

## Becoming-vulnerable

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For Therese

One thing is needful - to give style to one's character-a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the great strengths and weaknesses of their nature and fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. . . In the end, when the work is finished, it becomes evident how the constraint of a single taste governed everything large and small. Whether this taste was good or bad is less important than one might suppose, if only it was a single taste!  
- Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*.

The time has come to think about drag.(1) For many people, the idea of men wearing women's clothing and pretending to be famous is not a subject for conversation, much less a cause for serious thought. Mention the subject and you are often met with laughter, derisive comments, sexual innuendo and outright contempt. This immediate, visceral (perhaps we should say "bodily") response to the thought of drag queens, occurring as it does equally among men and women (both gay and straight), indicates the extent to which drag has already been made a subject of discourse. The terror and hysteria that is often met with the two simple words, "drag queen", indicates not a repression of the subject, but rather its exposure. Our current conceptions about what this term means serves to inscribe "masculinity" and "femininity" into our bodies. It is one marker among several (perhaps thousands) for demarcating what is considered masculine and feminine in the social landscape. To be more specific, the treatment or discourse of drag queens as objects of hate serves a governing and regulating function. It is, in part or in some measure, by means of reference to the "perverse" drag queen that the "normal" masculine male is defined. This is no less true, perhaps even more so, among gay men. This, in itself, gives us reason to think our way through the serious pleasures of drag. I use the term pleasure intentionally for it is precisely this, I think, that many people find so frightening. It is not that they cannot "comprehend" drag. That is easy enough to do. Anyone looking at a drag queen can say: "that man over there is pretending to be Cher." What people cannot allow themselves to think about is the pleasure that this involves. That a man putting on fabulous outfits, make-up, jewelry, etc. and performing in a show, becoming a superstar, could actually choose to do this. That he would *want* to engage in such behavior and make a spectacle of himself for the world to see. This essay is about the pleasures of drag.

What is the sense of gay men gathering together, dressing up as women, and putting on shows? What affects and experiences does this unleash in the body? How do gay men use this experience, this expression of their bodies, as an affirmation of life: a mode of becoming which seeks to overcome the limits of gender and sexuality as regulating practices of the body? How does this practice constitute an expression of political (bodily) empowerment? What does it mean in this (Western) culture to view the bodies of drag queens as objects of hate? What use does this discourse make of their bodies and its pleasures? These are some of the questions that I would like to speculatively explore in the following meditation on the *force* of drag. Such an inquiry, by its very nature, can only give expression to one (multiple) sense or sensibility of this *force* in its unique and specific relations. This essay, I want to make clear, is an expression of my own experiences, encounters, and relations as a spectator of a small working-class gay bar in Tacoma, WA (the 24th Street Tavern). It is as much about my own body, and its affective experience with this encounter, as it is about what I see on the stage. All I can do, and all I care to do, is share with others what I feel, sense, think, and experience in the midst of this spectacle. Such a perspective is inherently *subjective*, but this

subjectivity is not one of a *Cartesian* subject; rather, it is one of a singularity. Such an inquiry necessarily takes place *between* my (particular) body, this (particular) bar, these (particular) drag queens, and the world (the fact that these bodies are immersed in a world in which these practices have become possible at a particular moment in time), at the same time that it attempts to write the very multiplicity of this meaning. The sense of drag that I want to fashion is, itself, part of this "theoretical" activity. That sense, I want to suggest, is one of vulnerability. To present the "thesis" of the present work in purely theoretical terms, it is an effort to read Deleuze's theory of radical empiricism as a theory of becoming (an asubjective mode of individuation) in relation to the theory of affect and immanence, and as a theory of incorporeal transformation (which is, simultaneously read) as a theory singularity; it is the use of all these ways of thinking in order to arrive at (create, fashion and invent) a concept of becoming-vulnerable. The *force* of drag is becoming-vulnerable.

