JOYFUL UNDER THE DRAGONFLY

AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC FASHION ACCOUNT OF HELSINKI PRIDE 2025

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Abstract

This paper offers an autoethnographic account of Helsinki Pride 2025, June 28. Reflecting upon comfort, visibility, invisibility, joy, and resistance, the complexities of dress, embodiment, and multiple dressed bodies are discussed. It is concluded that although Pride is a demonstration for the rights of sexual and gender minorities, its significance reaches beyond these in times when conservative, anti-democratic forces are increasingly gaining power in Europe. Beyond individual style, as great as its importance is, the joyful coming together of masses, irrespective of their dress choices, holds enormous potential for mass power and individual empowerment.

Keywords: *Dress and Comfort; Pride Dress; Visibility and Invisibility; Minority Dress; Dress and Politics.*

INTRODUCTION

Fashion research has for a long time at least bent towards queerness and queer identities (Vänskä, 2014). For many, fashion is one fundamental element of representing, bending, crossing, consciously playing with gender boundaries (Cole, 2015). Fashion is a powerful tool for performing and experiencing queer identities (Holliday, 2001), but also a means for a minority to negotiate different audiences and social situations (Reddy-Best et al., 2024). Whether dress has been seen as a semiotic marker of queer identity (Schofield and Schmidt, 2005), or a key means of identification with, and a signifier of belonging in the queer community (Clarke and Turner, 2007), dressing as "visibly" queer can be a source of both distress (Reddy-Best and Pedersen, 2015), and empowerment and solidarity (Medhurst, 2023). It is well known that the liberation movement that became a series of Pride events around the world started in 1969 as embodied resistance to repeated and targeted police raids in New York, conducted on biased "moral" grounds (Merritt, 2023). With time, Pride parades have emerged as a carnivalesque space for queer self-expression, along with various political demands, in which the performing body is both aesthetic and political (Sandoval, 2021). Yet, in some conservative national contexts, overly visible, flamboyant queerness can be considered to work against the interests of the queer community in general (Horton, 2020). Minority dress communication

carries typically (at least) dual messages: ones for the majority, others aimed at the members of the community (e.g. Almila, 2018a).

In this paper, I reflect upon the Helsinki Pride 2025 event on 28th June where I marched in the bloc of the Voluntarily Childfree (*Vapaaehtoisesti lapsettomatry*); the Association's logo features a dragonfly, symbolising liberty and lightness. While my reflection is autoethnographic, as is typical in an autoethnographic account (Adams et al., 2024), I place my reflections within the wider political situation in Europe today. Helsinki Pride took place on the same day as the Budapest Pride, banned by Budapest Police (who were strongly encouraged by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán), but supported by the Mayor of Budapest Gergely Szilveszter Karácsony. In Budapest, up to 200,000 people marched, amongst them several MEPs, including Li Andersson and Jussi Saramo of the Left Allegiance Finland. In Finland, the march was estimated to have attracted 100,000 people. Many carried signs declaring solidarity to the Budapest queer community; other expressions of solidarity included the people of Palestine ("Queers for Palestine") and Iran ("One day we'll march in Iran"). In its fundamentally political character, Pride is one of the central public platforms where the battle between conservative and liberal forces is being fought in Europe today.

I will first briefly visit the idea of autoethnography, and what it means, or could mean, for study of dress and fashion. I then discuss the history and today of Pride in Finland and Europe, before moving on to describe the Helsinki Pride Day. In the conclusion, I reflect upon visibility and invisibility of dress, appearance, individual, and group, as well as the voluntary or involuntary nature of becoming (in)visible. In what follows, I write not only as a fashion scholar and a dressing person, but also as a *writer* wishing to push the boundaries of academic writing. Emerging from the positionality of a standpoint theorist (Smith 1992), I seek to do what Kathy Davis (2014, p. 174) describes as "a personal, passionate, and creative enterprise – something that enables us to take risks, embark on unexpected paths, and, in so doing, command our audience's full and appreciative attention." Emotions in academic writing are often treated as a problem, something to be "managed" (Janke et al., 2020). By dwelling not only in dress but also in the emotions triggered, experienced, and expressed by the dressed individual, I explore both social and academic realities and boundaries.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND FASHION

A classical definition of autoethnography describes it as "form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context" as "a way to shape understandings of and in the wider world" (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1660). According to Adams et al (2014, p. 1), "[a]utoethnographic stories are artistic and analytic demonstrations of how we come to know, name, and interpret personal and cultural experience. With autoethnography, we use our experience to engage ourselves, others, culture(s), politics, and social research". In fashion research, it has been noted that autoethnographic content may become "a medium of [fashion studies], an amateur mode of critical inquiry into the same themes, topics, and ideas that scholars of fashion hold dear" (Luvaas, 2016, p. 83). In other words, fashion is for a fashion scholar both a topic of enquiry and, necessarily, an everyday practice, whether professional or not. In this paper, I use my reflections upon dress in a location and situation as a means of narrating political agency and visibility in turbulent times. Autoethnography "[u]ses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences", and perhaps even more importantly, it "[u]ses deep and careful self-reflection … to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political" (Adams et al., 2014, p. 1). An autoethnographic account therefore serves two purposes: it allows me to communicate the urgency of a lived situation, as it has been written immediately after the event it describes took place. Furthermore, it allows me to narrate a context both from within and outside, through observations concerning both myself and my environment.

