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'Affect, Performance and Queer Subjectivities


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AFFECT, PERFORMANCE AND QUEER SUBJECTIVITIES
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This article will re-configure the historical association between queer lives and psychopathology by focusing upon the enactive potential of particular performances of queer subjectivities. These are usually live performances which through their engagement with a background of trauma, shame, loneliness and isolation afford the circulation and distribution of what will be termed, ‘unhappy affects’. These situated responses to a register of affects which have historically been associated with queer lives, open up performative possibilities for enacting queer forms of belonging and becoming. The article will foreground the importance of attending to embodiment, affect and genealogy in investigating queer adventures in the context of live performance.

Keywords performance; affect; embodiment; genealogy; inter-generational memory; subjectivity

Introduction: doing genealogy

Performativity is not an explanatory concept so much as itself part of an intervention... it will imagine and articulate the possibility of things being ‘otherwise’.

(Bell 2007, p. 5)

Genealogical research has been accepted across the humanities as an important strategy and intervention for exploring the contingent conditions and relations which have combined and re-combined to produce present understandings and forms of subjectivity. These are forms of subjectivity which have become authorized within particular regimes and fictions of truth, and which through their immersion within particular technologies of the social enact and produce normative desires. Subjectivity is a concept which refers to those experiences and desires which although constituted through historical and discursive processes are experienced as emanating from a felt interiority. These relations may remain all the more opaque because they appear to materialize from the subject’s own fears, anxieties, hopes, aspirations and dreams. They may take on the status of habits, where we understand habits to be those processes...
which become engrained and embodied such that they are more resistant and
difficult to change. In this context genealogical research has been important to
queer projects which have sought to make such historical processes visible,
producing new cartographies of queer possibilities which de-stabilize
normative distinctions and their associated ‘structures of feeling’ (Williams
1977, Blackman 2009a). These are ‘troubling’ enterprises, associated with the
work of Judith Butler, who through her own experiences of identifying as a
butch lesbian and observing drag performances of femininity in a gay bar was
inspired to analyse camp as a practice which drew attention to the enactive
processes of gender (Segal 2008). If gender was brought into being through
reiteration, then certain queer practices held enactive potential for undoing
gender and performatively exploiting the gaps, silences and contradictions in
our being and becoming. This way of analysing and investigating queer
subjectivities has had huge import and inspired countless academics and queer
subjects to attend to the practices through which queer subjectivities are
enacted and produced. As such it is beyond the scope of this article to detail
the numerous studies inspired by Butler or to comment on their specificity and
effectivity (see McRobbie 2005, 2009). Such work has extended Butler’s
ouevre to explore the importance of queer spaces and time (Halberstam 2005),
as well as directing attention to the creative potential afforded by queer
practices of being and becoming (Treut 1999). As Bell (2007) suggests, these
practices do not encourage a retreat to the self in terms of an interrogative
questioning, but rather open out subjectivity to its primary ‘co-extensivity’.

Bell locates the concept of ‘co-extensivity’ in a discussion of various
philosophers including the work of Jean-Luc Nancy (2000). Nancy raised a
paradox which is central to the problem of subjectivity (see Blackman 2008).
Using a term associated with the work of Simonden (1992) he argues that our
individuation is always relational and therefore plural. In other words our very
sense of interiority emerges through our relations with others; human and non-
human and in that sense we are always more than one and less than many. This
relational ontology privileges process, such that we are always in excess of
ourselves (Manning 2007). We are singular-plural processes characterized by
the strange paradox of being both ‘one-yet-many’ (Blackman 2008). Nancy
(2000) uses the concept of ‘co-originality’ to describe how such plural and
therefore dependent relations have to be denied in the processes through which
subjects individuate. As Bell (2007) suggests, it is this paradox and its
precarious nature which is brought to the fore by Butler (2004) in her
meditation on grief post-9/11 in America. Butler suggests in this context, that
grief has the capacity to un-do the subject, where what previously held the
subject together dissolves. As Bell (2007, p. 23) argues:

