¹ With each B-word, a corresponding object emerged from the briefcase, while kids listened attentively, at times screaming along. Then came the final punchline: “B as in the beginning of... Bajs [Poop]!” The room erupted in laughter. Björta pretended to be scandalized, holding up a plastic poop prop while the children shouted suggestions about which plushie might have planted it. “It was Mamma Mu!” one yelled, referring to the red-haired cow that stars in a popular Swedish book series, one of the plushies shown earlier. So, what began as scripted storytelling transformed into playful improvisation. A video clip of this moment later appeared on BD&DQ’s Facebook page with the caption: “How do we make letters and reading fun and engaging? Well, like this! What’s your favorite letter? #readingmotivation.”

This scene illustrates BD&DQ’s unconventional approach to literacy. Rather than relying on traditional alphabet songs and letter games typical in early childhood education, Björta’s performance revitalizes these elements through a collaborative and sensory drag performance that merges “camp” and improvisation, moving beyond just “teaching letters.” In my fieldwork, moments like these revealed play as a fundamental pedagogical method that acts not only as a way to engage but also as a learning logic that prioritizes curiosity and collective participation. This aligns with the theory proposed by Keenan and Hot Mess, who define “play as praxis” as a queer pedagogical approach where knowledge is developed through relational experimentation instead of formal teaching, especially when considering that the artists themselves are also playing with and learning from their audience.¹²² The emphasis on play as relational improvisation came through clearly in my interview with Inga Tvivel, a core performer and pedagogue in the group.

¹²¹ The “B as in the Beginning” song was written by Petter, as all content of the BD&DQ’s performances.

¹²² Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess, “Drag Pedagogy,” 448-449.

Reflecting on her interactions with children and the role of their emotions in the performance, she noted:

Yes, but there is also joy in what you do, and... that you have fun with the interaction. You never know what children will say. *Sometimes* I know what they will say. Today in the performance, I say that my jacket is blue and then everyone shouts, “It’s yellow!”. And then I ask, “Is it *FUL* [ugly]??? -It’s *GUL* [yellow]!!!!” And then they get really upset because I’m an adult who can’t tell the difference between colors. And they can’t handle it. It’s so strong! You have to say the right thing!

This moment, which I observed during her performance before our interview and initially noted in my fieldnotes as a playful joke, later merged as a deliberate strategy during my analysis. Inga’s deliberate “mistake” destabilizes adult authority and invites children to become co-authors of the scene. Here, knowledge is not delivered but made, emotionally and collectively, in the moment. BD&DQ’s drag pedagogy offers structured spontaneity instead of discipline, as performers lead their crowd toward certain “expectable” feelings while allowing space for the unexpected. Surprise, contradiction, and joy become essential conditions for learning. While these shows may appear spontaneous, they are carefully crafted. Petter Wallenberg, founder and director of BD&DQ, explained:

It’s something I do in all my projects, to use creativity as a weapon against intolerance. But also to use playfulness and creativity, because with Bland Drackar och Dragqueens, there are educational purposes, there are literary purposes, there are individual empowerment purposes, and societal improvement purposes. So the red thread is to use artistry in new ways, in new forms, in new target groups, and maintain a kind of joy and playfulness, even when working with difficult issues.

In this framing, play is positioned as the guiding logic of their teaching practice. Playfulness thus serves as both an emotional ambiance and a means to engage various audiences. The incorporation of “B as in Bajs” may make room for collective giggles, but it also stages a queer challenge to norms of propriety and seriousness in public education spaces. This dual function of play, as joyful and strategic, sits at the heart of the tension Keenan and Hot Mess highlight when warning that play, once institutionalized, risks becoming a “technology of governmentality.”¹²³ BD&DQ carefully navigate this risk. Their performances are crafted to appeal to institutional partners (like libraries) and their norm-critical pedagogical expectations, while still carving out moments of unpredictability and subversion. Rather than rejecting

¹²³ Keenan and Hot Mess, *Drag Pedagogy*, 449.

institutional legibility, BD&DQ's pedagogy leans into it but only to twist it. In doing so, they enact a pedagogical logic that is situated, relational, and defiant, where learning takes shape through playful collective storytelling. While their shows are infused with open-endedness and play, the "utilitarian" learning purposes are also central, both in practice and in how the artists narrate their work.¹²⁴ This does not undermine the playfulness of learning with drag; rather, it reflects a professional strategy that is as "productive" as it is fun. Indeed, the performers are also trained pedagogues and educators, and their attention to learning outcomes is informed by their broader institutional and professional engagements. To conclude, BD&DQ invites children and adults alike to play with gender roles, aesthetics, and movement in imaginative ways. However, these performances are carefully designed, with clear pedagogical intentions guiding their experience.

CULT:

I've been thinking a lot about how we can create a sense of *group* feeling through what we call "relational exercises". So, you know, this is like singing, making people hold hands, making people uh moan together, you know. We go from this point of departure that if you embarrass yourself in front of other people, you have a different kind of access to them. And like people chat to each other after the show, and I think that's really the basis for like forming a community. (Sam Message, the Meatbaby)

I encountered this approach firsthand during CULT's "CULT of CARE" show, where I found myself drawn into one of the very exercises Sam describes. In character as the Meatbaby, they invited the audience to hold hands with the people next to them and moan together in sync. I hesitated briefly, unsure whether to laugh, cringe, or follow along. Yet as the sound filled the room and strangers touched and giggled beside me, the energy shifted, and awkwardness turned into something strangely connective. Rather than passively absorbing entertainment or information, the audience was drawn into a visceral pedagogy that could be felt through the body before it could be understood conceptually. The warmth and openness that followed were not incidental but cultivated through these *queer*, shared acts.

