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Limp Wrists, Clenched Fists: An Analysis of Queer Performance Art as a Tool for Political Resistance

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Introduction

Art is the language of the oppressed. Throughout many queer liberation movements, queer people use performance art as a medium for political expression and resist dominant oppressive structures. Recently, queer performance art, particularly drag, has been commodified, becoming palatable for the white cisheterosexual majority. Despite this, queer performance art has an innately liberatory spirit. William Dorsey Swann, a drag queen born enslaved in Maryland, U.S.A, first created Drag performance art. (Joseph 2020). In the 1800s, Swann began organizing drag balls, subsequently fostering Ball Culture that remains vital to queer communities today (Joseph 2020). At its core, drag and all forms of queer performance art mobilize an emancipatory, liberatory ethic. This paper will explore queer performance art as an effective medium to subvert and criticize socio-legal reflections of cisheteropatriarchal hegemony. Further, this paper will emphasize the importance of keeping the political, revolutionary roots of this queer performance art alive.

Queering Law and Culture

On ‘Queer Community’ and Queerness as a Politic

In this paper, the term ‘queer’ is a reclaimed term referring to community identity, retooling the oppressive language used by cisheteropatriarchal hegemony. The emergence of queer theory in the 1970s and 80s inspired the reclamation of the term to respond to the single-axis, predominantly white, LGBT+ rights-seeking movements in the Global North (Motschenbacher and Stegu 2013, 520). While white gay and lesbian movements emphasized respectability politics, queer theory and praxis explore a liberatory, intersectional framework of resistance (Motschenbacher and Stegu 2013, 520). This paper will utilize the framework of queerness rather than the neoliberal LGBT+ framework that dominates the pop-cultural mainstream in the Global North.

When speaking about queer groups, the term ‘community’ often signifies a oneness or connection between people of marginalized gender identities and sexual orientations. Nevertheless, queer people and global queer communities do not exist as a monolith but rather are bonded by the collective political interest of queer liberation. This political interest, and liberatory praxis, may be categorized as queer culture. Queer culture is the collective identity bonded by arts, traditions, language, and rituals (Mezey 2001) among groups of marginalized gender identities and sexual orientations.

Exploring Queer Relationships With The Law

Law is traditionally thought of as an amalgamation of carceral institutions, policing, and statutory law. Law enforcement's juridical practice is a cultural tool that holds significant meaning-making power (Mezey 2001). Law often has a monopoly on power, which manifests itself through state violence and the threat of punishment and is mobilized to enforce said legal order.

Critical queer theorists, namely Judith Butler, call upon a vision of law that enforces cisheteronormative societal order, administered through the threat of state and societal violence (Butler 1990, xiv). Through this analysis of the law, Butler theorizes the concept of gender performativity. Gender performativity, as distinct from queer performance art, is the ritualistic performance of binary, cisheteropatriarchal understandings of gender (Butler 1990, 175). Expanding on this, Butler theorizes that gendered performance is enforced through social and juridical laws, as the law is often used against those who deviate (1990, 175-176). Although many view the law as a tool for creating and responding to culture, the law may take on different meanings in queer culture. The creation of law and normativity by the dominant mainstream erases those on the margins; thus, countercultural movements provide space for the empowerment of the marginalized (Plessis and Chapman 1997). Queer resistance movements position themselves in resistance to, and for freedom from, the oppressive nature of the law. However, simultaneously, these movements are created as a response to the dominant culture, which holds the power of the law.

Law's Impact on Culture: Performance Art as Political Expression for the Oppressed

Art can be a powerful tool of expression for silenced voices and stories. Queer performance art, through its use of eccentric, humorous, erotic, and shocking imagery, can allow queer folks to take control of narratives around queerphobic and transphobic oppression (Plessis and Chapman 1997, 55). Through performance art, queer communities can find their voice, further empowering them to resist socio-legal oppressions.