If the relations that have had to be denied emerge to floor us, the
competent and useful subject unravels a little.
This excursion through Bell’s engagement with Butler and philosophers of co-extensivity such as Nancy sets up a particular conceptual frame for examining culture and performance. If the plural ties which sustain our individuation are fragile and precarious, we are both always ‘outside ourselves’, and therefore subject to dissolution. Bell mobilizes this frame to explore collective practices of mourning deployed by the Bush administration to the communal grieving following 9/11. She argues that one should analyse how such practices might have ‘captured’ people’s sense of being undone. This is an attempt to both understand the affective basis of practices and on the basis of this how they mobilize, connect up and distribute relations of entanglement amongst people, places, entities and objects producing particular situated responses to trauma. Bell argues that this is not a pessimistic analysis that forecloses the possibility of new entanglements, as other practices afford the potential for new attachments and configurations. This extension of the potential for genealogical work that Bell (2007) develops throughout her book emphasizes the importance of historical continuity rather than the usual focus in genealogy on discontinuity. I am very sympathetic to this focus, particularly in trying to understand the inter-generational and inter-corporeal transmission of ‘unhappy affects’ that will form the subject of this article. I will develop this in the next section before turning my attention to the problem of queer subjectivities and culture and performance in light of this.

**Queer families**

The concept of queer family allows us to imagine the ties and connections that bind us inter-generationally, and therefore point towards the continuities that circulate across space and time. These are attachments that might not necessarily be spoken or easily articulated and yet are embodied in complex ways. They are inter-corporeal and inter-subjective and Bell uses the concept of lineage or inter-generationality to point towards what tends to be left out by genealogical analysis. She suggests that although we might uncover historical dis-continuities between different epistemes, this approach wilfully denies, through its historical method, the way in which affects, trauma, forms of shame and so forth are communicated inter-generationally. Turning to critical race studies and Gilroy’s illuminating work on diaspora, she re-establishes the importance in this context, of exploring how this background of felt dispositions is commemorated and routed (Gilroy 1993). In this sense forms of subjectivity are produced and enacted not merely as performative de-stablizers, but more importantly as ‘performative routedness’ (Bell 2007, p. 32, Ahmed et al. 2003). She describes these as ‘those relations that are neither simply of identification nor of alterity, that is, those of genealogical connection’ (Gilroy 1993, p. 33). In other words these forms do not simply
‘trouble’ normative desires, but also appeal in some sense to people’s felt embodied dispositions which disclose their ‘generational, carnal connection’ (p. 37). Bell only gives one brief example of how such a frame would enable the analysis of forms of cultural performance which are non-normative, in that they do not simply subvert cultural norms. These are forms of communication which respond, often in non-linguistic ways, to the generational ties and connections formed around trauma or shame.

The article that Bell refers to was published in an edited collection, *Internationalizing Cultural Studies: An Anthology* (Abbas & Nguyet 2005). One theme that the anthology takes up is how to understand performance (which might include drama, ritual, show and spectacle) as ways of ‘knowing’ the past and therefore intervening in the future through enacting different versions of the present. The key focus of Hamera’s chapter is the ‘performance of amnesia’, which focuses on how embodied forms of performance (in this case Cambodian dance) allow bodies to ‘speak what they can’t’ (Pollack 2005, p. 76). This is about the communication and transmission of inter-generational forms of trauma that appear to be ‘unrepresentable’ (if we remain at the level of signification), and that are usually contained through a logic of silence. The family that Hamera attempts to interview has been displaced through forced migration to Los Angeles following the genocides carried out by the Khmer Rouge in the 1960s in Cambodia. What characterized the Sems family was their unwillingness or inability to articulate the trauma surrounding these events, which Hamera links to their survival and sanity. Indeed, Hamera (2005) suggests that the forms of ‘relational amnesia and aphasia’ (p. 96) that surrounded their refusal to ‘confess’ was a form of ‘strategic forgetfulness which kept them alive’ (p. 97). One could see this as a form of stuckness, where the family could not process the trauma which foreclosed the possibility of conscious deliberation and expression. Indeed, one version of trauma that Ruth Leys (2000) identifies in her genealogy of trauma is that trauma is a wound that cannot be registered therefore it cannot be integrated into consciousness. It remains as a disorder of memory or form of dissociation which prevents the processing and working-through which might allow the trauma to be acknowledged and the suffering accepted and communicated.

However, what is interesting about the significance of the practice of dance in the Sem’s family life, was that the Khmer movements that were performed by the parents allowed them to embody the traumas and communicate with those who did not survive, and therefore to afford the possibility of inter-generational communication and transmission. The Sems talked about the voices they heard whilst dancing who communicated the traditional Khmer dance movements to them. In this context the dance was a relational practice that afforded a ‘with-ness’; and that allowed connections of lineage and continuity to be forged and embodied. Hamera (2005, p. 98) describes the voices as ‘ghostly interlocutors’ that although experienced as ‘other’ (they were not experienced as internal dialogue but as coming from those who did
not survive), nevertheless were integrated and enacted through forms of embodied practice. Thus, the dance was not the expression of an individual psyche-in-trauma, but rather a form of affective symbiosis which allowed a reaching-toward the unrepresentable and unknowable. This reaching-toward was not characterized by a singular body reaching out to another singular body through a discrete sensory motor-system. Rather, the dancing bodies were always in excess of themselves and importantly communicated with ‘others’ through the embodied experience of voice-hearing.

