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The Dangerous Real: Queer Solo Performance in/as Active Disruption

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ABSTRACT

Like all radical community endeavours, queer performance in the United States has been shaped through resistance to restrictive ideologies. National insecurity over ‘indecent’ (read: queer) artistic expression in the US has been aimed at artists working in a variety of genres, and here I focus specifically on queer solo performance artists. This essay explores the dangerous realities that queer artists present to an imagined unified US national identity. I argue that queer solo performers operate as artistic activists, challenging homogenous fantasies about US culture through the queering of experience. Aesthetically disparate, their work is connected by common threads of vulnerability and precarity. The article asks how their work disrupts U.S. insecurities concerning intersections of sexuality, gender identity, race and religion.

KEYWORDS

Queer; solo performance; NEA Four; dangerous real; community; Dynasty Handbag; M. Lamar; Erin Markey

Life and work, and their dependence upon one another, are often imagined as increasingly precarious, their futures shadowed by pervasive terror as well as everyday anxieties about work. At the same time, ‘creative capital’ invests a kind of promise in precarity with words like ‘innovation,’ ‘failure,’ ‘experiment,’ and ‘arts.’ The links here between creativity and terror, art and structures of risk and insecurity, point also to connections with performance and the embodied balancing act of the live performer. (Ridout and Schneider 2012, 5–9)

Queer Worldmaking and US Insecurities

National insecurity in the United States over ‘indecent’ (read: queer) artistic expression has been aimed at artists working in a variety of genres, and here I focus specifically on queer solo performance artists. In this article, I argue that queer solo performers operate as artistic activists, often making work in politically challenging environments and without continuous financial or commercial support. Central to my argument is the concept of ‘the dangerous real,’ and the challenge it presents to an imagined unified US national identity. In other words, queer solo performance work challenges homogenous fantasies about US culture through the queering of personal experience, confronting audiences with the sometimes dangerous truths about queer life.

I begin by looking at three key concepts: queer, solo, and performance, in order to understand how they collectively contribute to this genre of work. Then, I discuss what are known as the Culture Wars in the United States, focusing on the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) Four legal case as a way to explain this important history, and because it is crucial to understanding why queer (or any) solo performance artists are not eligible for independent government funding in the United States today. Finally, I offer a performative analysis of work by three contemporary US-based queer solo performers – Dynasty Handbag, M. Lamar, and Erin Markey – whom I have followed for the last decade through New York City performance networks.

In her article on zombie capitalism and theatrical labour, Schneider (2012) suggests that ‘theatricality comes out in force when capitalism is under attack’ (164). The attempt to censor queer artists and deny funding to solo performers has resulted in a proliferation of work that smartly and fearlessly critiques intersections of US capitalist structures and US domestic and global political policy. Ultimately, queer artists disrupt state representations of homogenised national identity, suggesting more complex and diverse ways of being global citizens (Cruz-Malave and Manalansan 2002).

Queer, Solo, Performance

Inquiry into each of the three terms in the phrase ‘queer solo performance’ is a useful exploration of a coherent and complicated form of artistic expression. As a scholar-practitioner in performance and gender studies, I, too, make queer solo performance. I use this phrase as a theoretical framework for a genre of staged performance that follows an historical tradition of the (mostly) solo theatre maker,¹ operating under the sign of queer identification.

Making queer performance is a crucial way of resisting constraints of limiting gender binaries and recognising intersectional elements of US identity like class, religion, race, ability and nationality. Queer solo performance work actively explores intersections of identity by choosing not to ignore them. Queer solo performance work reveals US insecurities around nostalgia on the part of conservative political factions for an imagined white, middle-class, Christian, heteronormative family structure. In order to survive the pressures of this silencing imaginary, queer solo performance work insists on (re)producing and archiving queer experience.