In my interviews with Sam and co-founder Kolbrún Inga Söring, they explained that such audience interactions are part of a broader emotional dramaturgy central to CULT's performance-making. As part of their *INITIATIONS* drag school, performers are encouraged to

¹²⁴ Keenan and Hot Mess, "Drag Pedagogy," 449. The authors claim that Drag itself does not take "utilitarian aims [of curricular standards etc.] too seriously (but it is quite good at looking the part when necessary)."

diagram the emotional arc of their acts, mapping energy or affect against time. A key component of this structure is what the group refers to as the “orgasmic moment”, a deliberately staged emotional peak that punctuates the performance with intensity, surprise, or transformation. Relational exercises, like the one I experienced, serve not only to build audience rapport but to prepare them for these affective climaxes. Thus, play serves as the foundation for this structure. I observed that the playfulness in CULT’s performances went beyond simply eliciting queer joy or mildly awkward moments, like shared moaning, it also created room for more complex or “negative” emotions (such as anger, fear, and discomfort), provided they were approached in a caring and relevant manner.¹²⁵ As Sam Message explained: “It doesn’t always feel good or comfortable to explore anger or fear. [...] And I think play is really this key way of getting in touch with these things without them becoming disruptive.” This echoes arguments made by queer affect theorists who emphasize that so-called negative emotions can be as generative, notably fueling queer activism and community-building.¹²⁶ In this context, I suggest that CULT’s use of play does not avoid discomfort but instead channels it, reshaping group dynamics (i.e., the connections among performers, audiences, and the performance itself) and encouraging emotional risk-taking. The resulting shifts between performer and audience, or between discomfort and laughter, are also structured pedagogically. This strategy became even clearer when Sam reflected on their hosting style as the Meatbaby:

I think that is something definitely very playful, perhaps more in the camp, or in the comedic, around subverting that genre of leading people to an uncomfortable feeling. Like last time, I did that when I was doing my kind of comedy hosting, I blended these very serious things with these very comedic things. And I spoke about trying to kill myself. And that’s really uncomfortable to watch. Because there’s some kind of 4th wall where like I’m playing this character and then actually, I’m just like sat down talking to you about something quite awful that happened to me. And people are like, “I came here to have a good time, like what’s going on?!” And then you can subvert that fact by, you know, by being like, actually, this is a really funny story. And bring them into discomfort to then take them out of it. (Sam Message, the Meatbaby)

Here, the Meatbaby again engages their audience through an affective choreography that oscillates between discomfort, humor, and reflection. This method reflects Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess’s idea of play as praxis, yet CULT embraces a more emotionally intense direction as

¹²⁵ That includes issuing trigger warnings before talking openly about self-harm for instance. But also having a break by the middle of the performance for people to take a breather.

¹²⁶ Wen Liu, “Feeling Down, Backward, and Machinic: Queer Theory and the Affective Turn,” *Athenea Digital. Revista de Pensamiento E Investigación Social* 20, no. 2 (July 10, 2020): 2321, <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/athenea.2321>.

they lean into discomfort to unsettle expectations and open space for reflection.¹²⁷ This approach to drag pedagogy does not rely on direct confrontation but still creates space for exploring taboo or painful subjects through a disarming and affective use of play. What I find especially telling is that even in a queer-centered event, the mention of suicide produced discomfort that some audience members responded to with unease (e.g., “I came here to have a good time!”). While this reaction doesn’t necessarily reveal the audience’s intentions, it does illustrate the kinds of expectations that CULT artists are negotiating. As the organizers emphasized, even radical drag spaces “by and for queers” are not immune to the desire for safety or escape. This points to the discomfort often felt by queers in heteronormative spaces, and how non-normative spaces are expected to provide comfort by contrast, as suggested by Sara Ahmed in her theoretical exploration of queer feelings.¹²⁸ Yet as Sara Ahmed argues, discomfort is part of “a queer life,” and its presence, even within queer spaces, can be politically generative, and, I would add, pedagogically so.¹²⁹ Of course, it is essential to remember that not all queer people experience discomfort equally. Factors such as race, class, and gender identity mediate how safety and community are felt and negotiated.¹³⁰

This became evident in a different, more explicitly political moment during the “CULT of PROFESSIONALS” show, a performance I did not attend but that both Sam and Inga recounted in our interviews. In it, Sam Message again performing as the Meatbaby, addressed sex work and harm reduction, directly challenging the dominant framing of sex work in Sweden as merely “capitalist exploitation of women’s bodies.” This issue has long signaled a significant divide between “queer” and “lesbian feminist” communities and has been actively negotiated within Swedish drag scenes. As shown in debates around drag kinging in the early 2000s, these tensions often centered on the intersection of queer culture and feminism.¹³¹ These tensions came to the fore in the moment of performance, when some audience members walked out in response. Meanwhile, backstage, tensions emerged within the collective itself, as some members expressed discomfort during the show’s preparation with taking such a public stance. Still, Inga described this as one of the clearest examples of learning through drag within their collective, as sustained internal discussion ultimately led some initially reluctant members to reconsider their views. Both Sam and Inga highlighted this moment as emblematic of drag’s pedagogical potential because of its emotional and political volatility. Crucially, this learning extended beyond the

¹²⁷ Keenan and Hot Mess, “Drag Pedagogy,” 448-449.

¹²⁸ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 146-155.

¹²⁹ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 151.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Lööf, “The (Ab)Uses of Gender Trouble.”

audience as it developed within the group, where performers navigated their differences and reevaluated political commitments through the collaborative act of creating drag.

CULT employs play as a way to explore the boundaries of what can be said, felt, and learned on and offstage. By intertwining care with discomfort and pleasure with provocation, they utilize play as a pedagogical tool that is equally affective and political. Sam refers to this process as a form of intentional emotional choreography, designed to guide the audience through an arc that surpasses the expected thrill of a “wig reveal” or a “split,” which are elements often seen as the typical highlights of drag. This aspect is said to set their method apart from more “conventional” or “entertainment-driven” drag, though Sam themselves expressed uncertainty about what precisely defines these categories in comparison to their own practice. In framing their work as deliberately affective and educational, CULT not only distinguishes their practice from more mainstream forms of drag but also asserts its legitimacy as a form of queer cultural labor. At the same time, these framings risk unintentionally reinforcing assumptions about what qualifies as “real” or “legitimate” drag. Nonetheless, CULT’s performances offer a radically different model of queer learning that is intentionally emotionally charged and sensitive to the tensions within the communities it addresses.