I have written this essay on the basis of my affinity, or shared *sensibility*, with drag queens; for the choices they have made regarding power, masculinity, and its inscription in their bodies. This affinity or sensibility is not the same as the mirror-image of identity related to a person or operating on the level of a personality (the fetishization of the concept of subjectivity). Rather, this affinity operates at the level of a self, reconceptualized, if you will, de-subjectified, as a socially constructed *singularity* enmeshed in a complex interplay of forces and relations; acting, reacting and inciting on the surface of the body. The term sensibility can be used here in the broadest sense of the word: as designating, simultaneously, a sense, a sensation, a sense-perception, and a sensitivity. If there is a self, it is the choices we make, whether to actively resist or acquiesce, to multiple inscriptions of power. At the level of the body how "it" fights the viral mutations of power with its own mutating "genital thought." (2) To conceive of a body of thought in this sense is not to conceive of an organic form of thought, but of a thought from the outside which simultaneously goes deeper than any facile subjectivity or personality. (3) A thought that is simultaneously on the surface of our bodies and inside them, not as some deep structure of development, spirit, or identity, but as something raw and visceral. As an accumulation of forces and relations as they have been inscribed in our bodies and the resistances to them, or rather the counter-forces to them and their multiple mutations. A bodily assemblage of intensities, forces and relations. In this sense, "local knowledge" is conceived *as the body*. (4) The body, according to Deleuze, is composed of a multiplicity of force relations:

Being composed of a plurality of irreducible forces the body is a multiple phenomenon, its unity is that of a multiple phenomenon, it is a unity of domination. In a body the superior or dominant forces are known as *active* and inferior or dominated forces are known as *reactive*. Active and reactive are precisely the original qualities which express the relation of force with force (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 40).

The "self" is composed, at once, of its creative and affirmative resistance to power and its inherent and inescapable complicity with it. The body is productive, and what it produces is its unconscious. This is its power, its potential. "What makes the body superior to all reactions, particularly the reaction of the ego called consciousness, is the activity of necessarily unconscious forces" (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 41-42). What the body produces, in other words, is its *potential*. This potential, however, is always (more or less) in the process of being circumscribed by relations of power. We cannot escape power. It is always with us. We are all, always, in more or less ways, implicated and inscribed with power. But within this fate, what is most important *for* the body are its engagements with opposing forces, its "encounters" with other bodies and the world. The choices that we make for, and with, our bodies and their engagements with active and reactive forces. (5) The "self" is this constantly mutating play of forces and relations within concrete apparatuses of power, not a self-valorizing subject "realizing" itself through history, nor is it an autonomous being with an original beginning. To be born is not to begin life, but to *become-life*. To "begin" life, to conceive of birth on this level, is to posit a subject who can be made use of by others. To "become" life, to conceive of birth on this level, is to affirm a creative self, a constantly changing and mutating self: a becoming-self which can live in affinity with others. Beginning and becoming. These two ideas could not be more opposed. The first, seeking as it does for a power over life, and the second, stemming as it does from the very desire *for life*. Subjectivity has been, if nothing more, the ultimate discourse by means of which power is exercised over life. My affinity with drag queens stems from an affirmation of their lives. To experience a working-class man, in a small pub, wearing a dress, lyp-synching

to music, pretending to become a famous star, is to experience a common sensation of vulnerability. It is to affirm and express an experience of intensity: the body's vulnerability to power. It is to take pleasure in the very exposure of the body. That this expression should be constructed by men, who are culturally denied such affects, and that these men should be turned into objects of hate for this expression of their bodies, is all the more reason for us to celebrate them and the mode of resistance they have created; to affirm and protect drag as a force for life against the constant state of subjection in which we all live.