Queer performance has long been established as a genre.² In the introduction to a special issue of *Theatre Journal* on the subject of queer research in performance, editor Farfan (2012) historicises queer performance as follows:

As a corporeal practice centering on bodies upon which ideologies of gender and sexuality converge and from which they emanate, performance – located, relational, textualized, vocalized, costumed, choreographed – has been an acute site for queer subversions, critiques, and ways of knowing and for the activation of queer significations, experiences, feelings, desires, and communities. (487)

Farfan illustrates the important role that performance plays in queer worldmaking, and the multiple, theatrical forms in which it manifests. Affects of queerness are an insistence on the realness of queer feelings, and manifest through performance in ways that are necessary to build and sustain community (Miller and Roman 1995).

The concept of queer performance has also been complicated in productive ways by scholar-practitioners. For example, Johnson (2008) has done extensive ethnographic performance

research on black gay men in the southeastern US. Johnson juxtaposes his academic experience with the word 'queer' against his grandmother's expression 'quare' as an alternative way of understanding difference in her Black experience. Complicating the usage of queer in performance scholarship through such intersectionalities is central to this project. I seek to understand its usefulness for historical activist moments like the case of the NEA Four, as well as contemporary expansions of or even resistance to the term.

'Queer' is a broad category that allows me to work with a diverse spectrum of artists, and a term that points simultaneously to history and future possibility (Love 2009). I use the term queer both because of my commitment to it as an ideological marker, as well as to ensure that my research is as inclusive as possible. I use this term not as necessarily defined by expressions of or orientations toward a particular sexual or gender identity, but rather, as one which resists a normative worldview. Queer allows for interrogation of multiple intersections and assemblages of identities (Puhar 2007). I choose the term queer as a political and aesthetic descriptive to discuss a strategic effort to refuse heteronormative ways of making community. The romantic idea of the starving artist, and the struggling artist, is bound up in such refusals, and endures in the US and contributes to a culture where artists are not paid fairly for their work. A select few make an actual living. Performance artists are often outside of mainstream society; queer reflections of those who follow standard scripts for success.

As a scholar-performer writing about solo performance, I use queer as a marker of identity that resists heteronormative ways of being. Drawing on the work of Lauren Berlant, Gayle Rubin, and Eve Sedgwick – among others who write about the restrictive demands of heterosexuality – heteronormativity was first described by Warner (1991) as having 'a totalizing tendency that can only be overcome by actively imagining a necessarily and desirably queer world' (8). The artists I discuss in this piece resist heteronormativity by employing the concept of queer identity in uniquely individual ways. I choose the term queer as a political and aesthetic descriptive to discuss a strategic effort to refuse heteronormative ways of making art.

Queer archiving is integral to queer worldmaking, as a strategy for insisting on historical presence (Cowan, McLeod, and Rault 2014). For example, in writing about Peggy Shaw's solo work, Pryor (2014) cites traditions of queer historiography, explaining:

Such embodied forms of pedagogy are vital in a United States where 'straight' history is archived in public institutions of memory (museums, libraries, film, popular media), but the always already marginalized lives of queer and trans people slip from history because there are few institutions devoted to collecting, protecting, and trans/mitting their history and collective memory. (69)

Shaw's thirty-six year career as a performer has included work with the feminist collective Split Britches, as well as collaborative shows with and solo shows directed by Lois Weaver, also a member of Split Britches.³ Collaborations between and among Shaw, Weaver, and Deb Margolin (the third member of Split Britches) are examples of how queer solo performance often operates collectively, even when only one body may seem to be present on a stage. Archiving the fluidity of solo work as that which moves between and among the singular performer and the collaborative effort productively complicates the notion of what it means to perform alone one stage.

Simply put, to perform is to act, to affect action – what Richard Schechner (1985) has iconically referred to as 'twice behaved behavior' (52). Staged performance is a crafted,

lived experience, sharpened for an audience through the placement of a theatrical frame around an event. A solo performance is traditionally meant as one performed by a single performer. However, solo performance is arguably always a collective endeavour. For example, in 'Between a Director and a Cast of One: A Beginning Aesthetic', Pinney (2006) explores the relationships she develops with the solo performers whose work she directs. Pinney observes that 'the solo performer and the director, at once other and team, are faced with the inevitable arrival of the audience' (189). The audience may see only one body onstage, but other bodies – material, ideological, even virtual – linger in the theatrical space as participants in and witnesses to the event: a phenomenon which Pinney refers to as 'being *alone together* [...]' (2006, 190). While the artists I discuss often perform alone on stage, they frequently share the stage with other performers – sometimes other live bodies, sometimes mediated representations of themselves.