Aesthetics:

BD&DQ:

One of the most cherished and repeated moments in BD&DQ’s performances is the “magiskt önskeglitter [magic wishing glitter]” ritual. Typically, during storytime shows with a smaller audience, the drag artist invites children to step forward one by one to receive a dab of glue and a sprinkle of glitter on the back of their hands.¹³² Then, they are asked to make a wish, which can only be fulfilled by singing a short song or performing a dance. This ritual, as simple as it may seem, is a carefully crafted pedagogical tool. Indeed, on their Instagram, BD&DQ explicitly describes glitter as a “pedagogical and empowering tool”. “Even the shy child in the back can take part,” they write. “We’ve heard wishes like ‘a world made of candy’ and ‘a cement mixer,’ but also ‘that dad gets well again.’” In our interview, Petter Wallenberg emphasized the emotional depth of this moment: “We hear from parents and preschool teachers that children talk about the önskeglitter loooong after. It’s really important for them! It has a deep, *deep* meaning.” When I

¹³² See Figure 2.

asked here about the use of önskeglitter in her drag shows, Inga Tvivel described the practice as one of BD&DQ most intentionally inclusive pedagogical strategies:

Yes, önskeglitter... I think it was Tant Henrik who had the idea originally, that every child at the storytime gets glitter on their hand and can wish for whatever they want. And it was such a joyful moment, so exciting, and every child also got to be seen. Because in any audience, in any class, in any group of children, there are always those who are visible, who take space, who are heard. And then there are always those who are a little shy. But when you do something like this, then everyone who wants to can come forward, and I get to meet everyone. And that's important, because then it's fair. It's for everyone!

Thus, this glitter ritual becomes effective through the sensory power of its aesthetic form, particularly its “glamour” and invitation for all to play. It makes space for imagination and intimacy, thereby embodying queer pedagogy through craft glue and sequins, and it also demonstrates accessibility while offering each child a moment of being seen on their own terms. What's striking is that BD&DQ don't merely perform this as an entertaining moment, but they explicitly frame “önskeglitter” as a pedagogical trick, both in interviews and on social media. Yet I found that to call it a “trick” risks underselling its significance, since it serves as a strategy aimed at temporarily leveling power dynamics, ensuring all children can equally engage and learn, while also stimulating emotions and fostering dialogue within the audience (i.e. “wat did you wish for?”). This use of glitter as a playful and purposeful aesthetic strategy aligns with Petter Wallenberg's broader reflection on BD&DQ's aesthetic philosophy:

People think this is something superficial, but glamour, I would say, can sometimes be the deepest thing there is. [...] It's our need for magic. That's what glamour is. And drag mixes our need for magic with something that comes from the heart, but something that also challenges the whole reality and evokes strong emotions.

This “glamour” aesthetic is thus central to BD&DQ's pedagogy, which he later explained as a mix between theater and clownery. This leads me to another captivating example of the audience being invited to experience the educational potential of drag aesthetics (glamour) through a “participatory drag show” hosted by Inga Tvivel, tailored for individuals with disabilities.¹³³ This show, accompanied by a sign language interpreter, was rhythmized by five defined steps for the public to engage with to playfully build their own drag character: the drag

¹³³ This was for the occasion of the “Häng med festival,” in Skärholmen, a suburban area in southwest Stockholm, specially adapted for disabled people, and hosted at the Skärholmen “Folketshus,” a social and cultural center hosting free activities.

name, outfit, makeup, accessories, hair, miming/lip-syncing. The drag artist invited her audience to participate at each stage, but made clear that one did not need to do it all to be a drag queen. Indeed, there are many ways to step into drag through aesthetics, and it does not always require a full makeup and accessories; it can just as well be about creatively transforming oneself into a character.

Inga Tivel, wearing a bright red wig and a glittering neon-orange dress adorned with feathers, called out to the audience: Does anyone want to come up and transform their outfit into drag? This marked the “outfit moment”, one of the five interactive steps in this “participatory drag show”. Two teenage girls from the back row shrieked “Yes!” loud enough to turn heads. Their group had been filming and reacting animatedly since the show began. A behavior arguably typical of teens, yet slightly out of place in this setting, where the intended audience, mostly seated in the front with their caregivers, was visibly marked by their proximity and attentiveness. Despite a few raised eyebrows, the two girls walked toward the stage, against the backdrop of giggles from their friends. As they stepped into the scene, their confident energy gave way to a sort of vulnerable hesitance. With each piece of fabric and every feathered scarf that Inga layered onto them, one wrapped in a gleaming pink satin and the other cloaked in silver with a cascade of blue feathers, something shifted. The girls’ postures relaxed, their shyness dissolved into stylized gestures and laughter. When Inga offered one of them a neon-pink bob wig to match the outfit, the girl accepted it enthusiastically. Meanwhile, her friend struck an improvised pose, waving her feather boa as though the stage were always hers. As Inga Tivel dressed them, she narrated her styling choices to the audience: “You can just use what you find at home,” she said, pointing to her craft box filled with scrap materials, old costume bits, and leftover Easter decorations. So, what seemed to be dress-up also served as an invitation to reimagine the everyday, play with transformation, and blur the lines between ordinary and spectacular. When the moment came to a close, the girls asked for a selfie with the artist before skipping back to their seats, still dressed in drag. They were laughing, not at the performance, but now *with* it. The audience applauded, yet the boundary between performer and spectator had already blurred, if only for a moment.

Figure 3: Inga Tvivel does the makeup of a participant during the “makeup moment” of a BD&DQ participatory drag show.

Photograph by author, Skärholmen, Stockholm, May 2024.



This vignette highlights how drag can become a site of playful disruption of norms, roles, and expectations through what Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess call “aesthetic transformation.”¹³⁴ In my fieldnotes, I noted the palpable tension triggered by the teenage girls’ unexpected participation, given the initial ambiguity of their intentions and the mocking tone from their friends. Yet rather than dismissing the disruption, Inga embraced it, queering the moment by extending the logic of inclusion beyond the pre-identified audience. The shift in the girls’ behavior, as they began to engage more seriously and joyfully with the performance, reveals how drag can emotionally connect with people and reshape who feels invited to participate.

