

Dragging Across Amsterdam

By Robert Wells

As part of my sexuality and gender study program in the Netherlands, I was required to perform drag in public and reflect on the reactions I evoked. Having done femme drag several times (dresses, heels and the occasional boa), I decided to see what people would think if I performed as a “butch dyke.” My outfit comprised of a white “Batman” t-shirt over a stuffed bra, baggy jeans, string bikini, light eye make up and purple nail polish. I set off to the grocery store with my host to begin my Dutch debut.

The first thing I notice when I do drag is how uncomfortable bras are. As always, I felt the need to constantly touch my “breasts” to make sure they were in place. I realized more than ever this time how important breasts are when gendering someone. Because my “breasts” were the only part of this outfit I’d never worn in public, I was especially keen to individuals’ reactions to them. I caught a few people staring directly at them, trying to figure out if they were real. One man passed me on one aisle and was suddenly waiting for me on the next aisle to confirm what he had seen. I was suddenly reflecting on how often I do the same thing – whenever I see a person whose gender I cannot determine, my first instinct is to look at his or her chest. Kate Bornstien says in her book “Gender Outlaw” that it takes four feminine attributes to outweigh one masculine trait when someone is gendering a stranger on the street. I know that without the “breasts” I would have been read as an effeminate man, and if I had just worn them without the make up, nail polish and my “butch dyke swagger,” I would have just looked like a man wearing a stuffed bra.

I received no direct verbal response from anyone, and I didn’t really notice many people looking at me until my host pointed them out. I did notice, however, my own reticence to look at others. Being used to getting stared at for being an effeminate man, I’m used to ignoring people. I thought I would be more comfortable performing a different gender; yet, surprisingly, I found myself very insecure about being able to pass as a woman.

I wasn’t thinking too much about how cultural differences

affected individuals’ perceptions of me as I have been quick to get used to Dutch people’s easy-going attitudes; but, I realize that the responses I would have received doing this project in North Carolina, especially the rural area where I’m from, would have been much more overt. Laughter, finger pointing, and confused facial expressions – I saw none of this. People in Amsterdam seem to be more respectful of other people’s privacy, although they’re not above doing a double-take if they think they see something offbeat.

That said, I should explain something about trans-politics in the Netherlands. Many Dutch insurance plans will pay for sex-reassignment surgeries; however, one must go through a year of psychotherapy and hormone treatment and “live” as the gender they wish to “become” for at least another year. After that process, patients are expected to live as their newly assigned sex. This medicalization of gender has caused a rift between transsexuals (persons who feel they were born in the wrong body and have sex-change operations) and transgender people (people who don’t feel the need for surgery; transgender is not used as an umbrella term as it is in the United States). Although it is possible to change your sex, transsexuality is treated as a disorder. Therefore, people who do not physically pass or simply do not want to fit into the gender binary have trouble accessing gender-specific spaces (bathrooms, for example) and are generally looked down upon. That

is the position I found myself in while completing the project.

As someone who identifies as gender queer and tries to live outside of the gender binary, I never feel like my body is constraining my gender, but it obviously constrains other people’s perception of my gender, which can be just as inhibiting to one’s identity. I feel like my gender is something I should be free to construct – not the government or strangers at the grocery store. This project forced me to face some of my own judgments and further solidified my belief that I should be able to wear whatever the fuck I want without my gender being questioned.



photo courtesy of Robert Wells

Studying in Amsterdam last fall, junior Robert Wells explores people’s perceptions of gender expression by performing publically as a woman.