In the introduction to a special issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* on Performance Futures, Stephenson (2015) explains that, 'When we talk about community, we talk about inclusion and connectivity, but we also talk about exclusion and about the entrenched systems and habitual patterns of thinking that create boundaries among us' (6). Making queer community through solo performance is integral to discussions of inclusion and exclusion, and artists who engage in this work are constantly negotiating these boundaries.

Queer artists require queer community for sustenance, both creatively and financially. In *Precarious Life*, her deeply personal, thoughtful exploration of grief, mourning, and nationalism, Butler (2006) explains how the loss of self is connected to the collective: 'Who "am" I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do' (22). Understanding solo performance as collective endeavour is a foundation of queer solo performance work. As so much of queer politics relies on the complex interworkings of community, so does queer solo performance. Not unlike the larger genre of theatrical and performance practice in which it resides, queer solo performance is ultimately a community undertaking. Understanding the importance and power of queer arts communities is key to moving into the following discussion of the Culture Wars, and the enduring legacy they have had on queer performance in the US.

Dangerous Realities and the Culture Wars, or, the War on (Queer) Culture

A crucifix is photographed submerged in urine; a performer blesses fish in a toilet bowl using a crucifix for a microphone; a naked artist smearing herself with food products will not stay silent about the subjugation of women's bodies; another artist wraps herself in an American flag while holding a Teletubby doll,⁴ surrounded by capitalist, consumer detritus. These are some of the images indelibly associated with the 1990s United States Culture Wars. The Culture Wars emerged on many fronts as what Cristyn Davies describes as a 'moral panic that has accompanied attempts by the New Right to shape and define the American citizen as heterosexual, monogamous, white and a believer in middle-class family values' (83). As the right wing grew increasingly politically powerful in the US, the moral policing of identity became a hallmark of the battle over cultural absolutism vs. cultural relativism.

Most notably for this article, the Culture Wars were fought via battles over National Endowment for the Arts funding, during which right-wing political factions legislated conservative standards of morality that resulted in dramatic cuts to the NEA's budget, and restrictions on which artists are eligible for support. Solo performance artists working with

provocative themes that confront dangerous realities of embodying queer identities have been particularly affected by these battles.⁵

If culture-making is often a queer production, another way to understand the Culture Wars battles over arts funding in the US is as a war *on* culture, and particularly on queer culture. Cultural wars in the US have frequently played out via the policing of aesthetic representations of sexual and gender identities, and as a result, precarity is endemic to queer artistic production. Like all radical community endeavours, queer politics have been shaped through resistance to restrictive ideologies. There is always risk involved: a bit of danger. In the introduction to *O Solo Homo*, an anthology of queer solo performance texts, Holly Hughes and Roman (1998) compares queer solo work to the act of ‘witnessing’, which she traces as a cultural phenomenon present in both African-American civil rights movements and feminist consciousness raising. Hughes goes on to say that when we view a queer solo performance, we are aware that the events being discussed on stage might have ‘really happened ... There is some level of safety that disappears for the audience, we can’t hide behind “it’s only art”’ (4). US queer solo performance work is a risky practice, aesthetically, politically, and financially – one that reveals the dangers of telling the truth about what has really happened in our lives.

Hughes, along with Karen Finley, Tim Miller, and John Fleck, comprised a group of four solo performance artists whose funding from the NEA was rescinded in 1990 based on claims that their work was indecent.⁶ Each of these artists speaks of ways in which solo performance takes on the danger of the real, or as Hughes notes in *O Solo Homo*, the danger of the thing that might really have happened. Finley, Fleck, Hughes and Miller all spoke of dangerous realities in US politics that threatened an imaginary unification of experience. Much like the McCarthy hearings in the 1950s, during the 1990s a civil battle and cultural witch hunt ensued that was led by conservative politicians like Senator Jesse Helms and Senator Alfonse D’Amato – famous for ripping up an art catalogue containing a photograph of Andre Serrano’s *Piss Christ* on the floor of the US senate (Carr 2008).

