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Rainbow Flag and Belongings/ Disbelongings: Öckerö Pride and Reclaim Pride in Gothenburg, Sweden 2019

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Reclaim Pride will take place at Världskulturmuseet (The National Museum of World Culture) in August this year. Reclaim Pride is for all queers who do not feel welcome at West Pride, for those who are critical of the commercialization of Pride festivals, for those who feel their hearts in their mouths when the police show up in the Rainbow Park, for those who wonder what the police or the political parties—that repeatedly vote against the interests of LGBTQ people—are doing at Pride, for those who have not forgotten the LGBTQ movement’s roots in the Stonewall Riots, and for those who would rather visit a grassroots festival for queers, by queers. (Reclaim Pride 2019)¹

So come to Hotel Trubaduren and join us in the demonstration of everybody’s right to be whoever he/she/it (ze) is and the freedom to love the one you love!!! (Öckerö Pride 2019)

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Join us in the struggle for an equal and inclusionary world, free from prejudices and discrimination! (Öckerö Pride 2019)

In 2019, two events that in a broad sense concern LGBTQ people (lesbians, gays, bisexuals, trans persons and queers) took place in and around Gothenburg, the second-largest city in Sweden. Their approaches are different in many respects: the language and discourses used, the people they address and the aims that the events are supposed to fulfil. The rainbow flag and the concept of Pride, including their relation to West Pride,² are however central to both events. In this chapter I intend to discuss how belongings and disbelongings are created in and around Reclaim Pride and Öckerö Pride in relation to the rainbow flag and the concept of Pride. I will depart from my own experiences and emotions when visiting the events, which means I am inspired by auto-ethnographic methods (Hemmingson 2009; Adams et al. 2014). My reflections circulate around questions such as: What meanings, emotions, actions and temporalities are (re)produced as a result of the relationship between the events, the rainbow flag, the concept of Pride and the activists/participants—including myself? In what ways do the rainbow flag and the concept of Pride work as co-producers of belongings as well as disbelongings—and how does my position as a Swedish, white, middle-class, lesbian, feminist, mother, former activist and now sociologist affect my feelings of belonging and disbelonging?

Cultural artefacts such as the rainbow flag are seen here as empty/floating signifiers (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), i.e. as phenomena that are interpreted, used and challenged in different ways in different contexts. They do not have fixed meanings, but are involved in co-productions of meaning/reality/life together with other agents, such as human beings, artefacts, nature, symbols, etc. The fact that something like the rainbow flag is an empty signifier does not mean, therefore, that it is meaningless to study. Rather the opposite; it is when studying it in different local contexts that we can grasp how it is used and what it does to people. Different meanings, emotions and values are attached to it. It is when we see it used in practice that we can get sight of its performative potentials. The rainbow flag is also a materiality. It is a piece of cloth, a picture, a symbol printed on posters or placards, and it can also appear in the form of

jewellery, tattoos, garlands, etc. It is strips of colours put together. Materiality is always active in co-producing communities of belonging; it stabilises, makes assemblies visible and emotionally connects people. Saba Mahmood (2009) adds an important point when discussing the affective and embodied practices through which a subject comes to relate to a specific sign, such as an image, an icon—or a flag. She claims that the sign's meanings go far beyond representation and instead are based in attachment and cohabitation. Signs, such as the rainbow flag, exert a force in our world, they do things, but they do so in a transformative relationship that binds the sign to the spectator; the object to the subject; the signified to the signifier. When this relationship takes place an image is never just an image, a flag is never just a flag.

In spite of the rainbow flag's importance as a symbol for transnational queer belonging and its meanings for the survival of queers all over the world, much critical queer Anglo-Saxon research about the rainbow flag and the celebration of Pride claims that it has lost its radical potential. Queer activism, such as Reclaim Pride, is an integral part of this critique. According to these critics, the flag and the Pride parades have become normalised, mainstreamed, and thus harmless. It is used by capitalist market-driven businesses and cities in order to sell their products and services (Klapeer and Laskar 2018; Peterson et al. 2018), by nations to wash away the country's image of being homophobic, so-called pink-washing, and to build an image of the nation as modern and tolerant, so-called homonationalism (Puar 2007; Alm and Martinsson 2016; Laskar et al. 2016). It also functions as a tool for attempts by right-wing groups to dismiss immigrants and refugees, accusing them of being backwards and intolerant, often combined with statements about Islam (Brown 2009; Puar 2007). The figure of 'the white gay monogamous person' is hijacked—and fetishised—by these nationalist forces. Judith Butler's well-known words about the craving of LGBTQ people and movements for recognition from the state point at how the need for legitimation and equal rights risks creating a figuration of 'the good sexual citizen'/'the good and right homosexual body', and thereby excluding other, less worthy subjects (Butler 2004). When homosexuality becomes a question of equal rights based on identity, as in many celebrations of Pride, including Öckerö Pride, sexual citizenship risks being

individualised, disciplined and desexualised (Blanc 2013). The equality take on these questions also implies that queers ought to be equal to something; in this case the heteronormative subject that marries one other person and gives birth to children; i.e. a subject that fulfils a copy of the heteronormative nuclear family (ibid.).