Another highlight of the performance was the “makeup moment”. Inga drew the crowd’s attention to her shiny red lips, jokingly revealing her secret: “Panduro glitter!” With a dramatic touch, she emphasized how “easy” and “cheap” it is to recreate the look at home. Beyond sharing a beauty tip, there was thus an invitation to play and take part in transformation using everyday, accessible materials. She asked who else wanted glittery lips and began by doing the makeup of a person with Down syndrome sitting in the front row. As she applied the lipstick,

¹³⁴ Keenan and Hot Mess, “Drag Pedagogy,” 449.

Inga narrated each step with enthusiasm, stressing that “there can never be enough glitter” and that the point is “to have fun with it.” The Swedish Sign Language interpreter echoed her every word, occasionally smiling back at the artist. After showing off the person’s glittery lips to audience applause, a person in a wheelchair eagerly insisted on having their makeup done too. Inga welcomed them to the stage, and their caregiver wheeled them forward. “Can I take off your glasses?” Inga asked. “Yes, you can take off my glasses!” they replied, smiling. She applied green eyeshadow, fluffed their brows, and turned them to the crowd. “Do I look pretty?” they asked. “You look amazing! Green is your color!” Inga replied, to cheers from the room.

Inga Tvivel emphasizes that drag is an affordable and accessible form of performance art that does not require expertise. BD&DQ goes beyond traditional drag norms, which typically imply that elaborate makeup kits and advanced dance skills are essential for performing drag. In contrast, anyone can participate in drag for pure enjoyment, regardless of their mental or physical abilities. Thus, this scene further illustrates how aesthetics, easily dismissed as superficial as emphasized earlier by Petter, can become a site of serious pedagogical engagement. Inga Tvivel’s playful, accessible approach to makeup not only engaged the audience through embodied participation but also blurred distinctions between performer and spectator, expert and novice. Her step-by-step narration, use of inexpensive materials, and affirmation of each participant’s beauty emphasized aesthetic play as a relational and transformative way of learning.

CULT:

Figure 4: Sam Message performing as the Meatbaby during the “CULT of CARE” drag show.

Photograph by author, Gothenburg, June 2024.



The show “CULT of CARE” opened with a surreal procession under dim stage lights as a row of figures slowly emerged, their faces painted in full makeup, but their bodies concealed under white robes. They knelt, curled, or posed around the edge of the stage like followers awaiting revelation. Then, from the shadows, the host, the Meatbaby, appeared. They slowly hovered above the others, towering in their bizarre electric blue and red costume. The voluminous loops of red tubing spiraling from their chest created an extravagant, tentacled armor, while their expressive, clawed gloves and sculptural headdress rendered them nearly post-human. Their appearance defied easy categorization, part clown, part alien. As they stood beneath the lights, they revealed themselves as a drag *creature*. Their entrance was theatrical and unsettling, breaking with the expected glamour of drag.

As the “followers” remained quietly staged around them, the Meatbaby spoke with conviction, their grotesque makeup exaggerating each facial feature, and invited the audience to join their cult.¹³⁵ This appeared not so much a parody of cults as a campy invitation to consider

¹³⁵ See Figure 4.

drag as a site of collective transformation. After commanding their followers to scream, cry, and moan for them, the Meatbaby turned to their audience, urging the crowd to do the same in chorus with their “followers”. And so we did! We screamed, cried, and moaned together, while the unexpected thrill of this collective exercise took over the initial feeling of embarrassment. As CULT emphasizes on their website, “We’ll get you worshipping, chanting and praying in the service of your newly found family.”¹³⁶ And that’s how it felt, connecting with our newly discovered queer family, highlighting that their drag pedagogy could foster a form of “embodied kinship.”¹³⁷ Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess suggest that the queer kinship formed through drag pedagogy could provide insights into “how alternate worlds are being made in the here and now.”¹³⁸

Through the staging of this opening, aesthetics became a tool for teaching in its own right. Indeed, it was through their campy aesthetic and performative authority that the host offered a lesson in queer potentiality, demonstrating how drag can create new and unexpected ways of being together and caring for one another, such as by being in a queer cult. In this process, the Meatbaby was embodying genderfuck aesthetics on stage. Genderfuck is a term coined by June L. Reich that describes practices that intentionally disrupt binary gender norms through exaggerated or incongruent gender expressions.¹³⁹ Reich argues that genderfucking is often realized through exaggeration and playful incoherence, with a strong grounding in camp¹⁴⁰. So, the Meatbaby’s theatrical entrance staged a moment of genderfucking through their deliberate refusal of gender legibility, presenting as a “drag creature,” thereby playing around with nonbinary and genderqueer identities.

The Meatbaby is certainly not the only drag character “giving freak,” as Kolbrún Inga Söring affectionately calls it. CULT is composed of “drag kings, queens, and creatures” that range “from the glamorous to the disgusting, the vain to the rebellious.”¹⁴¹ All members of CULT are graduates of the INITIATIONS free drag school, where the emphasis on aesthetics is on the condition of the political through line that must be present in each performance. So, rather than having a defined collective visual identity, all members are encouraged to pursue an aesthetic

¹³⁶ “About,” *Status Queer: CULT*, accessed April 5, 2025, <https://statusqueer.com/local/cult/about/>.

¹³⁷ Keenan and Hot Mess, “Drag Pedagogy,” 454.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 455.

¹³⁹ June L. Reich, “Genderfuck: The Law of the Dildo,” in *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology*, ed. Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 123–38.

¹⁴⁰ Reich, “Genderfuck,” 124.