Richard Meyer (2000) cites Holly Hughes’ solo performance *Preaching to the Perverted*, chronicling her journey to the US Supreme Court as part of the infamous legal battle over National Endowment for the Humanities funding for four solo artists in the early 1990s:

I guess the reason this lawsuit got this far
Is that everyone is pretending that the definition of decency isn’t clear
Everyone is acting as though that word
Weren’t a big pink neon sign flashing: ‘No Queers! No Queers!’ (551)

Hughes’ explicitly points out that homophobia masquerading as indignant morality has been and continues to be a pervasive force in culture wars. The NEA artists’ funding was rescinded for being too queer; making provocative art that challenges and exposes the limits of so-called diversity.

The NEA Four conflict is by no means anomalous in a long history of conflicts over arts funding in the US. Artists like Ron Athey, Robert Maplethorpe, and Serrano are just a few examples of others whose work was protested and censored during the Culture Wars. In her public talk, ‘The Contest for American Culture: A Leadership Case Study on the NEA and NEH Funding Crisis’, historian Cynthia Koch (1998) details many of these conflicts. Koch explains the relevance of a growing Christian right wing in the US as underscoring the moral policing around arts funding.

It is a crucial snapshot for understanding today's lack of government support for solo artists. The NEA Four's legal battles' affect on funding for solo artists was to ultimately queer all solo performance by othering it as a creative form. The NEA Four incident made clear the dangerous real of queer solo performance work in two important ways. First, it made it impossible for solo artists to receive direct funding for their work. Due to a decency clause passed by congress in 1990,⁷ the NEA changed their policy so that they no longer offer funding directly to individual performance artists. Second, it effectively queered all solo performance by othering it, as a perverse and estranged art form.

Queer solo performers from the NEA Four to the three contemporary artists I discuss in the next section of this article work actively to provoke insecurity: affectively producing a range of emotions that might include unease, desire, amusement, or even outrage. Through an invitational challenge that dares us to reflect on our experiences of gender identity and sexuality – and the ways in which these intersect with other elements of identity such as race, religion, nationality, age, and ability – queer performance demands that we think outside proscribed, heteronormative scripts.

Queer solo performers occupy a specific place of protest performance by their very act of being, and of making and staging their work. Queer-identified solo artists put their bodies into a performance space as a gesture of vulnerability, particularly in a political atmosphere in the United States that is in carefully selected spaces supported, though in public places sometimes hostile, and often violent. Many queer solo artists produce work with very little funding and support, but as a necessary means of making community. David Román and Tim Miller (1995) refer to this as 'Preaching to the Converted,' a perverse reference to performance as a sort of queer church that we all need to attend often, in order to have our beliefs reified, and know that we are not alone in our convictions.

In Wallace's (1996) essay in *Modern Drama*, 'Performance Anxiety: "Identity," "Community," and Tim Miller's *My Queer Body*', Wallace writes:

One of the most effective sequences occurs when Miller, totally nude, surveys the audience to pick an individual on whose lap he will sit. At this point Miller denies the truth of the narrative he has just related and draws attention to what is occurring in 'the real,' emphasizing 'I'm here naked in front of all of you right now'. (325–326)

At the time of Wallace's writing, the body of a naked gay man summoned the dangerous reality not only of queer desire, but also insecurities around the transmission of HIV/AIDS. Miller's naked body spoke to the reality of the US (and other) government's choice to ignore the HIV/AIDS epidemic while millions died and the disease spread.

As another example of a challenge to US policy, both Tim Miller and Holly Hughes featured American flags in their work during the Culture Wars. Using the flag in performance has been a source of controversy for artists – and other protesters – well before 1990 and has of course continued since. For example, in June 2015, Bree Newsome, an activist and artist, scaled the flagpole at the courthouse in Columbia, South Carolina to remove the Confederate Flag, as what we might read as an act of performance protest, following the massacre of nine members of the Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The use of a flag speaks to a particular national insecurity, or dangerous real, of the challenge interventionist artists present to an assumed national US identity.⁸

The Culture Wars of the 1990s are now twenty and more years behind us. Today's culture wars are indicative of the intersectional ways that queer solo performance continues

to challenge an assumed, homogenous national US identity. In the next section, I will discuss the work of three contemporary queer solo performance artists. Dynasty Handbag is a self-deprecatingly comedic performer who embraces artistic and personal failure, M. Lamar is a classically trained vocalist and pianist who explores Black identity with a goth/rock sensibility, and Erin Markey writes and performs original musicals as popular culture parodies. Their work embraces the perverse estrangement engendered by lack of government funding, moving fluidly through various intersections of queer identity.