I was trained as a fashion designer and worked for a short period in the industry. In my scholarly accounts, I have made use of this experience and the related specialist knowledge (Almila, 2018b). A lot of my everyday dress style is a resistance of multiple factors: I resist the black so many designers (and also fashion scholars) seem to love in their personal outfits. I resist the demand of colourfulness that seems to be the very marker of 'creativity' for many. In fact, I love grey and carefully preserve the garments I can get when grey once again emerges as the colour of the moment.

In my reflections, I am strongly aware of some generally accepted, shared narratives (Lloyd-Parkes, 2018) about colours that seem to guide interpretations of Pride and Pride appearance: Pride is colourful, and this colourfulness seems to be synonymous with its joyfulness.

The nearest expression I can find for myself is gender vague, which could be interpreted as something near to gender fluid.[1] I have been externally gendered from my early childhood onwards but never was quite sure what I felt to be myself. The nearest to gender reflection I arrived when young, was to comment on any stereotypic gender accounts that I clearly must be a boy, if that is what "girls" and "boys" are and do (see Butler, 1988). Mostly my comment was an expression of frustration against the narrow boundaries the society wished to force me in. I have previously written research, involving autoethnographic accounts, from the point of view of a woman (e.g. Almila, 2021, 2022, 2025), but that to me has always meant being *treated* as a woman, not actually *being* one. If the society didn't care, I don't think I would care one bit. I am first and foremost a political and physical being, yet with multiple neurological and other issues that prevent me from taking as much part in political activities as one could hope. In Pride, I am never certain whether I am queer or an ally, and never much care, either. The one thing I deeply care about is right to legal, social, and corporeal self-determination, which is why I chose to march with my childfree peers – our slogan for the demonstration was "For self-determination". On the other hand, I like invisibility until I choose to become visible – and for an ageing gendered being labelled as a "woman", visibility is less and less available by the day (Twigg, 2013; Zeilig & Almila, 2018). In Pride, I chose to become visible, yet not necessarily visible as an individual.

PRIDE IN EUROPE AND FINLAND

In 1970, the London Gay Liberation Front held its first meeting and went on to hold its first demonstration. Another demonstration took place in 1971, but the first Pride march, with c. 2,000 attendees, is commonly dated to 1 July 1972 (Merritt, 2023). Other European countries and capitals followed. In Finland, the association for Sexual Equality (*Seksuaalinen tasa-arvo SETA ry*) was founded in 1974, and the first demonstrations were organised soon afterwards. The first major demonstration march took place in 1981, and the Liberation Days (*Vapautuspäivät*) thereafter grew in both length and number of attendants. The Helsinki Area Sexual Equality (*Helsingin seudun SETA*) organisation was established in 1991 and took over the local organisation responsibility. During this decade, the Liberation Days march became increasingly carnivalesque and colourful. As of 2000, the march has been called Pride, following an established international vocabulary, and the organising association has been Helsinki Pride (Helsinki Pride, n.d.). There are several other Pride marches organised in different parts of Finland. From relatively early onwards, since the 1980s, the police have collaborated with the organisers, aiming to reduce risk of threat and harm to the demonstrations and gatherings. Nevertheless, in 2010,

"A major attack on the Pride parade took place in Helsinki … Three men attacked participants with gas bombs, teargas and pepper spray. A total of 88 people were injured. Soon afterwards, someone smashed windows at Seta's headquarters in Helsinki. Another Pride event held in Oulu was also targeted by violent opponents". (Poliisimuseo, n.d., p. n.p.).

As Helsinki Pride has grown and developed, the association has also become increasingly professionally organised, with partial public funding and established organisation, involving specialist sections, such as youth work and, increasingly, refugee work (Helsinki Pride, n.d.). In 2015, when a large number of refugees arrived in Europe, Together with Pride was established to support refugees of sexual and gender minorities. It is well known that to belong in such a minority is life-threatening in many national and cultural contexts. In accordance with the tenth anniversary, the main theme of Helsinki Pride 2025 was "Pride without Borders" (Together with Pride, n.d.).

