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A Truly Enjoyable Read: But Is there Room for Fat Femmes in Femme-inism?

Dahl, Ulrika *Skamgrepp: Femme-inistiska essäer*. Stockholm: Leopard förlag 2014 (383 pages)

SKAMGREPP: FEMME-INISTISKA ESSÄER is a selection of essays by Swedish cultural anthropologist and professor of gender studies Ulrika Dahl, known internationally for her work on feminist sexual politics in general and on queer femininities, femme-ininities, in particular. Especially her collaborative work *Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities* (2009) with artist/photographer Del LaGrace Volcano has gained recognition.

In her latest book, which is the first in her native language Swedish, Dahl discusses the interrelated themes of gender, sexuality, femininity, and the body. The sixteen essays that are included in the collection have been written over the past decade, something that could well have resulted in an assortment of rather loosely connected texts. Fortunately, this is not the case with *Skamgrepp*. The book is thematically coherent and its feminist, or perhaps more correctly femme-inist, theoretical backbone is strong, and the texts are conversant with each other. Dahl describes her writing as "bio(myto)graphy," a concept borrowed from the American poet Audre Lorde and meaning a combination of personal experience, political activism, and intellectual endeavor. Indeed, *Skamgrepp* is one of those books that feels personal, is smart, intellectually rewarding, and politically insightful at the same time.

The translation the Swedish-English dictionary gives for the book's main title *Skamgrepp* is "dirty trick," but the literal meaning would rather be "the grip of shame," a translation which somewhat better captures the essence of this book, since it denotes the way shame is always present when we talk about the gendered body and sexuality. As Dahl writes about the title, shame "grips" women in particular from several different directions at the same time: it is always an embodied experience, and very often linked to that elusive and contested quality that is femininity.¹

The texts that make up *Skamgrepp* volume are organized under three larger thematic chapters, namely "Feminism", "Fittor" (Cunts), and "Femmes". The essays in the first chapter discuss intersectional perspectives, as well as a lack thereof, in relation to feminism. The essays in the second chapter deal with feminist sexual politics, and in the final chapter, the figure of the femme, femme-inity, and femme-inism are explored. On an overall level, these sections are united by Dahl's interest in what she calls the "others of feminism," particularly in relation to the figure and concept of the "femme," which is an effort to gather together those who are usually left out of or are dwelling in the margins of (mainstream) feminism. These outcasts, the so-called "fuckups" of feminism, as Dahl names them: the slut, the blond, the Lolita, the flâneur, and the lesbian among others represent the blind spots of feminism.

Through these different types of femme figures, Dahl aims to examine femininity differently, in that she does not see woman, the female body, or femininity as problems. Dahl reminds the reader of the uncomfortable truth that femininity, or what is perceived as such, is still today often conceptualized as a negative trait, a sign of weakness and submission: a view which is also sometimes perpetuated by feminists. For Dahl, however, femininity is not an absence, a lack of something, or a reason for being subordinated. On the contrary, in this book femininity comes across as a central, yet often overlooked, issue in relation to feminist gender, body, and sexual politics. It is also the very space where many of the internal conflicts of feminism, as well as personal crises play out, and where embodied experience and affects are negotiated with activism and politics.

Although femininity might thus be dismissed as a quality, the other side of the coin, Dahl claims, is that femininity too is normative and that there are strong notions of how a "proper" femininity should be performed. Those who cannot do or perform femininity in the "right," i.e., the normative way (e.g. white, heterosexual, middle class, thin, etc.), have always known its power. These others often feel the rejection of the mainstream society in their bodies. Those femininities/femme-ininities that are judged to be either too much or too little thus become susceptible, suspicious, and possible sources of shame. Basically, the normative feminine is a very white and middle class construction. Femmes occupy that precarious space of gender and sexual politics where the rules of normative femininity (sexual or otherwise) are transgressed and reshaped. The femmes in Dahl's book embrace, use, or play with fem(me) ininity, as she shows in her analysis of Marilyn and Madonna.

Dahl's understanding of feminism is influenced by intersectional and queer thought, something that means a view of gender as a category, which cannot be isolated from other meaningful personal and political positions such as race, ethnicity, and sexuality. Thus, the power hierarchies and systems of oppression such as sexism, racism, and homophobia are also inherently intersected. Dahl's effort to open up the essence of this critique to a wider audience can be commended, since intersectional and queer feminist thought have yet to reach the mainstream even within the feminist movement.

Skamgrepp: Femme-inistiska essäer is one of those rare books that offer an enlightened layperson a glimpse of up-to-date feminist discussion, yet do not disappoint an academic reader either. Stylistically, the essays in the book do not obey to the strict academic formula of writing, nor does the conversation remain in the confines of the academic realm. The texts reach out, transgress, spin off, and sometimes flow into unexpected directions. This makes the book simultaneously a challenge, and an enjoyable and intense read. Yet, if I could ask for an addition to Dahl's gallery of the "fuckups" of feminism, I would add the figure of the fat girl/body, which now is mostly present in the form of abjection. It has been argued that fat queers the body inevitably, which is one reason why

it would have been very interesting to see what it would have meant to give the fat/queer femme some space, as well as more positive connotations, in *Skamgrepp*.

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NOTE

1. Dahl offers an extensive discussion on the possible meanings and connotations of the term *skamgrepp* in the book's introduction.