Dynasty Handbag and the Embrace of Queer Failure

Dynasty Handbag is the alter ego of performance artist Jibz Cameron. Her work embraces her fears of failure as an artist, and parodies capitalist aspirations of success. *Soggy Glasses: A Homo's Odyssey* premiered at the Brooklyn Art Museum (2014), and is a mediated chronicle of Cameron's journey of failed productivity at an artist residency. Performing in front of a giant screen that features a map of her body, she guides the audience through her frustrations with the creative process. She introduces us to the other characters at the residency (all drawn and voiced by her) in the form of strangely animated cartoon-like creatures, such as the seductively hissing snake who wants to reassure her that she is doing good work, and the aviary being who flies around her studio as spectator.

Her futile attempts at the passionate, prolific artistry she imagines she should have at this residency are highlighted in the moment when she straps on a dildo and simulates sex with a chair as an imaginary object of desire, only to be discovered by another intruder. It is unclear if the intruder is someone else at the residency, or perhaps us, the audience. The idea of being watched and regulated as an artist is a constant theme in this piece, both during her residency and literally, by the audience, as we wonder: *when* will she produce?? *Will* she produce?? The show is the journey of an anti-heroine, ending with her emergence through her vagina on the mediated map of her body. Cameron stands on stage at the end of the show, singing her own lyrics to Tina Turner's 'We Don't Need Another Hero': 'We don't need another ... anything. We don't need another ... anything else. All we want is ... nothing. Forget it'.

On her website, the page with press reviews is featured on the menu as 'Depression', when a viewer rolls the mouse over this menu item, the word 'press' is highlighted. On this page she has a list of links to reviews she has received, followed by short, laudatory quotes for her work. Failure is illuminated here with the suggestion that success is ephemeral: even good press reviews are not enough to counter the constant sense of never-good-enough that she faces as an artist trying to achieve notability and navigate the pragmatics of making a living.

In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz (2009) describes her work as a refusal of capitalist success, and a 'utopian oddball par excellence' (196). He explains:

Dynasty Handbag's queer failure is not an aesthetic failure, but a political refusal. It is a going off script, and the script in this instance is a mandate that makes queer and other minoritarian cultural performers work not for themselves but for distorted cultural hierarchy. (177)

Queer failure, such as Dynasty Handbag employs, might be read as an escape from the punishments of heteronormativity (Halberstam 2011). Muñoz wants us to understand the character of Dynasty Handbag as embodied resistance to the dangers of a queer artist trying to live in a heteronormative reality. As Dynasty Handbag, Cameron's work provides audiences

with alternate possibilities for cultural production. Her performances are marked by an improvisational feeling that anything could happen at any moment. Her inner monologues are revealed to her audience via pre-recorded voice-overs, with which she converses live on stage. Vulnerability and precarity prevail in her work, and the result is an invitational sense for the audience that we see and know and feel her struggles with the elusiveness of success.

Dynasty Handbag's website also features a cartoon created by herself and collaborator Hedia Maron that chronicles what they call their 'failed TV show', which they pitched to Adult Swim, a lineup of animated programming intended for adults on the US channel The Cartoon Network. The video is produced in the mash-up style typical of her/their work, borrowing from aesthetics familiar to Monty Python fans, for example, with parodies of the self-indulgent passions of nobility. In one of these scenes, she writes a love letter to herself and then waits anxiously for its delivery by a knight on a horse.