In their book about Pride parades, Peterson et al. (2018) explain the tension between Pride politics and queer politics with the fact that Pride parades in many countries have been so strongly supported by the state, the capitalist market and the wider civil society that we now have: ‘a convergence between LGBT politics and neoliberal state practices’ (ibid.: 12). They also talk about Pride parades as containers of western liberal values and a ‘litmus test’ of a nation’s democratic status. Since so many allies, organisations, political parties and businesses are participating in Pride parades and waving rainbow flags, the parade and the rainbow flag are no longer necessarily signs of one’s lesbianism, gayness, trans identity or queerness. However, allies can be very important for a movement to succeed, both in making it legitimate and in getting support to reach its goals (see also Wahlström et al. 2018). The presence of allies, of *normal* people, may help to throw off stigmas related to dirt, disgust and sin. Still, the questions posed by many activists and researchers are relevant: Can friends be too friendly? Is there a ‘de-gaying’ risk? A risk of undermining the radicalism of queer politics? A desexualisation of queer subjects? Of shifting the ownership of such events? (Peterson et al. 2018). It is obvious that analyses of the rainbow flag and Pride parades need to be contextualised. In many contexts the flag is under attack and LGBTQ people are fighting for the right to exist, which means that the flag is connected to questions of life and death for queers. Even though these attacks are beyond the scope of this article, they are a fundamental background to both the events and my reflections upon my own participation in them.

Sweden is a country, which, together with Norway, Denmark, Netherlands and Canada, is often deemed to be one of the world’s most tolerant of homosexuality. The tolerance is seen as a signum of the open, educated, enlightened state that the country is so proud of having achieved (Laskar et al. 2016). Even though Sweden *has come a long way* (note my use of a linear timeframe) regarding laws and official policies, LGBTQ people are still hit by homophobic actions and many are still not

open about their sexual identification, especially not at work or in public (Björk and Wahlström 2018). This linear developmental framing of time, of which I just gave an example, is also related to space and the relations between centre and periphery. We often get caught in a trap that positions the queer subject as always moving forward, situated in a linear timeframe where the urban is fixed as fast and new and the rural as slow and old (Crawford 2017). This is, of course, deeply entangled with notions of the West as modern, free, rational and progressive, and ‘the rest’ as backward, traditional, stuck and conservative. Elizabeth Freeman (2010) claims that we are living in a chronobiological society where the state and other institutions impose temporal schemata on us. Properly temporalized bodies move and change within specific frames, in which the accumulation of health and wealth for the future, and marriage, reproduction, childrearing and death are necessary steps. Queer subjects often depart from this framework, something which Lee Edelman (2004) sees as a queer opportunity to resist the present temporal order. In his discussion of *reproductive futurism*, the child represents the possibility of the future. The ‘queer as in no future-approach’ is interesting in relation to the hopes for another society and the politics of (n)utopias (Thörn 1997) that I contend are so present in queer activism—and which are played out quite differently in events such as Öckerö Pride and Reclaim Pride.

From the beginning, Pride was an urban phenomenon that was concentrated in big cities, but it has now become a concern, a happening, even for people in the rural parts of a country, as for example in Öckerö. Mary Gray et al. (2016) state that rurality has become the constitutive outside of urban life and is defined as unchanging and fostering a religious culture of sexual conservatism that is intolerant and/or phobic towards gender and sexual diversity. Further, they point to the temporal and spatial assumptions that permeate the metronormative stories about queers leaving the rural and entering the urban in order to enjoy ‘freedom as gays’. The urban is seen as the place to which you are heading, i.e. the future, and the location where you can unfold your gayness (ibid.: 12–13). Metronormativity is consciously expressed and explained in Lucas Crawford’s (2017: 917) words: ‘... the city is where queers *do* queerness, and the country is where things *are done* to queers’. However,

he argues that even though queer theory and culture are metronormative, it is important not to get trapped in its opposite either; by romanticising rural queer lives and/or temporalities (ibid.; see also Halberstam 2005; Gray et al. 2016). Instead, he urges us to see the ever ongoing movements and influences between the rural and the urban and to investigate what rurality can do, rather than focus on what happens to queers in rural locales. In light of the metronormative discourse, it is interesting to study rural Prides.³ Further, it is of importance to acknowledge that new articulations, new forms of struggle and resistance are taking place in both rural and urban spaces.

To conclude this introduction; it is central to this chapter that a cultural artefact, such as the rainbow flag, and its role in the co-production of belongings and disbelongings, has to be seen in its context. The plain presence of LGBT(Q) bodies in the public sphere is provocative in non-gay-friendly contexts (Peterson et al. 2018) and the more gay-friendly a context, the bigger the arsenal of dramaturgical tools (e.g. Wasshede 2017). The local mobilising context and frames are important; do the organisers mostly want LGBTQ people to participate or do they want a broader group to come? What is the goal of the event? In the two cases analysed for this chapter the goals are very different; the organisers of Öckerö Pride want to have a broad reach, educate 'ordinary people' and normalise homosexuality (even if there are aspects that work in the opposite direction); at Reclaim Pride the aim is to offer a political alternative to the ordinary West Pride and offer a safe place for queers of different kinds. Nevertheless, the rainbow flag is highly visible and in focus in both cases.

In the following sections, my visits to these two events are described and reflected upon with a focus on my own experiences and feelings regarding belonging and disbelonging, paying attention to my position as a former lesbian feminist activist now working in academia. It is inspired by what I would call an affective auto-ethnographic (e.g. Hemmingson 2009; Adams et al. 2014) way of analysing and writing. However, in the text you will also find some more traditional sociological reflections. My choice to shift between observing myself in the middle of the events and the more 'distanced' way of conducting analyses makes the text a mixture of academic text and field notes—maybe also diary and political

pamphlet? I use myself as a tool to gain a deeper knowledge of the processes of belonging and disbelonging that are taking place in a broader sense, even though it is a bit uncomfortable (for a discussion about sociological introspection and auto-ethnography see Hemmingson 2009). My hope is that these leaps between the personal, the political and the academic/scientific will produce useful new insights for both academia and activism.