¹⁴¹ “CULT of the Information Superhighway,” *Gothenburg Fringe Festival*, accessed April 5, 2025, <https://www.gbgfringe.com/events/cult-of-the-information-superhighway/>.

unique to their character, as such variation is what makes drag “fabulous” (Sam Message, the Meatbaby). In the context of INITIATIONS, learning how to make your own freaky costume and extravagant makeup is also part of the teaching and the learning of drag within their drag family. For example, aligned with the tradition in drag, the bizarre costumes of the Meatbaby and the other members of CULT are all “DIYs”. Kolbrún Inga Söring proudly states that “now everybody does everything on their own or helps each other,” yet they sometimes still need their drag parents’ help (i.e., Sam and Inga), to make outfits or teach them how to sew. As they are backstage, painting their faces side by side, I found this element of collective learning is still best understood through “aesthetic transformation”.¹⁴² This transformation is both internal and external. By playing with aesthetics and embodying “freaky” drag characters, members of CULT not only experiment with their own gendered selves but also invite the audience into emotional and imaginative shifts. These aesthetic choices are not merely stylistic, as they are political interventions. Through genderfucking drag kings, queens, and creatures, CULT exaggerates, parodies, or outright ignores the binary logics of gender, rendering them strange and unstable. Drag creature performances, in particular, defy legibility altogether, embracing the bizarre, the monstrous, and the excessive as tactics of refusal. Within the framework of drag pedagogy, these acts of aesthetic transformation become tools for reimagining social and bodily norms. Costumes, makeup, and gestures create forms of belonging that do not depend on sameness in queerness but instead emerge through shared play and reinvention.

Accessibility

BD&DQ:

Well, it’s a theatre experience that engages all the senses. Through interactive exercises, sensory tools, and tactile props, the audience gets to “step into” the story. They get to howl like wolves, flap like bats, smell garlic, feel the cold of Dracula’s castle, the gust of wind from a fan, the warmth from a love heart, and much more. When you see, hear, touch, smell, and act out the story, it becomes more alive. It turns into an adventure that everyone can take part in, regardless of ability.¹⁴³

The only show of BD&DQ I was not able to observe in person was “Dracula”. Wanting a fuller picture of their repertoire, I turned to their online presence. That’s when I discovered the entire performance had been adapted into a filmed, interactive format, reminiscent of their “Drag

¹⁴² Keenan and Hot Mess, “Drag Pedagogy,” 449.

¹⁴³ Bland Drakar och Dragqueens, *Vårt utbud 2025* [Our Offer 2025], under “Dracula – Upplevelseteater för alla sinnen” [“Dracula – Experiential Theatre for All the Senses”]. <https://blanddrakarochedragqueens.se/utbud/>

School” series on YouTube.¹⁴⁴ The video invited viewers to participate actively, once again blurring the lines between audience and performer in ways that echoed the collective’s broader pedagogical approach. The drag collective BD&DQ created an interactive digital drag performance of “Dracula,” specifically adapted for people with intellectual disabilities. Developed in collaboration with experts in easy-to-read language and representatives from the target group, the performance includes pedagogical materials to support inclusive participation. The performance invites sensory active involvement, such as smelling garlic, touching cold water, and mirroring movements, guided by Dracula’s (Inga Tvivel) instructions in the film. Library staff and accompanying personnel facilitate these activities, ensuring all participants can engage. The provided pedagogical material emphasizes clear, slow communication, simple language, and a welcoming atmosphere, offering concrete phrasing to guide the experience. This reflects Petter Wallenberg’s (BD&DQ’s founder) awareness of how language may lead to exclusion and his commitment to centering multiple ways of learning and knowing.

In the performance’s format, pedagogy is distributed among multiple agents, the drag performer, the facilitators, and the audience, challenging traditional hierarchies of knowledge. While the drag queen initiates the performance, it is through the facilitators’ guidance and the audience’s embodied participation that learning occurs. This shifts the focus from drag as a subject to be taught to drag as a *method* through which accessible, multisensory, and collaborative learning takes place. Additionally, this learning can occur anywhere, as the interactive format enables the show to be experienced in a range of non-urban settings. This decentralizes the performance, allowing it to travel beyond metropolitan centers and into local contexts across Sweden. Furthermore, this learning through drag is always free of cost for participants across all areas, whether through open-access online resources or in-person shows, which are offered at no charge during various festivals and public libraries. Although they still promote their book during story hours, they do so by encouraging people to buy or borrow the book from the public library where they perform. In these ways, BD&DQ invoke their pedagogy to actively challenge barriers to cultural participation shaped by class and locality.

The pedagogical approaches utilized in “Dracula” align with the overarching manner in which the collective orchestrates their performances, illustrating that accessibility serves as a fundamental organizing principle shaping both form and content across their repertoire. In this

¹⁴⁴ *Dracula – en interaktiv föreställning* [Dracula – An Interactive Performance], Stockholms stadsbibliotek, Bland drakar & dragqueens, 2021, video, 23:45, <https://biblioteket.stockholm.se/titel/dracula-en-interaktiv-forestallning>. The data about “Dracula” was retrieved from both the informational brochure and the video on “Play Bibliotek,” Stockholm’s public library’s digital platform.

example, accessibility helps render drag more acceptable within the institutional context of the Swedish public library. However, despite their emphasis on inclusion, their approach remains silent on questions of race. As a collective composed exclusively of white drag artists, their version of accessibility appears colorblind. This is unsurprising in the context of Sweden, where the notion of race itself has been progressively censored in public institutions, and colorblindness is not just a norm today but seen as a desirable ideal.¹⁴⁵ So, from what I found in BD&DQ's interviews, performances, and across their social media, the topic of race is never addressed. This silence reflects broader trends within Swedish liberal inclusion projects, with whiteness continuing to be the unmarked standard. In discussing her experience as a Black teacher in Sweden, Ylva Habel unpacks Swedish colorblind discourse, emphasizing that "Skin color, often considered a non-issue in the public sphere, is consistently played down or erased in Swedish cultural and political discourse."¹⁴⁶ BD&DQ's framing of accessibility thus risks reproducing a racialized version of Swedishness, one that continues to marginalize non-white audiences and performers, even as it claims to open up space for difference. In this sense, the drag collective's work within state-funded cultural frameworks exemplifies both the possibilities and limitations of drag as a tool for institutional legitimacy and raises essential questions about what a decolonial drag pedagogy in Sweden might require.