This conception of becoming-vulnerable defines the self *against* subjectivity. As Nietzsche formulates it, the self *is* the body. "A most powerful being, an unknown sage-he is called Self. He inhabits your body. He is your body" (cited in Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 42). Subjectivity, precisely because it posits an ideal and "essential" nature, is something inherently alien and foreign to the body. What is needed (for resistance) is not a new definition of subjectivity, a minoritarian subject, but perhaps a new sense of self. As Deleuze writes, "The body's active forces make it a self and define the self as superior and astonishing" (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 42). The task for sexual minorities, with regard to the "overcoding" of our bodies as subjects of truth, is not to develop gay identities or subjectivities, but to seek new ways of relating to our bodies and those of others; to create completely *other* ways of thinking and living. Impersonal (or, perhaps, absolutely personal), and therefore nonlimitative, modes of the self (of becoming). The task before each body is ultimately this: not simply to become, in Nietzsche's sense, who you are, but to push this sense to a further limit and become who you are not; to become other than who you are or have been made to "be." Incorporal transformation as individuation as becoming-other. "Identity," as Brian Massumi remarks, "is a habit, a predictability imposed upon a captured body"(6).

Subjectivity is nothing less than a "perpetual battle" to produce, and work on, the body in specific ways. I would like to explore, within the subject at hand, the parameters in which subjectivity can be said to relate to affective experience. To ask, in effect, what affective experiences, encounters and relations can mean for resistance to power. Affect, in the simplest of terms, is the capacity of a body to act or be acted upon. As Deleuze states:

The more ways a body could be affected the more force it had. This capacity measures the force of a body or expresses its power. And on the other hand, this power is not a simple logical possibility for it is actualized at every moment by the bodies to which a given body is related. On the other hand, this capacity is not a physical passivity, the only passive affects are those not adequately caused by a given body (*Nietzsche & Philosophy*, 62)

The "space" of affect, the place where it takes effect (becomes effective) is the in-between of the encounter between two (or more) bodies. Affect is a "pre-personal intensity" which "happens" in the space of a given body's exposure: it is "what happens" in the encounter between them. Affect is the vulnerability of two or more bodies in relation to each other and the world. How is it, I wonder, that such states of intensity are already used to fashion modes of resistance to power? How does the subjection of bodies constitute a loss of the body's power, which blocks, divides, and hinders its capacity to act, to resist power? How, in contrast to this "affective" loss, do bodies make use of affective states for resistance to power? How does the power of sexual subjection trap bodies in the world through the productive internalization of its truths? By simply asking these questions we consider the possibility that the overcoming of subjectivity may come, in part, from the affective and intensive states or experiences of the body itself. As Deleuze remarks, "the capacity for being affected is not necessarily a passivity, but an activity, a sensibility, a sensation" (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 62). "All sensibility is only a becoming of forces" (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 63). Perhaps the affective states of the body's ceaseless exposure (its sheer openness to encounters with other bodies and the world), is not something inherently negative, but positive and productive. Perhaps the body *in its very vulnerability* harbors a certain power or potential for resistance. Perhaps it is through this exposure (to power, to other bodies, to the world), - or, perhaps, through a certain relation to it - that we can resist power and *pervert* its relations; to, at least, dispel some of its effects. This is to suggest that to fight the reactive effects of subjectivity and the loss of power (potential) which it produces in (and extracts from) the body, we must make use of those active and affirmative states of intensity of the body itself. Posing these questions in this manner enables us to explore how affective states mean, both as functions of power and as modes of struggle or resistance. "Spinoza," Deleuze reminds us, "suggested a new direction for the sciences

and philosophy. He said that we do not even know what a body *can do*, we talk about consciousness and spirit and chatter on about it all, but we do not know what a body is capable of, what forces belong to it or what they are preparing for" (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*,40).(7) What forces does the unknown, the unconscious of the body, hold for life itself? "The great activity," Nietzsche declares, "is unconsciousness" (cited in Deleuze,*Nietzsche and Philosophy*,41). We have hardly begun to explore the *active pleasures* of the body, least of all, the pleasures of vulnerability. What is the sense of vulnerability and what can it allow a body to do? What, or rather, how can it mean as an active (and affective) force for life, for resistance to power, for becoming who you are, for becoming-other? The question of vulnerability, of what we can make of it and the potential (power) it holds for the body can be formulated in the following manner: *what use can a body make of becoming an error* ?