6.1 Reclaim Pride

Reclaim Pride, in 2019 celebrated for the second time in Gothenburg, is a reaction against ordinary Pride—West Pride as it is called in Gothenburg—which is seen by some queer activists as a commercial happening that has lost its political potential. In 2019, Reclaim Pride moved its location from a more peripheral site to the centre of Gothenburg, to Världskulturmuseet, which is an established and respected institution owned by the state. Reclaim Pride is a phenomenon that over the world insists that the roots of the LGBTQ movement reach back to before the Stonewall Riots in 1969 and that the struggle was led by queers of colour, trans persons, sex workers, as well as lesbians and other queer persons. As early as 1965 a protest group called *The Compton Cafeteria Uprising* was formed in California to fight back against harassment and police brutality (Reclaim Pride Coalition New York 2019). Reclaim Pride is about remembering these roots and honouring them by not accepting that the struggle for liberation ends when the normalised white middle-class monogamous gay person is accepted by the majority. The struggle is intersectional: anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-ableism, anti-capitalism and anti-war, etc. (Reclaim Pride 2019; Reclaim Pride Coalition New York 2019).

Reclaim Pride in Gothenburg has emerged from the queer activist milieu in Gothenburg, which I would say is imprinted by the character of the city. Historically, Gothenburg is an industrial and harbour city with a strong working-class movement. This has led to a political milieu formed by many different social movements and protest groups, among them many feminist and queer activists (Wasshede 2010, 2017). In 2007,

the activist network *Göteborgs Queerinstitut* (The Queer Institute of Gothenburg) was formed and since then many events have been arranged by them or related groups. Reclaim Pride is one of these events.

6.2 My Visit to Reclaim Pride 2019

I have been looking forward to the event and planned to go there with my closest friends. I am filled with mixed feelings. I don't feel as if I am part of the queer community; they are younger than I and more politically queer than I am. But at the same time, maybe I do belong? I have been on the outskirts of the queer scene in Gothenburg for many years; I admire the activists, I have done research about them and I actually embrace most of their political perspectives and stands. So, as I get on my bicycle to go there on Friday morning, I am going to work, to socialize with my friends and to take part in the content of the festival. When I arrive and park my bicycle I immediately see some people I recognise—either as people I know or have met before, or as the 'typical bunch'. I smile and feel happy inside. Those brave young people—I love them. I go inside and feel exposed. People are sitting on the broad stairs of Världskulturmuseet, which serves as a stand, and from there you can see everyone that enters the venue. I try to look cool and I search for my friends. When I find them I join them as quickly as possible. Relieved. I have people here that are mine, with whom I can feel safe (Fig. 6.1).

During the day we create a safe space in the bigger space. We stick together and we include some more people that we know, some of them deeply involved in the queer struggle, some of them also performers during the event. Quite high up on the stairs we establish a base, a kind of safe haven where we can drink coffee, talk loudly, laugh, lie down and rest. As if we belong there. We were activists long before many of the young queers in the room were even born, we were/are lesbian feminists, we took illegal actions at night, we participated in the *Frigörelsedemonstration* (Gay and Lesbian Liberation Demonstration) at a time when there were only around 25–50 of us walking up along Avenyn (the main boulevard) in Gothenburg. One year we were spat at by the neo-Nazis who stood along the demo route, raising their arms in a Nazi salute. We arranged several 8 March



Fig. 6.1 Care at Reclaim Pride. (Photo: Hanna Wikström)

celebrations, started feminist cafés, consciousness-raising groups and so much more. I am simultaneously both proud and ashamed. Proud for what I have done and even more for what some of my friends have done. Ashamed that I stopped being an activist. I got married. I had a child. I lived the ultimate heteronormative life, except it was with another lesbian. But still. I struggle with myself and my feelings of belonging and disbelonging, of pride and shame. I also observe how, due to my own feelings of insecurity, I risk being exclusionary myself as soon as I feel safe with my crew. How I greet high-status members of the queer community with extra warmth; how confident I am that I know some of them, can even hug some of them. Ashamed again. What am I doing? What am I trying to prove? And to whom? I guess it is a way to make myself feel that I do belong even though I spend most of my time at the university and with my family.

Sara Ahmed's (2004) way of describing feelings of comfort and discomfort is relevant here. To follow the white, heteronormative line or not, and how being queer is the same as a disruption of that line and how

that makes us uncomfortable in life. Something is always aching. You are always uncomfortably aware of yourself in the situation and whether it is a safe place or not. Of course, this shifts a lot depending on how well you fit into society. I am privileged, since I am defined as white, middle-class, able-bodied and as an academic—I even have a child/am a mother. But even though I know that my frictions and aches are less than some, I always have a feeling of not belonging, of being something not worthy, sometimes even disgusting. I know that my rights as a citizen can be taken away from me at any time. The political developments in society, with Trump in the USA and the expansion of the right-wing populist political party Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna, SD) in Sweden, scare the shit out of me. I know that some of the queers in the room at Reclaim Pride have been harassed by neo-Nazis or people from the radical right, beaten at night, threatened, arrested by the police, and I know that some of them have attempted suicide (and many of us know about someone who succeeded). I know that some of them cut themselves with sharp knives, some have been drinking too much or still do. I know that their parents have rejected many of them. Comfort and discomfort are sometimes a matter of life and death. Living in oppression has its costs. And this is what makes the communities of belonging so important. However, in parallel with experiences of oppression and pain, the LGBTQ movement has a long history of celebrating the joy and pleasures in queer lives. Showing and feeling pride is often a central part of this, also at this event.