CULT:

I think our promise is like a sense of belonging. That everything is about trying to create a group feeling, a group dynamic, and trying to create a space where people can approach each other and relate to each other in a different way...across identities. [...] Like, how can we create a structured environment where someone older in the community can meet younger trans people when there's a big divide in language and understanding amongst our people to get that connection? Or how can we create an anti-racist space for white people to engage with who've maybe not encountered anti racism in a meaningful way before? How do you make people of color feel safe in that, whilst kind of bringing people together, because segregation and separatism are so strong in Gothenburg? (Sam Message, the Meatbaby)

All the work Sam Message and Kolbrún Inga Söring do in *Status Queer* and *CULT* (i.e., the workshops, exhibitions, performances, and networks they create) focus on bringing together

¹⁴⁵ Catrin Lundström, "‘We Foreigners Lived in Our Foreign Bubble’: Understanding Colorblind Ideology in Expatriate Narratives 1," *Sociological Forum* 36, no. 4 (August 11, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12747>. In her research on how returning Swedish expatriate women discuss race and whiteness, Catrin Lundström frames her findings by highlighting colorblindness as the prevailing racial ideology in Sweden.

¹⁴⁶ Ylva Habel, "Race, Nation, and Schooling in Esmeraldas, Ecuador: Ethan Johnson," in *Education in the Black Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 2012), 99–122, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203152973-10>.

individuals from different intersections in ways they cannot connect otherwise. In their efforts to be inclusive, CULT variably manages exclusions based on class, gender, language, disability, age, and race, addressing “who has access to *making* and who has access to *experience* drag” (Sam, the Meatbaby).

CULT addresses class by making their drag financially accessible through two main ways. One method is through their ticket fees. Each performance accommodates priority groups. “Our shows are for everyone, not just those who can afford it.” Anyone can get a free ticket to CULT’s drag shows if they are part of one of the five priority groups. These include individuals who identify as “binary & non-binary trans,” “newly arrived,” “living with a disability,” “racialized,” and “working class/economically precarious.”¹⁴⁷ To claim a ticket, one simply sends a direct message on Instagram; there’s no evaluation of eligibility; the process relies on trust. The other method is through keeping the INITIATIONS school free for its participants. By doing so they hope to make the learning of drag accessible to even the most marginalized of the queer community.

This is also reflected in their selection criteria for students to join INITIATIONS. They claim that the two things they prioritized in creating a “diverse group” are intersectional identity and artistic style. Inga notes that although some individuals excel as dancers and others as makeup artists, these abilities are not as crucial to the selection process as a person’s motivation and engagement. For instance, they guide their selection on the motivation of people to *why* they wanted to learn how to do drag, trying to choose applications “purely on the idea and not how it’s expressed” (Sam, the Meatbaby). They recognize that not everyone, especially not marginalized and disabled queers of color, has had the chance to learn how to express their ideas eloquently, such as through access to formal arts education, which trains individuals to present their artistic projects in a compelling manner, especially in English. Indeed, while Sam and Inga demonstrated knowledge of Swedish during our interviews, they primarily use English in their shows, drag school, and on social media. This choice makes their drag performances accessible to a broader audience, not just Swedish speakers. As immigrants who had to learn Swedish, especially to apply for various grants, this approach serves as both a practical and symbolic gesture.

During my interviews with Sam, they mentioned disability within the framework of intersectionality. During their shows, they frequently revisit the challenges associated with mental

¹⁴⁷ “Accessibility,” Status Queer, accessed April 5, 2025, <https://statusqueer.com/accessibility/>.

health issues and ableism. Moreover, their venues are consistently wheelchair accessible, a fact they regularly emphasize in their social media promotions for the shows. They are also conscious of ageism, and while they cannot welcome minors into their drag school for legal reasons, they have succeeded in creating a diverse group where the youngest is eighteen and the eldest is in their forties. This approach encourages individuals to learn and perform drag, regardless of their stage in life.

Although they have achieved diversification in various aspects, race continues to be a challenge for the CULT founders, as highlighted in our interviews. They spoke overtly about how, despite their ongoing efforts, they find it challenging to enhance racial diversity within their group. For example, Sam mentioned how disappointed they were about the limits of the diversity of their members after two rounds of INITIATIONS:

We are just like a very *white* group. For various reasons, people of colour dropped out, and obviously has to do with minorities' stress, and that people's lives are very hectic, and also chance, you know. (Sam, the Meat baby)

Once more, viewed from the perspective of Swedishness, the prevalence of whiteness is expected, particularly in Gothenburg, where Sam and Inga experience that “separatism” shapes the cultural landscape and approaches to enhancing accessibility and diversity. Hence, CULT may unintentionally reproduce normative assumptions about whiteness in Swedish queer spaces by featuring only white drag performers. This brings me back to Khubchandani’s argument about decolonizing drag where “the category of performance we call drag has been occupied by particular forms of whiteness (binary gender, professionalism, disaffected irony) that regulate and deny access to the genre for many, particularly people of color and Indigenous people from across the globe, as well as poor and disabled artists”¹⁴⁸. Nevertheless, I contend that CULT’s intentional actions to diversify, politicize, and queer drag, along with its spaces, counters the grip of these “forms of whiteness” on their performances. This is demonstrated by a significant self-reflection on their privileges as white artists, especially as both founders have indicated a commitment to thoughtfully addressing this concern.

While not strictly an act of pedagogy, but rather a prerequisite for it, I emphasize CULT’s efforts to diversify their drag because it illustrates their commitment to making teaching and learning with drag more accessible. This echoes Keenan and Hot Mess’ argument about how drag

¹⁴⁸ Khubchandani, *Decolonize Drag*, 22.