As already mentioned above, Pride is in some places under threat even in Europe. While many countries have improved the legislative position of various sexual and gender minorities, other countries have moved against such tendencies, seeking to make the situation worse. In a European Parliament (2025, p. n.p.) Think Tank brief, the ban of Budapest Pride is described as follows:

"On 18 March 2025, a law was adopted in Hungary

1 Consider the following citation from Judith Butler in 2021: "I don't have an easy answer, though I am enjoying the world of "they". When I wrote Gender Trouble, there was no category for "nonbinary" – but now I don't see how I cannot be in that category" (Gleeson, 2021, p. n.p.). This resonates with me.

restricting the freedom of assembly … On the basis of this law, Budapest police decided to ban Budapest Pride. While at first some of the police"s decisions were annulled by the Hungarian Supreme Court on procedural grounds and required new decisions, the Supreme Court later upheld these decisions and refused to check the law against the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) or make a preliminary reference to the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU). … The mayor of Budapest announced that Budapest Pride will be held as a municipal event, but the Budapest police have issued a decision prohibiting this".

It is well authenticated that the Budapest Pride 2025 was bigger than ever, and many interpreted this as a more general demonstration against Orbán's and others' conservative, reactionary, anti-democratic politics. Pride's significance has grown beyond its original purpose, and it can today be read as one battle ground between opposing liberal and conservative political forces. In Finland, Helsinki Pride has successfully framed itself as one of the biggest human rights events in the country, thus placing itself on the side of general human rights concerning all.

HELSINKI PRIDE 2025

I wake up on Saturday morning exhausted. This is a state in which I have spent already days if not weeks, so it does not particularly disturb me. However, it does mean that I need the safest clothes possible. I choose the Ukrainian design dress I bought in the early days of the war and the flat red boots I wore when I couch surfed around Europe as a student. Their long zippers have been changed once, but one of the sliders has again lost its pulling slip, which I have replaced with a now shapeless paper clip. Plenty of the area we will be marching through is covered with cobblestones, and I'm certainly not young enough to manage those in heels, as I used to be able to do. The dress was originally of dark blue cotton with small white-red-black horse print, but the colour has been lost as I have continuously worn and washed it through several summers. The dress has a lowered loose waist, shirt collar, hidden-buttoned front, and long sleeves; its wide hem comes down to my mid-calf. I wear my least breast-enhancing sports bra and very comfortable underpants. The weather is as vague as my gender identity, so I pack a small scarf against potential sun, and a turquoise umbrella. I'm a sensible adult; therefore, I wear sunscreen on my face. It is not warm, so my grey buttonless trench coat with a long bindable belt will come in good use. I also pack the burgundy-coloured hospital quilt I have slept under on various park benches, airport floors, and train seats during my travels. It now mostly serves in our garden, but it is extremely washable. I can buy lunch on the way. I'm ready, I'm comfortable.

Many of us have trusted clothes that we choose when entering a new or challenging situation (Woodward, 2007). My safe dress is of material and cut that fulfil all my criteria of comfort, it makes me "feel right" (Woodward, 2005). I have argued elsewhere that dress comfort may contain numerous elements, including physical, psychological, and social. Even physical comfort may be culturally driven, not merely physiological (Almila, 2018b). Yet climate is rarely commented upon in fashion research, although its centrality to historical development of local dress styles is recognised, for example, in *The Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion*. Getting ready for the Pride in Finland it is hard to forget the lamentations of my Sicilian friend that the Pride should take place during what is an unbearably hot season in the Mediterranean climate. At least so far, Helsinki is not quite as overheated.

I take the local bus to get to the nearest metro station. A couple of stops later, a young very feminine woman dressed in pale pink dress and black boots gets on. With those eyelashes, I find myself thinking, she is probably going to Pride. I am aware that no one can tell that that is where I'm heading. Is that weakness? No, I decide, I do have the right to determine my own visibility (see Nicholls, 2019).

When we gather with our small bloc before heading to the Senate Square where the march is due to begin, I see most of my fellows sporting some Pride symbols or colours. Yet I am quite happy with my neutral outfit and feel that I am surrounded by people who are happy to be together under our dragonfly flag. We head to the Square. I'm a bit worried about the potential noise levels, but the organisers seem to have taken seriously their promise of sensory accessibility. *I will survive* does not hurt my ears, it merely forces me to dance. I never was able to resist that one.

At noon, the rainbow tram leads the march up *Aleksanterinkatu*, the main shopping street at the heart of the city. We cannot find our correct bloc place, but no one really cares – we are near enough.

We're moving and it is barely raining. No need for an umbrella. In fact, I'm starting to sweat under my trench coat, yet do not want to strip it off – far too cold for that.

The first preacher is shouting his religious anti-pride message in a loudspeaker in the *Esplanadi* park, around half-way the march. We can just hear the topic, not what precisely he is shouting. We are helped by a marcher carrying their own small player, just now playing the 2007 lesbian hit song *Ihmisten edessä* (In front of people). "Jesus Christ", the preacher declares. "Jesus Christ", sighs my fellow marcher. We have just discussed the extreme conservativeness of the area of Ostrobothnia where she comes from.