Activists in the queer community in Gothenburg have over many years developed a certain queer aesthetic, the main ingredients of which are irony, carnivalesque and verbal art. Through exposing emotions such as pleasure, hate, anger and joy in their actions and performances in a very politically, academically and artistically skilled way they have shaped the queer resistance in the city since the beginning of the 2000s (Wasshede 2017). My analysis of this has been framed with the help of Mary Douglas' (1984) discussions about dirt and Julia Kristeva's (1982) concept of abjection. I have chosen to define the queer use of hate and dirt rhetoric as a resistance strategy that I call abjectionification, which means an active use of and from the abject position. Instead of trying to be normal, pure and accepted by the majority society, queer activists throw the sin, dirt and

criminal stigma back in the faces of the so-called normals. They do not care about how the majority sees them; they use the classic queer *in-your-face strategy* (see, for example, Jagose 1996). So, when the musical *Stön från Duvemåla* (Moans from Duvemåla), a parody of the famous Swedish musical *Kristina från Duvemåla*, is performed at Reclaim Pride it is no surprise that it entails a lot of abjectification and irony. What interests me is the intensified interest in the rainbow flag. Last time I heard queer activists talk publicly about the rainbow flag was in 2010, when they urged people to burn it.

The musical is performed by around ten actors/singers/dancers and a large orchestra called *Queerorkestern* on the first day of Reclaim Pride. A considerable number of people have come to listen to/see it and the audience is mostly composed of supporters and friends. In the end, when *Folkets sång* (The Song of the People) is performed, the audience stand up, we raise our fists and sing along. Below, I will reflect upon some of the musical pieces, in what I described earlier in this text as a more traditional sociological way. The musical texts chosen here are all related to critique of the rainbow flag, Pride events and RFSL (the national Swedish organization for LGBTQ people's rights). In the song *Helt normal* (Totally normal) the text is harsh in its critique of Pride parades:

Whenever you parade I don't understand
 Do you believe yourselves or are you fooling me?
 Everyone thinks the same and all love is good
 Come, join us in our rainbow party and sing hallelujah
 Once upon a time there was defiance and struggles when we occupied
 the city
 Now the straights are in majority in the Pride parade

Later on they sing:

Totally normal, totally normal
 When did that become the ideal of pride?
 Totally banal bourgeois nonsense
 Continued oppression under the rainbow flag
 (---)
 Nice rainbow policemen hit us with rainbow batons

In these lines the rainbow flag is positioned as the ultimate symbol of normalisation, assimilation and mainstreaming of the LGBTQ struggle. It is seen as a masque that hides struggles, oppression and differences—even violence. The song expresses the frustration that is felt over the sell-out that many of us are (and/or feel) guilty of. It is not only the fact that the *lagom* (moderate) way of being LGB(T) won; that the good, decent, normal, white, well-functioning, productive gay person was the one who became tolerated and allowed into the *folkhem* (the people's home, 'the Swedish Middle Way'), what could be called homonormativity (e.g. Duggan 2003; Rupp and Taylor 2014). It is also the fact that it goes hand in hand with the sell-out of the Swedish welfare system and the closing of borders to 'undesirables'. Borders are thus enforced both within and around the nation. In the song this is represented by the lyrics about *nice rainbow policemen* hitting queers—in the name of the rainbow. The bad queers are corrected while the good queers are embraced—as long as they/we behave well and discipline our rage and pain. The words *all love is good*, which are so often associated with the rainbow flag, are wonderful words. No one can object to them. Still, the performers do. The musical text highlights that when the rainbow flag is used as a peace symbol, inclusive and full of love, it risks denying anger, hate, dirt and even sadness and sorrow. It is a sign of the (potential) joyful LGBTQ life, or a fantasy of it. A sign of sameness; we are just like you, we are not dangerous, we are nice people, just like you (e.g. Duggan 2003; Puar 2007).

However, in one of the last scenes, the actors make fun of themselves and the queer carnivalesque and provocative way of doing politics. They start by questioning how to be radical, how to make political change, and answer it with *Massa sex* (Lots of sex), a choice that is to be expected in this context:

Massive, provocative perversities
 Perverse bad habits with queer potential
 Fictive prediscursive perversities
 Filth (snusk) is our weapon against all bourgeois morals
 (---)
 Oh, we have to have offensive sex
 So straights are shocked and rebellion starts
 Disgusting dirty loathsome delightful

In this scene the artists are dressed in what are normally considered sexy outfits, they show a lot of skin, make ‘fuck moves’ (imitating sexual intercourse with each other). We, the audience, smile and enjoy the show. Maybe we raise an eyebrow noticing the massive use of mainstream porn-like clothing and attributes, but we are relieved when we realise how they are combined in anarchistic and queer ways. The nowadays ‘traditional’ (!) and ‘normal’ (!) queer way of provoking and resisting, i.e. abjectification (Wasshede 2017), is used. But this is only in order to suddenly make a total change of direction and criticise their own glorification of sex and instead sing about friendship, care and solidarity as the right way to fight:

Queers’ care
 For each other and for life
 Is as radical as our beautiful perversions
 (---)
 Celebrate friendship
 Real friendship
 We stand together and are ready for struggle

The musical wouldn’t be queer if it hadn’t turned its own messages on its head. Self-reflection, deconstruction and a permanent movement towards something unanticipated are the essences of queering things. It is a future-oriented strategy that at the same time questions a linear temporality. I would say that the musical artists are trying to ruralise, i.e. slow down (Crawford 2017), the tempo of their own queer performance by interrupting their own zestful wallowing in sex. Another way of understanding the shift to care and friendship is to see it as a necessary practice within a minority community. It is not enough to provoke, take action, have fun, have sex; you have to take care of each other as well. Reclaim Pride in 2019 has a focus on racism, borders, asylum seekers, newcomers, etc., which is also a sign of emphasising care and a widening of the ‘we’—the circles of friendships.