The fear of drag queens-the discourse and visualization of them as objects of hate-is a deployment of power. It functions as a warning to all who have bodies capable of experiencing fear that this is what will be done to you, this is how you will be treated, if you fail to conform, to discipline your body (self), to make it a representation of a true man, a true woman, a true heterosexual. That is, if you fail to relate to your own body and those of others as subjects of gender and sexuality, as subjects of truth. Is not the very visualization of drag queens as objects of hate used to advertise the immutability of subjectivity? Isn't the need to despise and hate drag queens really a need to *promote* subjectivity? Is not the discourse of drag queens as objects of hate a veritable deployment of fear? The fear of ever allowing one's body, or the bodies of others, to take pleasure in its own bodily intensities, to affirm its difference from other bodies, even to celebrate its ceaseless exposure to other bodies and the world. Isn't what motivates this discourse the fear of ever allowing the body to take pleasure in itself wherever one happens to find it. In a sense, we could say that we have inherited a world that is terrified of allowing body's to touch them selves: to experience their own sensations, affects and intensities as constitutive pleasures. We live in a world that has been organized precisely to separate the body from its power (potential), from its capacity to act; to prevent the affirmation of the self (body) and the embracing of its difference(s).

The fear of drag queens as objects of hate finds its basis in this denial of the body. What the discourse of subjectivity "does," in other words, is produce a reactive response to the body's (inherent, always, and already) vulnerability. Subjectivity is the denial of vulnerability. It is the reactive assertion that we can prevent our bodies from becoming-vulnerable, from being exposed (to other bodies and the world),and make them "be" correct or true. Any body that readily denies the vulnerability of its own body is always ready to commit acts of terror against those who embrace their bodies and expose themselves as vulnerable. A body that denies its own vulnerability, exposure, and implication is always ready to deny this experience and sensation in the bodies of others. The denial of difference is a denial of the body. A drag queen has no truth to assert or establish. She only has a dress and a body of affects and intensities, trapped in the world. With these tools she fashions the surface of her body, her exteriority, as means to "reclaim" her 'self.'" What drag "fashions," in a sense, are its relations between its self (body) and the world. It produces a mode of resistance between its body, its fate, and the world. The body of drag is an indicator, a flagrant display, of its inability to be made into, either through its own becoming or through others working upon its body, a normalized subject. The experience of drag pushes the body to the limit of its power and explodes the fiction that our bodies are somehow perfect, invulnerable, correct, or true. Drag is an embodiment of the "errors" of gender and sexuality as practices of truth. It affirmatively exposes the body as a visceral, physical, sensation (a material and immaterial fabulation) *against* the discourses of subjectivity which seek to harness the body, to view it as merely one unit, one (w)hole, which is perfectly isolated and self-contained. We are all mutations. We are all mistakes. Every body is an error. What is necessary is to turn this fate into an object of affirmation (of pleasure and enjoyment). Drag queens exalt and delight in the delirious pleasures of the very imperfection of the body. They have taken the errors of gender and sex, the mistake that such ideas and practices of power deploy, and the corresponding experience that their own bodies attest to this mistake, this error, this aberration, and they have turned it into an art. They have made of their vulnerability a pleasure. Their politics of vulnerability literally rides over the surface of the body as a counter force to apparatuses for the control of pleasure, sex, and self. Drag is a force of vulnerability in the present for the experimental creation and invention of de-subjectified bodies. Not as a utopian projection for the future, nor as an idealization or redemption from the past, but as a force of resistance trapped, and thereby implicated, in the present. There is no content or form that is

expressed through the body of drag, but rather something unknown. The unknown or unconscious of the body itself. Becoming-vulnerable is the affective experience of one's fate and the willing of its eternal return (which *through this very act* produces incorporeal transformations). Drag queens want to change themselves and the world by changing their clothes. "The power of transformation," Deleuze reminds us, "is the primary definition of activity" (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*,42).