In the text "Queercore: The Distinct Identities of Subculture" (1997), Plessis and Chapman explore the use of queer performance art in the queercore (or homocore) D.I.Y. punk movements. Plessis and Chapman explore the appropriation of imagery created by the dominant cisheterosexual population as a way for queer people to reclaim the telling of their history. Fertile La Toyah and Black Vaginal Davis (also known as Vaginal Creme Davis) are Black punk drag queens who appropriate biological essentialist understandings of gender through their use of vaginal and fertile imagery. These two artists use video zines, a mini bricolage

video magazine emerging out of the D.I.Y. punk subculture, as a tool of their performance art praxis. In the video zine, *Fertile La Toyah Video Magazine: Inaugural Issue* (1993), Fertile appears on screen wearing a shirt that reads “I’VE HAD 21 ABORTIONS,” with a large X on her baseball cap, as well as in the background (Plessis and Chapman 1997, 54). She then proclaims, “Soon I will be at your doorstep, me, Fertile La Toyah Jackson X, with my army of beautiful, beautiful coloured people ready to tear your white, blue-eyed devil asses apart [...] (we) will get justice by any means necessary” (Plessis and Chapman 1997, 54). At the end of her statement, Fertile cites Malcolm X, a Black nationalist civil rights activist, reinvoking narratives of Black struggle and collective resistance to white supremacy.

Similarly, post-colonial queer movements in the Global South connect forms of political resistance with performance art. Siyakaka is a pan-African queer feminist movement that translates to “we’re shitting all over you.” The movement reclaims homophobic language used by Martin Ssempe, a Ugandan pastor and the chair of Uganda’s Pastors’ Task Force Against Homosexuality, in his “Eat Da Poo Poo” lecture (Ellapen 2021, 118). This lecture is a particularly infamous example of how Ssempe mobilizes white gay pornography against African queerness, painting African queer desire as deviant and a result of colonialism (Ellapen 2021, 119-120). Despite the clear anthropological evidence of queerness in Africa before the continent’s colonization, these homophobic narratives have been reflected in Uganda’s Bill No. 18, often referred to as the “Kill the Gays Bill,” a sodomy law passed in 2014 (Ellapen 2021, 119-120). Recognizing Ssempe’s violent queerphobic rhetoric, Siyakaka feminism reclaims the imagery of feces through the name of the movement and in FAKA’s performance of *Bottoms Revenge*. The performance reappropriates the footage of Ssempe’s lecture, followed by clips of Gucci and Marea, queer performance artists, bathing in feces while positioning their bodies in various anal sex positions (Ellapen 2021, 127). In this example, FAKA can effectively transform oppressive, violent rhetoric into a site of pleasure and healing.

The queercore movement and Siyakaka feminism allow marginalized cultures, particularly queer Black communities, to enact cultural dominance upon the oppressive majority. In the text “From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation” (2006), Richard A. Rogers defines cultural dominance as reclaiming various oppressive cultural elements by subjugated groups as a form of resistance. In Fertile La Toyah’s and Black Vaginal Davis’ performance art zines, the artists appropriate the language of fertility to challenge white cisheteronormative conceptions of womanhood. Additionally, FAKA’s appropriation of the imagery of feces pushes back against violent narratives against African queer desire.

(Queer) Performance Art as Praxis

Queer performance art, among its many uses, has also been used as a form of political protest and to inspire direct political action. These forms of art can create safer spaces for political expression, with reduced threat of State violence and persecution. It is in these spaces that counter-cultural movements are actualized.

In the article “Drag Acts: Performativity, Subversion and the AIDS Poetry of Rafael Campo and Mark Doty” (2002), Joanne Rendell explores AIDS performance art poetry as drag-like in that it creates a parodic critique of cisheteronormativity. AIDS performance art poetry is a form of narrative poetry told through a performative model popularized during the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Due to the negligent and homophobic responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States, many in the queer community fell sick, causing people to quickly assume caregiver or care-recipient roles (Rendell 2002, 91). As the wider cisheterosexual society dehumanized and commodified those living with HIV, the queer community promptly took to performance art as a form of political expression (Rendell 2002). Mark Doty, an AIDS performance art poet, intentionally omitted the term ‘positive’ in the poem *Fog* (Doty 1993, as cited in Rendell 2002, 93). Doty listed other words beginning with the letter ‘P’ to comment on how ‘HIV-positive’ status has been subject to corporeal commodity fetishism (Rendell 2002, 94-95). The theory of commodity fetishism derives from Marx, implying that under capitalism, genuine relationships do not exist between individuals but rather between *things* (Richey and Ponte 2008, 722). Doty’s work critiques ‘HIV-positive’ status as a term that prevents genuine connections with people, but rather with their diagnosis (Rendell 2002, 94). Doty’s performance art has subversive potential similar to drag performance; his works effectively criticize capitalist, ableist, and cisheterosexual hegemony. Additionally, Rendell’s text contrasts Butler’s analysis of drag as subversive parodic performance art and performance art poetry. Rendell highlights the appropriation of feminine aesthetics, as created and upheld by patriarchal notions of beauty, by drag artists to parody misogynistic, queerphobic gender roles (2002, 93). These similar themes carry over in AIDS performance art poetry, where Doty creates a parody of and reclaims the usage of ‘HIV-positive’ terminology (Rendell 2002, 94-95).