In another scene in the musical they make fun of the rainbow flag when they sing about it to the music from *Do-Re-Mi* in *The Sound of*

Music. All of the people on stage perform as well-behaving scouts with rainbow scarves around their necks. They are very obedient as they follow the authoritative leader and practise singing various combinations of queer-related letters (LGBTQIRFSL etc.). They are dressed in clothes reminiscent of costumes from *The Sound of Music*, they march in straight lines and at the beginning of the scene they orchestrate a play with the disciplined body versus the 'free' body: someone comes in wearing a dress from the 1940s that is open, exposing the belly and the flesh in a way that I think is intended to be ugly, vulgar and/or funny, and after just a few seconds the person is helped and/or forced to pull in their stomach and make themselves thin and able to fit the dress.

In a scene at the beginning of the musical they also make fun of themselves and their own conformity by showing how a heterosexual couple are persuaded to become queers, and when they do, they are dressed in a 'queer costume', i.e. a special sort of leisure jacket with stripes down the sides (Adidas-like). Their hairstyles are also changed; blond long-haired wigs are thrown away. Among the lines they sing during this scene are:

Suddenly alerted, like from hypnosis
 What a disgusting heteropsychosis
 Romance was a chimera
 To keep genders apart
 Never again
 Now we become queers
 And ahh ... what a pleasure it gives

Through the irony used they problematise conformity and the fact that everybody in the room supposedly agrees on everything, pointing to the dangerous and comfortable context of consensus. Creating new paths, new routes, is necessary and unavoidable, but after a while even those new routes become normalised and hindering. So you have to create more new ones. What does it mean to a group to repeatedly question its own community and its prerequisites? How do you create a feeling of belonging and safety if the rules, conditions, norms, etc., change and are turned upside down over and over again? You sit there, feeling comfortable and cosy, leaning towards your 'crew', when suddenly a voice from

the stage strips it all away and points to its exclusionary effects and how your need for comfort has actually led you to betray your radical vision. Ahmed's (2017) words about the feminist need to endure discomfort and ache, even be the producer of it, describe my emotions here; I ambivalently move between belonging and disbelonging, between being right and totally wrong, being on my way at the same time as being lost.

6.3 Öckerö Pride

Unlike Reclaim Pride, Öckerö Pride is inspired by West Pride and has a focus on changing attitudes and making everyone feel welcome to Öckerö municipality, a cluster of islands outside of Gothenburg. They arrange education in LGBTQ issues and have organised the annual Öckerö Pride and Culture festival since 2017. Even though it only takes about 45 minutes to cover the distance between the islands and the city, there are some differences between the places—some of them regarding the situation for LGBTQ people.

In 2015, a motion to the city council, written by two Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterna), urged that the rainbow flag should be raised on official flagpoles in the municipality during the celebration of West Pride in Gothenburg. The motion was dismissed by Öckeröalliansen, the ruling political coalition consisting of the Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna, KD), the Moderates (Moderaterna, the 'moderate' right wing) and the Liberals (Liberalerna), which led to the establishment of the association Öckerö Pride. It was started as a protest against what was seen as the municipality's unwillingness to support LGBTQ rights. The association is mainly run by heterosexual allies, but there are also some active LGBTQ members. In 2016, a new motion was submitted, and this time the Öckeröalliansen was split and the motion was accepted, with only KD voting against the decision. From the interview with the political leader for KD (Interview, leader Christian Democrats and Head of Öckerö City Council), it is obvious that he is not very happy about the decision to hoist the rainbow flag, but in a democratic spirit he says that he and his party now accept the decision and will move on. The argument

behind KD's resistance to hoisting the flag is expressed in the following text:

To many people the Pride flag is primarily a symbol for everyone's equal worth. For others, like us, the flag is primarily a symbol for the LGBTQ movement, and it signifies Pride and diversity among homosexuals, bisexuals and trans persons. Depending on how you see the symbolism of the Pride flag, the question becomes totally different. (Suggestion for decision KD 2017)

This is a fight over what to fill the empty signifier, the rainbow flag, with. The political leader for KD is a bit upset that Öckerö Pride claims that the flag is a symbol of everyone's equal worth. 'Who defines what the flag symbolizes?', he asks. For him it is important to distinguish between the flag and people's equal worth and discrimination. The flag is a flag—and according to him it represents an association, a movement. The municipality should not support one specific group above all others: 'We could raise a flag for disabled people, we could raise a flag for ethnic identities, for religions. Because people are discriminated against for these things too', he says. Discrimination is key to this argument. If someone is discriminated against, he would immediately act to investigate it and take action to stop it. However, in Sweden there is a hegemonic discourse in the public political debate that the rainbow flag is something good. It is almost naturalised, as in taken for granted—as a part of Swedish culture. It is almost impossible to be against the flag, as the political leader of KD says. Consequently, he is quick to say that he is not against the flag per se, he is of course in favour of everybody's right to love.

The Öckerö Pride association has worked hard to anchor the Öckerö Pride festival in the local context and get sponsors for the annual event. One of the founders of Öckerö Pride talks about how they speak to the locals 'in a language that the locals understand' and continues:

If we kick in doors, they will put up new ones, heavier ones. We don't believe in a fist, but more in a handshake, and if you get a no, you have to back off and try to enter another way maybe. ... They have to open the door freely. (Interview, organizer Öckerö Pride)

Many people on the islands are happy to celebrate Pride; they participate in activities and they speak for LGBTQ people's rights, etc. One example of this is the story told in an interview with one of the organizers of Öckerö Pride about an older man who was in the local shop, which had rainbow flags for sale. Another man entered the shop and started grouching about the flags and that he didn't like them. This led to the first man telling him off: 'I told him he could go home to his own island instead' (Interview, organizer Öckerö Pride). Another example is the female priest who arranges annual love services in the Swedish church around the same time as the Öckerö Pride celebrations. These are examples of how the culture on these so-called 'conservative islands' is not always so conservative. On the contrary, in the interviews I hear a lot of stories about openness, friendliness and inclusiveness. These are mixed, however, with stories about homophobia, young people committing suicide for not being accepted as gays, rainbow flags being stolen or taken down, religious communities condemning homosexuality and LGBTQ people not daring to be visible and open about their identity and/or relationships. So, when Öckerö Pride takes place once a year it is a very special event. It is a family party, a festival, a political statement, a queer show and an opportunity to be able to feel safe holding your lover's hand in public—for a day.