Our bodies, from the moment that we are born, are always, already, inscribed with power. It is up to us to engage power wherever and whenever we find it with whatever means of affirmative resistance we have available. This is what Foucault means when he says, "Everything is dangerous. . . my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism." ( "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 232) Further, we have these forces available to us only in a mutating, more or less, fashion. Which forces are available to which bodies is completely a matter of chance and fate. We can engage in resistance to power in a more or less way, but no body can escape power. No body, however "weak" or "strong", comes equipped to live without invasions of power. No body is *not susceptible* to power. *All bodies are vulnerable*.

Becoming-vulnerable, as I have used that term here, is an affective experience which transmutes, but does not transcend, the body's inherent suffering in relation to the effects of subjectivity. To overcome (in part) the stratification produced by subjectivity it is first necessary to affirm the body in all its constitutive relations, in order to deploy its active passions and actions (its affectivity). The experience of the "suffering" caused by subjectivity must, first of all, be felt, experienced, and acknowledged by the body before such an incorporeal transformation becomes possible. It is the separation of the body from its own affective states (including those forces of subjection which bear down on it in order to produce that very separation) that produces subjectivity. The power of subjection seeks to close off the body from itself (to separate it from its own experiences, encounters, and relations). There is no room for "active forgetting" in the process of becoming-vulnerable, precisely because the body does not (and can never entirely) forget what is done to it (and what it does to itself). How can the body, conceived as an accumulation of forces and relations, ever forget (the problem of "active forgetting" in Nietzsche's lexicon, is one of "bad conscience" and not, properly, one of the body). The "exposure" of becoming-vulnerable is badly misunderstood, and perhaps reterritorialized - if not altogether completely obliterated - if it is misconceived according to Nietzsche's famous formulation that, "anything that doesn't kill me, makes me stronger." This is the image of *invulnerability*, *par excellence*. Can this be considered an image of vulnerability in any sense of the term. The forces and relations of becoming-vulnerable move in an opposing direction. "Active force," Deleuze remarks, "goes to the limit of its consequences" (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*,66). "Becoming active presupposes the affinity of action and affirmation; to become active it is not sufficient for a force to go to the limit of what it can do, it must make what it can do an object of affirmation" (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*,68 ). A body actively becoming-vulnerable affirms what is different about itself (and other bodies) through its very mutability and openness to existence (to other bodies and the world). It is not enough for such a body to remain trapped in the closed spaces of an "interior" strength or truth. The space of vulnerability is completely open, completely exposed. This is what a body wants. This is what a body becoming-vulnerable, becoming-active, seeks out. It is, perhaps, only in such a space that an affirmative (active) body can truly *live*.

This paper is about the scars on our bodies: the multiple scars of power and the ways our bodies have survived them. It is about the numerous assaults and invasions of our bodies by power and the wounds it has inflicted. "Even in a wound," Nietzsche reminds us, "there is the power to heal" (8) As a "Manifesto for Drag Queens," this paper is a celebration of what in our bodies (and the world) is available for us to make use of for resistance; for the productive creation in the present, the willing (in so far as this is possible), of a body of one's own. And this is precisely what drag queens do. They dress up their bodies as a means to reclaim them: to become who they are, to simultaneously mask (protect) and exalt their own scars, to make their vulnerability a pleasure.