As Schechner (2012) note in the special issue of *TDR: The Drama Review* on Precarity and Performance, 'Euro-American anxieties, however, cannot be isolated as regional, for they are born in relation to the global (7)'. In another scene in the 'failed tv show', Dynasty Handbag is having drinks in a dance club with a freakishly depicted stuffed animal in the form of a Siamese cat, whose blue eyes are pasted on and whose mouth seems to be swimming on its face while it talks. Dynasty Handbag is picking her teeth, wearing a red dress and an American flag scarf around her neck, along with her trademark smeared blue eyeshadow. 'I like watching people on TV', remarks the cat, 'having a March or a protest, or throwing some homemade bombs, just totally flipping out on the street, you know on scooters or whatever'. Handbag asks the cat, 'you're not into war or anything like that?' 'Oh no', the cat replies, 'I'm not into war or torture or anything like that'. 'God no', Handbag replies. 'I mean', the cat says, 'you're not into discrimination or violence or anything?' 'Are you kidding? No!' Dynasty Handbag replies, and then turns slowly to face a camera behind her with a deadpan expression on her face.

This scene reveals a particular US insecurity about the voyeurism offered by the media into global protest, and Dynasty Handbag's smug expressions suggest that she does, in fact, take a perverse pleasure in watching. Her final deadpan turn to the camera is a moment of j'accuse, implicating that we share the voyeuristic pleasure with her and the cat, which seems to represent the passive American viewer.

M. Lamar: Toward a Negrogothic Aesthetic in Solo Performance

Bodily memory is a powerful tool for solo performers. When employed as a performance device, it offers transparency and vulnerability for an audience that cultivates an intimate relationship. In her essay on her own lecture-performance, 'Riding, Scarring, Knowing: A Queerly Embodied Performance Historiography', Marra (2012) refers to Ann Cvetkovich's work on emotional archives, saying that 'this layering of body marks raises the history and memory of trauma' (15). M. Lamar draws on the scars of enslavement and physical and emotional abuse survived by African Americans throughout US history. Playing with intersections between racial ideation and queer sexual practice, his work raises and interrogates cultural scars resulting from slavery.

Lamar is a classically trained pianist and vocalist whose solo work richly illustrates the bodily engagement that Marra is describing, through what Brandon Peter Masterman (2012) calls his 'aesthetic blackness', referring to his unique vocal style as 'affective black sonic

abjection'. A countertenor, Lamar's ethereal vocal quality soars above the images of Black American abjection and white discipline that he intermingles in his work. In an interview with *Vice Magazine*, Lamar explains his interest in classical voice and opera,

particularly black sopranos such as Leontyne Price, Jessye Norman, and Marian Anderson. 'What they did with their voices was almost like science fiction to me,' recalled Lamar. 'They were in this very European form, but you could tell they came out of the gospel tradition' (Colucci 2016)

This hybrid of science fiction, classical opera training, and African-American gospel music is what powers M. Lamar's work, which he calls 'Negrothotic'.

Aside from his solo performance work, audiences may recognise him from his portrayal of his sister, Laverne Cox, in an early episode of *Orange is the New Black*. They are twins and grew up in Mobile, Alabama. It is of no small consequence that both left Alabama, a particularly historically troubled cite of racial relations in the US, and moved to New York City – an historically promising (if not also troubling) site of artistic promise and opportunity for Black Americans.

In an interview with Lamar, when I asked him if he identifies as a queer artist, this was his response:

Of course there are queer readings of my work and I welcome them but I don't spend any of my time thinking about queer activism. I spend my time thinking about white supremacy capitalism and patriarchy and how to respond to these things in meaningful ways (Whitney 2016).

Lamar's work richly illustrates the many ways he pushes back against whiteness and, often, the ways in which it does intersect with queerness, while not necessarily foregrounding it. In a poster for a show at Cooper Union in New York City titled, 'An Evening With M. Lamar,' we see an image of a blonde, pale white boy reading a text on a wooden desk with one arm through a restrictive structure, designed to keep him in this place of learning. Lamar faces him, wearing his signature Negrothotic solid black clothing with metal spiky shoulders. He is wielding a whip that appears to be in motion, in a gesture of disciplining and educating the constrained queer whiteness before him.