pedagogy can invite “queer ways of knowing”¹⁴⁹. The CULT founders succeed in offering alternative modes of engagement that lower barriers to participation for different learners, notably marginalized people of the queer community. Determining the extent to which CULT’s commitment to accessibility is influenced by the need to justify drag’s presence in, or funded by, public institutions is challenging. As demonstrated in earlier chapters, the founders of CULT face challenges in obtaining public funding and access to institutional spaces. Therefore, it is noteworthy that they are successfully making their own space accessible to other marginalized queers in Gothenburg. So, it is evident that making drag accessible as an art form, and as a political and educational tool, to marginalized LGBTQ+ individuals is integral to their pedagogical toolkit and not just a legitimacy justification.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored how drag pedagogy materializes not through formalized curricula or explicit instruction but through embodied practices grounded in play, aesthetics, and accessibility. These three themes, emerging across performances, audience interactions, interviews, and social media activity, reveal that teaching and learning in drag spaces often unfold in affective, improvised, and highly contextual ways. Rather than offering a singular model, the collectives craft pedagogical experiences that are relational and emotionally charged, sometimes celebratory, sometimes uncomfortable, and often contradictory. Crucially, the drag artists I worked with do not always name these practices as “pedagogy,” and I argue that this ambiguity is strategic. BD&DQ, whose work with schools and libraries aligns with institutional expectations, frequently adopts pedagogical language. CULT, by contrast, operate in informal queer adult spaces where pedagogy is not always legible, or fundable, as such. Naming their work as pedagogical might demand additional justification in these settings or risk undermining the radically queer nature of the space. Yet both collectives engage in “teaching and learning with drag” practices, underscoring the need to understand pedagogy not as a fixed label but as a contextual and negotiated practice. The examples in this chapter, ranging from glitter rituals and relational exercises to aesthetic improvisation and emotional dramaturgy, highlight how drag pedagogies become possible through creative methods of inclusion. Here, pedagogy is not merely what is taught, but how participation is invited, how bodies are rendered visible, and how discomfort and joy are mobilized as tools for collective learning. This form of queer pedagogy relies on performance to redistribute authority, challenge normative boundaries of propriety, and model alternative ways of knowing and being together. In this sense, drag pedagogies are not

¹⁴⁹ Keenan and Hot Mess, “Drag Pedagogy,” 441.

simply shaped by narratives of legitimacy, but they also reimagine what legitimacy can mean. Whether glittering in a library or moaning in a backroom bar, the pedagogical possibilities of drag emerge in the tension between accessibility and resistance, joy and critique. It is precisely in this unstable terrain that teaching queerly becomes not only possible but powerfully transformative.

7. Conclusion

This thesis began with a puzzle: what happens when drag enters public space in Sweden, not only to entertain or provoke, but to teach? What forms of pedagogy emerge when artists perform in libraries, schools, Pride festivals, museums, and backrooms, and how do these pedagogies become intelligible within a landscape shaped by institutional norms and narratives of Swedish exceptionalism? To address this, I asked: How do narratives about drag as legitimate work and art shape queer pedagogical approaches in Swedish drag? This question emerged from my ethnographic engagement with the two drag collectives, Bland Drakar och Dragqueens and CULT. My aim was not to produce a fixed definition of “drag pedagogy” but to trace how pedagogy appears within specific cultural and spatial conditions.

In Chapter 4, I began by examining how drag artists position themselves as cultural workers and how these positionings shape their claims to artistic and pedagogical legitimacy. I argued that legitimacy is not a stable status but a performance in itself that must be continually negotiated across settings and publics. BD&DQ emphasize institutional legibility and pedagogical clarity, while CULT foregrounds queer disruption and engagement with fine arts. These strategies reflect the pressures that drag artists face when queerness is made visible within publicly funded cultural spaces. Chapter 5 builds on this analysis by exploring how spatial and institutional settings shape what drag pedagogy can become. I focused on how “norm-critical pedagogy,” as a dominant educational frame, presents both opportunities and constraints for queer drag work. Tracing how BD&DQ navigate these expectations in schools and libraries, and drawing on interviews with three professionals from the public education sector, I argued that being institutionally welcomed does not necessarily allow for the full expression of queer pedagogical intent. CULT’s more informal engagements, by contrast, expose the political costs of remaining unintelligible to dominant frameworks. In Chapter 6, I turned to the performances themselves. Through the themes of play, aesthetic transformation, and accessibility, I explored how pedagogy materializes through affective and embodied interaction. I argued that drag pedagogy functions as a situated and improvisational practice that draws its force from emotional dramaturgy and the shifting relations between performers and audiences. From BD&DQ’s glitter rituals to CULT’s use of discomfort and drag creature aesthetics, I showed that these practices create openings for collective reflection and transformation.

Together, these chapters build an argument that drag pedagogy in Sweden is not a unified or predefined practice but a plural and contested terrain, shaped by artists’ strategic responses to

institutional pressures, audience expectations, and broader politics of visibility. Rather than asking whether drag pedagogy is “radical” or “normative,” I have insisted on sitting with ambivalence. BD&DQ and CULT operate under vastly different conditions, yet their pedagogies converge in important ways in their use of play as both method and mood, in their carefully crafted aesthetics, in their shared commitment to accessibility, and overall, in their affective engagements with audiences. These practices reveal that drag pedagogy is not reducible to queer visibility or norm disruption alone, rather, it is a situated, at times contradictory form of cultural labor that unfolds in relation to institutional constraints, audience expectations, and artists’ own survival strategies. In this sense, one of the key contributions of the thesis lies in its repositioning of pedagogy as an unstable field of relational, affective, and aesthetic work instead of as a fixed framework or a curricular outcome. While this aligns with parts of the existing drag pedagogy framework, my analysis foregrounds how pedagogy persists even when it is not named as such. It sometimes takes the form of glitter rituals or collective moaning, and sometimes of bureaucratic maneuvering, or even burnout. To treat these moments as pedagogical is not to romanticize them, but to take seriously the kinds of knowledge and transformation they enable, however fleeting. When drag pedagogy teaches, it often does so indirectly, through the body, through playful defiance, and through holding space for discomfort.

This approach also challenges dominant readings of institutional legibility. Much of the literature on drag and pedagogy, especially in the Swedish context, has focused on how drag is perceived by institutions or the public. While such analyses are important, they often erase the voice of artists themselves, or reduce pedagogy to institutional legibility: can this be funded? Is it too political? What will parents say? My research suggests that artists are acutely aware of these questions and often work around them in ways that are both defiant and strategic. In CULT’s case, this may involve describing their work as “queer performance art” instead of “drag,” to better fit into fine arts circuits. While in BD&DQ’s case, it may mean framing drag pedagogy through language of literacy, storytelling, and child development, while avoiding overtly queer or activist framings. These are not contradictions to be resolved but signs of the delicate balancing act artists perform between creative autonomy and the need to survive with(in) institutions. Legitimacy, then, is not a status to be attained, but a process to be constantly managed. It is performed, negotiated, and at times refused. What counts as legitimate pedagogy, what qualifies as valuable cultural labor, and who is authorized to teach in public are critical questions in Sweden today. They are entangled with neoliberal expectations of professionalism, with whiteness, and with narratives of secular tolerance that frame queerness as acceptable only when depoliticized, desexualized, or made child-friendly. Within this context, both BD&DQ and

CULT must navigate a politics of visibility that asks drag artists to be either “safe” or “spectacular” but rarely both. Thus, this visibility often demands assimilation, as pedagogical clarity risks flattening the political complexity of drag.