**Notes.**

This essay was written between the spring and summer of 1991. The original manuscript numbered some 100 pages in length. The present version was edited from approximately 20 of those 100 pages in December of 1998. Portions of it, in radically different and embryonic form, were originally presented in a final paper for Evan Watkins "Critical Theory" seminar at the University of Washington, Seattle in the Spring of 1991. I would like, first of all, to thank him for reading and commenting on my initial work. I would also like to thank Jenny Schlieps, Stacy Levine, and Jane Werntz for reading and commenting on various drafts. Steve Shaviro was kind enough to cite our conversations on these matters in his book, The Cinematic Body. Brian Mathis has not only afforded me his "fabulous" friendship, but he also introduced me to the subterranean world of Tacoma's 24th Street Tavern (an event for which I am eternally grateful). The drag queens of the 24th Street Tavern-Nöel Duvall, Topaz Dreams, and Stephanie Bell, in particular-deserve special mention for inspiring me to think and write along these lines. Finally, Therese Grisham deserves "extra special" thanks for her almost constant inspiration and encouragement during the writing of this essay. It could not have been written without her love and support. This work is, appropriately, dedicated to her-from one drag queen philosopher to another.

1. Since I began writing this essay in May of 1991, there has been a proliferation of discourses about drag. From the publication of scholarly books and articles on the subject to the increasing visualization of drag in popular culture: on television talk shows, music videos, and the widespread exposure of the film *Paris is Burning*. This new discovery of drag and drag queens as subjects of discourse is fascinating in and of itself and merits our attention. However, issues of time and space make it impossible for me to fully explore or integrate these sources into the current text. It is my impression that none of these new discourses detracts from the sense of drag expressed in the following pages. If anything, the heightened visualization and exposure of drag is all the more reason for us to take the meaning that I claim for it here seriously. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge Gayle Rubin's essay, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" in Carole Vance ed. *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge, 1984) from which the first sentence of the present work was "sampled."

2. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." In *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*.

3. For Deleuze on subjectivation see *Foucault*, 94-123.

4. The term "local knowledge" is taken from Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures" *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972 - 1977*. Ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 78-108. See especially the contrast drawn between "Marxist Science" and what Foucault refers to as "local knowledge's," 84-92.

5. As Deleuze succinctly defines these terms, "Reactive force is: 1) utilitarian force of adaptation and partial limitation; 2) force which separates active force from what it can do, which denies active force - triumph of the weak or the slaves); 3) force separated from what it can do, which denies or turns against itself - reign of the weak or of slaves). And analogously, active force is: 1) plastic, dominant, and subjugating force; 2) force which goes to the limit of what it can do; 3) force which affirms its difference, which makes its difference an object of enjoyment and affirmation." *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 61. For a more detailed discussion of these terms in Deleuze/Nietzsche see *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 39-72.

6. Brian Massumi, "The Power of the Particular." *Subjects/Objects* No. 3 (Spring, 1985), 14.

7. For the original reference see Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics and Selected Letters* trans. Samuel Shirley Ed. Intro. Seymour Feldman (Indianapolis: Hackett Press, 1982) p. 106. For additional references in Deleuze see his *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 217-234, and his *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights, 1988), 122-130, as well as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari *A Thousand Plateaus* trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 253-260.

8. *Twilight of the Idols* from the *Portable Nietzsche*, 465. The ambiguity in this quote is instructive for the question of how drag queens are, by their very nature, Nietzschean. This comment is made in the context of his project for a "revaluation of all values" and in relation to the theory of *force*: "War has always been the great wisdom of all spirits who have become too inward, too profound; even in a wound there is the power to heal" (ibid.). In maxim 8 he relates these ideas to "life's school of war" ("what does not destroy me makes me stronger"). It is evident, given the context in which these statements were made (the meaning of force relations in relation to the problem of suffering) that Nietzsche's thinking goes substantially beyond the "common sense" image of invulnerability often attributed to him in this maxim. It is worth mentioning that the work, as whole begins, "Maintaining cheerfulness in the midst of a gloomy affair, fraught with immeasurable responsibility, is no small feat" (ibid.).

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