At *Kasarminkatu*, a youngster is sitting on ground, holding a homemade sign in support of their "Hungarian siblings". Light grey-turquoise hair, loose pants of indeterminate material and colour and plenty of pockets[2], black short-sleeved top, piercings: a uniform that many of my gender studies students seem to don. They smile, we smile, someone goes and hugs them. Despite another preacher waving a sign at us – something about the gospel and salvation – it is impossible to feel anything but happy, being part of this huge collective movement, both physical and metaphorical. We do not risk being fined, arrested, or worse, for marching.

The psychological and emotional security felt in a group, or a crowd, can be increased by donning similar kinds of garments. In a demonstration, wearing unified dress can be used to make visual statements (Benda, 2022). In a minority group, chosen dress style may be a powerful indicator of belonging (Clarke & Turner 2007). But at the same time, being recognised, accepted, and valued by the surrounding society has significant consequences for an individual. There is safety in numbers, but also in knowing that one is not an outlaw. Pride is both a celebration of what has been achieved, and a statement and recognition that much still remains to be done.

Most people watching the march are carrying rainbow symbols and supportive messages. "I see you", declare many. When I read these, I have tears in my eyes. Both invisibility and visibility should always be chosen, not imposed upon people (see e.g. Almila, 2018a; Nicholls, 2018). We must have the right to be seen, or retire into invisibility, yet both are a privilege. Dress cannot change skin colour; it cannot transform body size. These are qualities that change individuals' visibility, in many cases in negative ways (Alcott, 2006; Chatterjee, 2022; Streeter, 2003; Taylor and Hoskin, 2021; Wingfield and Wingfield, 2014). I reflect upon how extremely important it is that the people gathered to watch the march are carrying symbols that indicate that they are there to support, not to criticise or threaten. We are safe in numbers, marching together, yet we cannot be certain of the intentions or what the people around us intend, not unless they indicate that with their symbols and signs, as well as their behaviour. An important part of Pride today is the attitude, behaviour, and appearance of the people watching the march.

Just before the march arrives at its destination, we pass on the left-hand side a large blockhouse with spacious balconies. Several balconies display a pride flag and people are gathered there, standing, sitting, enjoying the day. People of all ages, of all outfits. Waving flags and flowers, greeting us, raising wine glasses. One elderly watcher with a messy grey hair, dressed in a long yellow coat, waves a large tulip in a slow circular dance. We have arrived.

The march crowds up at the entry to the *Kaivopuisto* park. It is slightly rainy, and parts of the park are muddy. Fortunately, the trees protect the people who gather under them. I'm very glad of the insulation capacities of my quilt. I remove my shoes and stretch my toes. My knees have been hurting occasionally, and I have great doubts as to how long I will be able to sit on the ground, but so far, the passing samba dancers keep me fully entertained. I see the balloons of the state alcohol monopoly company Alko floating nearby over the park, as well as the symbols of many other state institutions. What a change in just a few short years and decades. Pride has pushed itself from the margins and forced those who oppose it to the margins themselves, at least for a while. At least here.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Later the same day, I see a photo of myself marching. I look happy, and very much myself. Half visible, half invisible. Nice line of a figure, I think, a clean A-line. My extreme blondness is not particularly visible in Finland, yet elsewhere it would be. In mainstream media accounts, the colourfulness of the march is underlined, both verbally and visually. Colourful it was indeed. Practically any hair colour could be found, and in addition to rainbow

2 For reflections upon gender, pockets, and feminism, see Gaillard and Vissen, 2022, Jayan, 2025.

patterns, a staggering spectre of other colours was presented. Dress styles comprised anything from a samba dancer's bikini to black leather jackets – as they should.

Yet it interested me to notice how many people were dressed in a very ordinary manner. We chose to step into a demonstration to make our bodies matter, to become visible, when we might have remained invisible. We live in a time when this choice must be taken very seriously indeed. It is no small thing. Recent developments in different parts of the world, such as in the US, show us how fragile our individual and political rights may be.

Research on dress and political protest has often stressed shared dress styles to convey a shared message (Benda, 2022). This is indeed one element of staging striking, visually impactful demonstrations. But the demonstrating body is more than visual. A political protest in a public space is always embodied (Pabst, 2011). It matters to express one's identity and individuality, and to be allowed to do so, but at the same time, masses matter, too. They mattered in Budapest, where the Pride managed to really annoy and potentially also challenge Orbán and others. They mattered in Helsinki, where the radical right and fundamentalist Christians sit both in Parliament and Government. Fashion's visibility is not merely individual, it can become a visibility of a group, a crowd, a movement. In this, joy and happiness can have enormous power to bind people together, irrespective of dress style or appearance.

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