The theoretical tools of drag pedagogy, norm-critical pedagogy, and decolonial drag helped me make sense of this ambivalence, but they also required adaptation. Keenan and Hot Mess offer a compelling account of drag pedagogy’s queer potential, yet their U.S.-based focus on DSH did not account for the national conditions that shape drag’s reception in Sweden. Norm-critical pedagogy, while influential in the Swedish education system, is revealed here as both a resource and a constraint, a framework that invites “diversity” while policing the terms under which queerness appears. Meanwhile, Khubchandani’s decolonial drag concept illuminated how drag pedagogy can resist hyper-professionalized norms and invoke minoritarian aesthetics, even if these resistances are partial. What this thesis ultimately contributes is not a new definition of drag pedagogy, but a deeper understanding of how pedagogies emerge through drag when legitimacy is unstable, and when institutions simultaneously invite and exclude queer cultural labor. Through a multi-sited ethnography grounded in feminist reflexivity, my methodology has allowed me to trace pedagogy not only in performances and interviews but in affective atmospheres, visual aesthetics, and even the silences around race or discomfort. By approaching drag pedagogy as something that emerges unevenly and at times elusively, I hope to have made space for forms of queer teaching that are often missed by more outcome-oriented or policy-driven approaches.

This project is also shaped by its limitations. While both collectives emphasize intersectionality and accessibility, the landscape of Swedish drag remains overwhelmingly able-bodied and white. Despite efforts to engage a diverse range of drag performers, my study inadvertently reflects this racialized homogeneity, which is a fact that is not simply methodological, but structural. The absence of race in many of my interviews and performances is especially telling. It demonstrates how Swedish colorblindness still influences which expressions of queerness are funded and celebrated. This analysis has therefore not only traced drag pedagogy’s potential but insisted that such potential must be understood within the constraints of racialized cultural legitimacy.

Future research might address these questions more directly, examining how race, migration, and decolonial critique intersect with drag pedagogy in Swedish or Nordic contexts. How do drag pedagogies shift when they center performers and audiences of color, disabled queers, or migrants? What forms of collective care or resistance emerge when drag is practiced

outside institutional circuits altogether? Additionally, practitioners may also recognize the value of drag pedagogy in its content and form. What would it mean to design public cultural programming that allows for contradiction, discomfort, and joy? To move beyond tick-box inclusion and toward a pedagogy of shared risk and mutual recognition? If institutions are to engage meaningfully with drag pedagogy, they must also be willing to be transformed by it. Finally, understanding drag pedagogy in Sweden means grappling with tensions between play and professionalism, joy and exhaustion, and visibility and risk. It is to see pedagogy not only in the glitter and the spectacle but also in the awkward moments, the administrative work, and the silences that linger after the shows. In this perspective, drag pedagogy becomes less of a practice of teaching and more a way of imagining and staging queer world-making, in a landscape that too often demands legibility at the cost of complexity.

Appendix

Appendix 1: Details about my interview participants

<u>Drag Artists' Perspective</u>	<u>Education Sector Perspective</u>
Sam Message (UK) aka <i>the Meatbaby</i> is a drag performer, artist, co-founder of <i>Status Queer</i> and <i>CULT</i> , but also a trans activist, curator and community organizer. Based in Göteborg. I got in touch with them last summer via email after having seen their CULT drag show. I interviewed them in August 2024 and then a follow up interview in February 2025. I interviewed them about their vision when creation <i>Status Queer</i> , and then <i>CULT</i> , and the motivations behind creating a queer community around drag event, and so on.	Karla (SE) is a pre-K teaching student about to graduate based in Göteborg. We met during my fieldwork during West Pride, and I interviewed in August 2024 her about her perspective on the place of drag in the classroom, the role of the queer teacher, and how she understands drag pedagogy in relation to the new curriculum and expectations for upcoming teachers.
Kolbrún Inga Söring (IS) aka <i>Sinfluencer</i> is a drag performer, co-founder of <i>Status Queer</i> and <i>CULT</i> , and renowned artist. Based in Göteborg. I got in touch in them via email in Summer 2024, and interviewed them in February 2025. I interviewed them about their perspective as a co-founder and artist navigating drag's versatile underground scene into the mainstream etc.	Maria (SE) is a co-rector of a suburban public "communal" school, based in Göteborg, and a former teacher for 10–13-year-olds. The school is in a well-off and mostly white suburb. I know her personally from before my research. I interviewed her in November 2024 about her management perspective on potentially introducing drag into the classroom. She is also a mother of 3 children under 10 years old so her perspective as a parent was equally interesting.
Jan Ericsson (SE) aka <i>Inga Tvivel</i> is a drag performer, one of the 3 drag queens starring in <i>Bland Drakar och Dragqueens</i> , and teacher at a public "free-standing" high school in a well-off neighborhood in Stockholm. I met him at a drag story hour. I interviewed him in July 2024 on his perspective as both a drag artist and a teacher, how the latter informs his drag character and pedagogy, and so on.	Madeleine (SE) is a "free time" pedagogue for children between 8 and 14 years old at a public "free-standing" school. The school has changed location going from two suburbs in Göteborg, both with a majority of racialized students but with important differences in socio-economic status. I know her personally from before this research. I interviewed her in February 2025 about her perspective on bringing drag into "after school" activities and navigating "norm-critique" beyond the official curriculum. She is also a mother of a 11-year-old.
Petter Wallenberg (SE) is an activist, director and writer, and founder of the drag theater company <i>Bland Drakar och Dragqueens</i> , based in Stockholm. I got in touch with him via the contact form on BD&DQ's website last spring. I interviewed him in December 2024 about his vision when creating the collective 7 years ago, how he navigates hate and threats, what drives his creativity, what inspired his pedagogy etc.	

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