Further, Carrie Sandahl’s “Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer?: Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance” (2003) highlights the usage of performance art monologues within the queer and disability communities. This specific form of performance art, autobiographical performance art monologues, has been used extensively by overlapping queer and disability justice activists (Sandahl 2003, 29-30). This art form has become a core facet in the communities due to four key reasons: 1) the production of the artwork is cheap and timely; 2) the performance form is accessible, and gives the performer

the ability to cross the boundaries of discrimination they may face in more traditional performing arts; 3) it emphasizes how the personal is political, as performers share their experiences, so it can quickly mobilize audiences to engage in direct action; 4) performers can speak directly to and about their communities, calling out shortcomings and highlighting victories (Sandahl 2003, 29-30). In one performance art monologue, “White Disabled Talent” (2000), the performer, Greg Walloch, uses humour and erotica to challenge ableist and queerphobic perceptions of his body (Sandahl 2003, 48). In one scene, Walloch tells a story, slowly captivating the audience: “I would sit on the metal (hospital) chair in my underwear staring at the clock, and I would pray [...] And then I would look down and sure enough, I would have the biggest erection I’ve ever had in my entire life!” (Walloch 2000, as cited in Sandahl 2003, 48). As the scene continues, the audience’s diagnostic gaze is challenged, creating anticipation for sensual touch. Walloch slowly turns a stark, traditionally nonsexual medical scene into erotica (Sandahl 2003, 48). In this performance, Walloch retools the oppressive socio-legal governance over his body, asserting sexual autonomy and centring his pleasure.

In both “Drag Acts: Performativity, Subversion and the AIDS Poetry of Rafael Campo and Mark Doty” (2002), as well as “Queering the Crip or Crippling, the Queer?: Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance” (2003), the authors emphasize the use of queer, disability justice-centred performance art as a tool to articulate a critical analysis of dominant and oppressive cultures. The works of both Mark Doty and Greg Walloch assert cultural dominance over oppressive structures, appropriating and retooling oppressive language and symbols. The works parody and mimic ableist, queerphobic perspectives, exposing the ignorance and inconsistencies of these narratives.

Conclusions

Although not always representative of a global or even local queer community, performance art pieces can represent a unified collective struggle against cishetero patriarchal hegemony when pieced together. Although these art pieces exist as distinct in their current socio-political contexts, when weaved together, they form the quilt that is the queer liberation movement (Rendell 2002, 98). Therefore, queer performance art inspires, and itself is, a form of revolutionary praxis. Through these performance art pieces, queer people in various intersecting oppressions can find unity in their resistance.

Although these multiple forms of performance art are quite different, many artists use similar tropes in their works. Queer communities often retool artistic eroticism, which has been dominated in the mainstream by cisheteronormativity, to assert bodily and sexual autonomy. Due to the ongoing commodification and

policing of queer bodies, this art form is inherently political by both societal and state powers. Drag, and other parodic performing arts, effectively reclaim language and aesthetics to empower themselves and the queer community. This essay explored examples such as how Black punk drag queens, Fertile La Toyah and Black Vaginal Creme Davis, appropriate bio essentialist understandings of womanhood to illustrate the performativity of gender, all while connecting Black power, decoloniality, and liberation from the gender binary (Plessis and Chapman 1997). Further, Siyakaka feminism and FAKA's performance art reclaim the language and imagery of feces, affirming queer Africans in their identities and creating space for pleasure-based healing (Ellapen 2021). Additionally, Mark Doty's refusal of the term 'HIV-positive' subverts the commodity fetishism of queer bodies (Rendell 2002). Lastly, the performance art of Greg Walloch effectively uses erotica to challenge the audience's diagnostic gaze (Sandahl 2003). Within these unique art performances, the thread of queer liberation weaves through, communicating the revolutionary narratives of queer theory and creating a lasting impact on all those who engage in queer performance art.

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