6.4 My Visit to Öckerö Pride 2019

In 2019, I participate in Öckerö Pride for the first time. It is a mix of work and leisure—and also a challenge to myself to do something on my own. I usually do things together with my friends, not by myself. I feel a bit uncomfortable about this, I am nervous when I leave home that Saturday morning.

This year is the third annual Öckerö Pride and the organizers hope it will be a success and attract a lot of people. To make it easier for people from the city to participate, a big tourist ferry has been hired to pick up participants in the centre of Gothenburg and take them to Hönö Klåva, the harbour on one of the islands where the festivities are being held. I have decided to take this ferry. When I arrive at the place from where the ferry is due to leave I see very few LGBTQ people. Am I in the wrong

place? Am I too early? Too late? Then I see them. A small group of women, obviously lesbians/queers, so I go over to them and start talking about the details of the trip; where exactly is the boat, etc. They are friendly and I stay on the outskirts of their group, still very uncomfortable. When we get closer to the boat, I see one person I know a little so we greet each other with a hug. But when we get on the ferry I end up sitting alone on the outer deck. There are few of us on the boat, strangely enough. As I sit there, another woman I know vaguely comes up and asks if she can sit next to me. I am thankful not to be alone, and say yes. We talk the whole trip. After a while, a female crew member hoists the rainbow flag on the ferry and within seconds we are all standing there taking photos with our smartphones. It is beautiful. It is impressive. It is dancing in the wind. We are giving it our full attention and we are all happy about it. It is like a script; this is important, this is something to be proud of, happy about, it is *our* flag. At the same time I feel embarrassed. I am very aware of the criticism surrounding the rainbow flag. I am critical myself. It is also a normative, normalising, commercialised symbol. It has lost its radical potential. It is accepted almost everywhere in society. Not only accepted but loved, cherished, honoured. Everybody embraces its message about love and everybody's right to love whomever they want (Fig. 6.2). So there we are, looking up at the flag and the sky and we are so happy—and proud? Some people start to drink a special beer from the islands with a rainbow flag on it, which has been brewed for this special occasion (Hönöbryggeriet 2019).

Just as the boat arrives at Hönö Klåva, the small Pride parade reaches the harbour, passing it on its way to the stage. I feel a rush, a genuine feeling of happiness and love. Wow, here they are, my people, the brave people, demonstrating their love and lives on the small 'conservative islands'. And they have really timed the ferry well; I am convinced that they have been waiting for the ferry and for us to join them. We do so. The parade is colourful, as always, rainbow flags and other decorations in rainbow colours, music, songs, dancing. Someone puts a rainbow flag in my hand and I immediately start to sway with it. I am staying quite close to my new friend from the boat, still worrying about being alone out there, in the crowd. Even so, it is a happy moment.



Fig. 6.2 Taking photos of the raising of the rainbow flag. (Photo: Cathrin Wasshede)

We arrive at the stage, it is close to Trubaduren, a well-known restaurant/hotel at Hönö Klåva that is hosting/sponsoring the event—and, of course, will also earn a lot of money this day. It is crowded with people. Nearly every political party is there with its own table and pamphlets, everyone but the Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna, KD), who govern the municipality, and the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna). Over the course of the day I see and/or meet almost everyone that I have interviewed, except the man from KD. Families, children, older people and a lot of obviously gay and/or queer people are mingling. The music is loud and the place is crowded. I start to feel alienated. What am I doing here? Why did I come here by myself? I am not going to be able to talk to someone or do the mini-interviews that I had in mind as my work for the day ... it is

too chaotic. One of the organizers comes on stage and welcomes everybody. People are cheering. Then there are lots of performances, from speeches about trans rights to dancing by a group of quite young girls from a local dance group. At some point in the middle of all this activity my friend from the boat leaves and says that she is going to circulate. I am on my own, in the middle of the crowd. Feeling lonely and more and more miserable.

At one point a young queer poet comes on stage and starts shouting words. It is outrageous and vulgar, and a lot of dirty words are used in a provocative way. People leave, parents take their children and go for an ice cream or something. I am provoked. Why does the performer have to do it this way? Why on earth did the organisers choose this kind of entertainment? It is a family party, not a queer underground club. Or is it? Why am I so upset? Maybe because the normalisation process is interrupted. This is not nice, normal and acceptable. It is just vulgar, dirty. Abject. The ever-present queer strategy. The strategy that I have written about quite a lot, that I love and cherish. But why do I not love and cherish it here and now? Maybe because of the context, the supposedly conservative Christian islands that make it so hard for LGBTQ persons to live there and be open about their sexuality/identity/relationships. This is NOT going to help them! Maybe also because it is not aesthetic in a way that I can embrace. I am used to the queer performances in Gothenburg that are elegantly provocative and almost professional in their forms—like the musical *Stön from Duvemåla* at Reclaim Pride. They have a very ironic awareness of their performances, which makes them brilliant. Frustrated, I leave. I go to a toy store close by and buy a gift that I have to buy and then I go back to the stage again. The poet is still shouting words. At some point it ends.