Lamar's media work is as richly textured as his artistry, and his website offers multiple video pieces. In 'Trying to Leave My Body,' he moves in agony in front of a noose – an iconic image signifying lynching and the subjugation of African-Americans in the United States. In interviews he has discussed his inspirations for exploring lynchings and the middle passage (*Huffington Post* 2012), as well as the exotification of the Black male body by white men (*Vice Magazine*). Ultimately, Lamar's work seems designed to leave his audiences with feelings of desire and outrage. The gothic beauty of his music working in tandem with the historical violence he explores serves to provoke and produce new ways of understanding Black American history as an alternate to a master narrative of US imperialism.

Erin Markey: Queer Popular Culture Parody Goes to Hell

A performance powerhouse, Erin Markey's intensity on stage is part political meltdown, part musical theatre actor gone wild. In an interview with *Bomb Magazine*, (Cooper 2013) Markey describes herself as 'absurdist'. Markey's work has also been described by the *New York Times* as having 'an element of the demonic' and 'an id run amok' with 'an abandon of her physical performance'.

An icon of downtown New York City cabaret performance, Markey is known for her parodic performances in the Joe's Cabaret Pub Series *Our Hit Parade*. For example, in her version of Justin Bieber's 'Baby', she transforms on stage while singing – with the assistance of a make-up artist – from Bieber in his signature baseball cap to Bieber as an elderly woman who monologues the rest of the song in a nostalgic reverie. 'I just wanted to see her on the weekend', a frail, greying, Bieber gasps, clutching her fringed shawl around her shoulders. At the end of the performance, the make-up artist paints X's across both of Markey's eyes, as the aged Bieber closes her eyes while narrating, 'I died'. She then opens her eyes for one final moment, glaring at the audience: 'I grew up too fast, and you know whose fault that is? Probably the paparazzi'. A play on the lesbians-who-look-like-Justin-Bieber internet meme,⁹ Markey nails both a pitch-perfect impression of Bieber as well as revealing the artifice of the pop star's projected masculinity, and a commentary on Bieber's co-optation of Black American hip-hop culture.

Markey also works as a solo performer in shows by other artists. Of her many memorable performances, *God Hates This Show*¹⁰ is a prime example of the absurdist, theatrical imagination she brings to a character. In *God Hates This Show*, Markey originates the lead character of Shirley Phelps-Roper, the daughter of Fred Phelps, the now deceased leader of the Westboro Baptist Church, which infamously leads protests at funerals of queers and soldiers (and queer soldiers) among others. Phelps-Roper notably denounced her affiliation with the church in 2013. In *God Hates This Show*, Markey becomes Shirley, who has died and gone to hell and is staging a retrospective rock concert.

Complete with choreographed teams of back-up singing demons, Markey's ferocity is a match for such a wildly imagined world. *God Hates This Show* opened in the basement of HERE, a performance space in the SoHo neighbourhood of New York City. Synthetic smoke filled the room as the audience entered to a campy background soundtrack, including eerie, demonic cackling and the cawing of crows. When Markey is introduced as Phelps-Roper, she is first shown covered in a white sheet. The sheet is pulled from her, and she opens with the number 'Rumor Has it God Don't Love You Christians No More'.¹¹ Markey's representation of Phelps-Roper shows us that such extremist Christians both fear and fantasise the experience of Hell, as a place for indulging the ultimate catharsis of queer desire.

Conclusions

As a genre, queer solo performance operates in many forms. In this essay I have referenced work by artists who work with monologue, personae, and personal experience narrative. The contemporary artists whose work I have discussed are connected by their incorporation of new media that blurs boundaries between first person and character work – opening up new possibilities for the danger of the queer realities. They employ aesthetics of camp/excess and the gothic, sharing creatively embedded themes of political critique.

Their work is connected by common threads of vulnerability and precarity, moving together towards a recognisable body of queer solo performance work that speaks to ongoing US insecurity over the queering of culture. Collectively, they explore insecurity in the US concerning intersections of sexuality, gender identity, race, nationality, and religion. Ultimately, such work productively disrupts an imagined homogenised national identity, suggesting a much more complex and diverse way of being an artist in the US.