Hellmans Drängar (Hellman's farmhands), a choir for men that was set up in 1994, is one of the main performances, and they are well received. They had also sung at last year's Öckerö Pride. There are about 25–30 men, all dressed in light summer clothes, some of them wearing rainbow accessories; they are co-ordinated and handsome. They sing amazingly. I enjoy it a lot. But after a while I become bored. They sing and sing and sing, for a long time. It is beautiful but actually a bit boring. Where is the radical message? Where is the emotional shock? Why am I not touched? I circulate again.

I am curious—and a bit embarrassed—about my own reactions. My ability to take pleasure in queer performances is actually not so great. When witnessing a *true* queer performance I feel bad and even need to leave. When watching a beautiful singing performance I get bored. Saying that something is *truly queer* is, of course, an impossibility. Queer is not something you are supposed to be able to pin down, define or frame. It is fundamentally something in movement, escaping definitions and always challenging the existing status quo. Anyway, I would like to argue that the poetry performance on the stage at Hönö Klåva is *truly queer*. It is shocking, it provokes and it makes people feel uncomfortable, even disgusted. The words from the musical at Reclaim Pride about indecency, disgusting desire, etc., are put into practice here. At Reclaim Pride they are not. At Reclaim Pride the queer performance is not shocking anyone. It is performed in a context where everyone is already comfortable with that discourse, the jokes, acts and attributes. This is not to say that it is not good or valuable—I am convinced that we need places and performances, as well as floating signifiers such as the rainbow flag, that make us feel comfortable, safe, at home and that strengthen the solidarity, the feeling of belonging to a community, and thereby help us move on with the political struggle in places that are not so comfortable and safe. Taken together, my reaction to these two different queer occasions in different contexts tells me a lot about the ambivalences in the struggle and in our lives. We want to feel at home in society, to belong, at the same time as we feel an urge to resist the normalisation and mainstreaming of our queer lives. This is, of course, nothing new, but it is a concrete example of the inner clashes we experience (or at least that I experience). When my taste, aesthetics and my need for the event to be family-friendly in order to make the majority accept me/us are challenged—I react like this. It is only in the safe queer space that it is comfortable for me to watch/listen to/participate in queer activities. But are they queer under such circumstances? Maybe. Maybe not. Anyway, I have to realise that I might not be that queer.

Suddenly the woman that I hugged at the ferry in the morning runs into me and invites me to join her group of people. I go with her, feeling like an outsider, standing beside them, but after I while I sit down on a corner of a bench. They all belong to a network called *Häng i Götet* (Hang in Götet/slang for Gothenburg) that has existed since 2016, a large network for lesbians, bisexual and queer cis-women, transwomen and

non-men over the age of 35. This network is mediated through Facebook and arranges a lot of different activities, such as nature walks, meeting up for coffee or drinks, movie nights, book clubs and parties. In my own networks many people see them as not political or queer enough. I seldom join their activities, but I have participated at least at two afterwork occasions. The group that I now meet is a core of the network, they almost seem like a family. They sit around a big table, in the sun, eating food and drinking wine that they brought from home. I am hungry. The woman that invited me asks if I want to share some food. I say no, I am going to buy something later. Am I? Then she asks if I want a glass of wine. I say yes, and they pour wine for me in a plastic glass. In my head I think very fast; this is the way to become comfortable, to not leave the Pride event. I decide to end the part of the day that might have been called work: observations and mini-interviews for my research. Instead I decide to let go of anxiety, drink some wine and relax into the open arms of the group. It feels better after the first sip of the wine. I talk with some of the women in the group, laugh and get a little tipsy, not much, just enough to relax a little. It feels good. I envy them their feeling of family, closeness and safety. One woman has a baby and some of the women in the group take turns holding the child. It makes me happy to see their solid network and sharing of care-giving. I talk briefly to a woman who I used to know in the early 1990s, almost 30 years ago. There is a feeling of summer and being at ease. I feel so relaxed and happy. Almost as if I am a part of this. Of course, I know I am an outsider.

In the centre of the harbour is a gigantic luxury boat, a white yacht. On the deck some people are sitting drinking and partying. They are dressed in glitter and rainbow-coloured party clothes. One of them is wearing a big pink pelican on their head. Suddenly three women in the *Häng i Götet* group begin to talk about going to the boat and performing a dance from there. I get caught up in this plan; we laugh a lot and plan this 'takeover' in more and more detail. At some point I realise they are serious and I begin to get nervous. I don't dare to do such a thing. Perform from a yacht ... but then I decide that my part can be to document the event with photos, phew ... So when they have decided which dance moves to perform, we walk to the yacht and shout to the people on the boat and ask if we can come aboard. Of course, they say yes, it is a happy

day, it is Pride. So three women, two of them around 60 years old, one around 40, climb on to the boat—which is not easy since it is high and steep—and suddenly I see them up there on the deck. They talk to the boat people and they borrow some of their decorations and accessories—including the pelican headdress—and then they start to do some dance moves. After the dance they return the items and come down again, totally high on their action. We look at the photos that I have taken and laugh a lot, it is hilarious. It is unlikely that many people saw it; we had no music and there was so much else going on, in the bar, in the restaurant, on the quay and on the big stage. Not even their friends had noticed the adventure. But we did. And it was so much fun. I felt simultaneously both included and like a stranger, an outsider, a witness. Afterwards, when I told my own friends about this day and this adventure, I came to realise even more the queer amusement it represented. It was so much more queer than many things we do. So brave and shameless. The queer logic *fuck-you-we-don't-care-what-you-think* was practised in reality—by these women, two of whom were in their 60s. I just loved it. But I also loved the touch of the feeling of belonging. That they gave me wine and a place to sit; a temporary community of belonging even for me.

The ferry is about to leave. This time I am sitting together with the group of women from *Häng i Götet*. The woman that I talked with on the trip in the morning and that gave me a kind of safety net at the beginning of the festivities is sitting somewhere else. I feel a bit guilty about not hanging with her, now that I have access to the group. Where is she? Does she have company? I don't even know. I am just relieved that I am included in the group, even if it is only temporary. Selfish. When I arrive home I feel happy about how the day turned out, that I did not leave in the beginning when I felt so alienated. Me staying there was totally dependent on the invitation from the group, even though I felt at home at times just by being in the crowd with *my people*. The LGBTQ community is my people, my family. Even though I may not know a single person there, we belong together, we have a certain connection, some shared experiences that really connect us all around the globe. What is this, how can I explain this feeling of transnational community of belonging? Still, it was not enough to make me feel *at home*, as if I had a place there. I was given a place by the women in the smaller community of belonging. I am so grateful.

6.5 Sweden Now: A Kind of Epilogue

While I was writing this chapter lots of things were happening with the rainbow flag in Sweden. In September 2019, the municipality of Sölvesborg, a small city in the south of Sweden, decided to forbid the raising of the rainbow flag on the municipality's flagpoles. Immediately after the news spread on the internet, people reacted to the decision and there were many protests. One action was a call to bomb the municipality's website with pictures of rainbow flags, another was the quick decision by Karlskrona Pride to hold parts of their next Pride celebration in Sölvesborg, and yet another was that the Swedish Church in Sölvesborg posted the rainbow flag on its Facebook page. At the beginning of October there was a protest in Gothenburg, publicly defending the rainbow flag. It is obvious that the rainbow flag is a very topical and emotive cultural artefact—and an empty signifier—in the Swedish political arena.

Until now, few Swedes have openly objected to the raising of the rainbow flag, since that would have positioned them as homophobic and backward. But the political climate in Sweden has changed significantly over the past decade. Conservative and populist parties such as the Christian Democrats and Sweden Democrats have grown and recruited many voters. In the context of the conservative, Islamophobic and racist climate in Europe, with the increasing presence of openly neo-Nazi political parties and associations, it seems to be possible to dismiss the rainbow flag as well as to express strong hostility towards immigrants and Muslims. It was just five years ago that the then Swedish prime minister, the Moderate Fredrik Reinfeldt, challenged his party's politics on immigration and urged the Swedish people to open up their hearts and homes to all the refugees that were coming to our country. It was not long ago, but it feels like another era, another universe. Since then, the tone has changed radically, and things that people would not have said before are now commonly heard in the news, at lunch tables, from stand-up comedians and in schools. Foreigners are no longer that welcome. Borders are to be closed. Young Afghani people are taken from Swedish schools and families to be sent to a country they have never visited and where they fear for their lives. LGBTQ people who seek asylum in Sweden are not deemed trustworthy since they don't have an *accurate* coming-out story to tell.

The rainbow flag and the celebration of Pride are involved in a specific construction of time and place, one which positions some at *the front* and others as *behind*. I find myself repeatedly falling into the trap of a traditional linear timeframe—using words such as *before*, *backwards*, *another time*, etc. Maybe Lucas Crawford’s words can help me (us) change my (our) thinking around temporality. In his text about queer rural temporality Crawford challenges the self-images of queer activists and scholars as always *in the front*. He says: ‘To queer time, it is crucial to ruralize—even “slow” down—queer theory’ (Crawford 2017: 905). To look for the queer to take place even in unanticipated places, such as on the small islands outside of Gothenburg with their queer poetry performance and queer middle-aged ladies dancing on the yacht might be a way to slow down queer theory. Maybe the staged shift of focus from sex and provocative acts to friendship and care in the queer musical at Reclaim Pride is also a way to slow down queer theory and activism.

The circulation of the rainbow flag is, as has been shown in this chapter, a deeply ambivalent process. It can be seen as a ‘globalized cultural commodity that can be purchased on the capitalist market and as a signifier of (neoliberal) tolerance and diversity aimed at inviting and producing as many consumer subjectivities as possible’ (Klapeer and Laskar 2018: 528). At the same time it is a symbol of and an expression for transnational queer belonging. As Klapeer and Laskar write, queers’ experiences of loss and separation, due to exclusions from family, nation, representations, etc., may lead to the rainbow flag symbolising important belonging and new transnational ways of queer being (see also Blanc 2013). It is in this nexus, in these tensions, that we can look for local, and at the same time transnational, meanings of the rainbow flag (e.g. Vertovec 1999).

By focusing on the rainbow flag and the celebration of Pride—and their attachments to and cohabitations with activists, places, practices and emotions (Mahmood 2009)—borders between and around belongings and disbelongings are brought to the fore. In this chapter I have touched upon some aspects of this. My own different positions and experiences as a lesbian, feminist, former activist, academic, Swedish, able-bodied, middle-class, mother, etc., make me dis/belong to different communities, and my circulation between them is not free from frictions. These frictions make me feel, think and move, and I become one of

the many actors involved in the co-production of meanings, emotions, actions and temporalities around the rainbow flag, Pride events and activist communities. Processes of inclusion and exclusion can, however, be much more hurtful and dangerous than the feelings of comfort and discomfort that I have reflected upon in this chapter. In order to grasp the very different effects that these processes have on queer people in different places and situations they should therefore always be contextualised and seen in all their complexities.

Notes

1. All translations from Swedish throughout the chapter are made by the author.
2. West Pride takes place over several days and at the end there is a big parade in the centre of the city. In 2019, 15,000 people participated in this parade; LGBTQ persons, allies, political parties, associations, unions, sections of the municipality, state authorities, sport clubs (especially football clubs), religious communities and some corporates, etc.
3. In the Nordic countries there are some ongoing projects about rural pride; for example, Anna Olovsson Lööv's project about Decentralized Pride at Lund University. In 2015 a report on being queer in the countryside in Norway, *Skeiv på bygda (Queer in the countryside)*, was published.

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