Of course one of the primary changes since the culture wars of the 1990s is the availability of user-generated media. Markey, Lamar, and Cameron (Dynasty Handbag) all have extensive bodies of work available online, allowing access that is not under direct control by US funding allocation. The benefit of online access to queer solo performance is that it prevents isolationism. Artists are able to share work in a generative spirit that influences new and inclusive art, taking into consideration identities and events outside of a geographic boundary.

The spirit of the collectively accessible is not unique to the current moment, as other DIY vehicles for underground distribution such as zines, community organised café performances, and touring festivals have long played a crucial role for queer artists to find one another. What is new, however, is the ability for artists to post work online that can reach a much wider audience than an ephemeral staged production. Certainly, online performance production has its drawbacks – which could be discussed in future work – such as the intangibility of the performance itself and the assumption that internet access is available to everyone. However, the opportunities for visibility of queer performance work is unprecedented and challenges traditional moral policing such as protests and other censorship (Figures 1–3).

While all of the artists I have discussed here work individually in unique ways, seen together they queer an imagined unified national identity by troubling iconographic US imagery, summoning intersections of religious bigotry, racial scarring and unquestioning



Figure 1. Dynasty Handbag (performer). Photo credit: Ves Pitts.



Figure 2. M Lamar (performer). Photo credit: Amos Mac.



Figure 3. Erin Markey (performer). Photo credit: John Keon.

patriotism. Most importantly, this troubling opens up space for further dialogue about the crucial role that queer solo artists play in challenging imperialism and making space for broader understandings of US identities.

Notes

1. I say 'mostly' because artists like Pinney (2006) have argued strongly that solo performance is always a collaborative endeavour.
2. Dolan, Hughes, and Tropicana 2015; Galloway 2010; Bernstein 2006; Troyano 2000; Muñoz 1999.
3. Recent publications on work by Shaw, Weaver and Split Britches include Case 1996; Shaw and Dolan 2011; Harvie and Weaver 2015.
4. Teletubbies is a popular British children's cartoon that originally aired in the US from 1997 to 2001, and was frequently cited as part of the queer invasion of children's television because the character 'Tinky Winky' wore a triangle on its chest. Dalrymple's (1999) article suggests they are part of what he calls a larger 'Orwellian world', and satirises about concern the gay agenda in children's TV and other popular culture expressed by evangelist Jerry Fallwell.
5. For more on the culture wars (see Schechner 1990; Rector 1992; Heins 1993; Meyer 2004; Heins 2007; Kerstin 2007; Carr 2008; Glass and Williams 2011; Hartman 2015).
6. For a more detailed discussion of this historical legal battle see Meyer's 'Have You Heard the One About the Lesbian Who Goes to the Supreme Court?: Holly Hughes and the Case Against Censorship'.
7. Public Law 101–121, section 304 (1989).
None of the funds authorised to be appropriated for the National Endowment for the Arts or the National Endowment for the Humanities may be used to promote, disseminate or produce materials which in the judgement of the National Endowment for the Arts or the National Endowment for the Humanities may be considered obscene, including but not limited to, depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts and which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.
8. This paper was developed as part of a conference on North American In/Securities at the John Morton Center for North American Studies in the University of Turku, Finland. Subversive use of the US flag was present in other conference presentations, including Erik Hieta's (2015) writing on the American Indian Movement where protesters are depicted displaying an upside down flag; and in Stephanie Sparling Williams' (2015) writing on Coco Fusco's solo piece, *A Room of One's Own*, where she plays a fictional U.S. military Sergeant, saluting in front of a US flag.
9. This Tumblr site catalogues this popular culture phenomena: <http://lesbianswholooklikejustinbieber.tumblr.com/>
10. *God Hates This Show* is written and directed by John J. Caswell Jr. It was first produced by Progressive Theatre Workshop (<https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/IN5JBRUGb253cn?domain=progressivetheatreworkshop.org>) at HERE on October 16–20, 2013 and then ran again at Joe's Pub for a special Halloween show on October 31, 2014.
11. On the show's website it is explained that all songs are parodies of pop songs that are written by the Westboro Church and published on their website for public usage.

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