This relational approach to dance, in the context of the communication and transmission of trauma, resonates with the work of Erin Manning (2007, 2009). Manning (2007) takes Argentine Tango as a figuration for exploring the ways in which bodies are never separate clearly defined entities, but rather plural processes disclosing the relational and enactive qualities of corporeality. Manning situates these relational and enactive qualities within the context of the dyadic relationship of two Tango partners moving together in time. The Tango that Manning is specifically interested in is improvisational and not choreographed and orchestrated as we might find in forms of Ballroom Tango. She suggests that improvised Argentine Tango is danced through a form of listening-with-intent and is aligned to an infra-language of attunement that bypasses calculative rationality. Thus Tango enacts a form of affective symbiosis characterized by a reaching-toward the unknown and unknowable (see Blackman 2009b, 2010). Interestingly Manning also queers Tango through aligning this moving practice to forms of queer relationality.

In Chapter 2 of her book, Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty (Manning 2007) she begins the task of drawing out the political stakes of the importance of improvisation by focusing upon the film directed by Wong Kar Wai, Happy Together. The film follows the relationship of two Gay Hong Kong men, Lai-Yu Fai and Ho Po-Wing and their travels to Buenos Aires in order to ‘start over’. The trope of ‘starting over’ becomes an important device to suggest what kinds of movement might enact and enable a politics of change and transformation. This is not the first time that queer relationships have been mobilized strategically to make political claims about the kinds of relational configurations that are seen to be transforming intimacy within neo-liberalism (Bauman 2003, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2001). In this examination the relationship of Lai-Yu Fai and Ho Po-Wing is marked by an ambivalence which is seen to disclose the paradox of sensing with movement that might enact or prevent a democracy-yet-to-come. On the one hand, Lai-Yu Fai and Ho Po-Wing are continually ‘starting-over’, such that their relationship is seen to be open to change and not simply repeating the same old relational dynamics that get them to this point. ‘Starting over’ for Manning (2007, p. 21) suggests an enactment-together of multiplicities that she links to a particular politics of friendship that ‘resists a straitjacket of belonging (in terms of gender, sex, nation)’. This is about the movement, rather than fixing of desire, and is
mapped onto the improvisational nature of Argentine Tango and to touch, which she suggests is ‘a process we must begin anew’ (p. 23).

On the other hand, Lai-You Fai and Ho Po-Wing are both seen to struggle with this ‘starting over’, yearning simultaneously for some kind of fixity or grounds to their relationship, which is framed by Manning as a form of capture or containment which re-figures their relationship as one of fraternity rather than friendship. Fraternity describes for Manning a relationship that is about ‘establishing identities of coupling’ rather than a ‘friendship toward the multiple movements of an other’ (Manning 2007, p. 22). As she asks, ‘Might we conceive of friendship as an improvised tango?’ (p. 38). This paradox between stasis and ‘rhythmic multiplications of space-time’ (p. 24) is struggled over in the film and is aligned to Tango as improvised and simultaneously fixed as a tourist commodity, which forms the beguiling backdrop to the film. Argentine Tango, Manning suggests, demands ‘a learned desire to be aware, awake, attentive to an other as an-other’ (2007, p. 29). This other is always unknowable and it is opening to the unknowable and unintelligible that might return us Manning suggests to the ‘not-yet invented’ (p. 35). This privileges queer forms of relationality as affording the possibility of creative movements towards the not-yet-known, and to therefore be central to a politics of re-invention.

Manning’s (2007) discussion of the forms of affective communication afforded by dance are contained within a dyadic relationship (two Tango dancers) happening in the spacing of the present. What happens when we consider this exchange inter-generationally, and when the ‘other’ is embodied as a voice or trace registered corporeally? This extends Manning’s discussion beyond the infra-language of becoming based on what could arguably be considered a fantasy of harmonious connection between two-bodies-dancing-in-time. The forms of inter-generational connection communicated through the Khmer Cambodian dance and embodied as a voice(s), draw our attention to the complex affective and relational dynamics that circulate inter-generationally and inter-corporeally.

**Affect and queer becoming(s)**

Manning’s argument and the queering that is performed in the discussion of ‘Happy Together’, aligns forms of creative becoming to particular, possibly fantasized modes of queer becoming. But what might be occluded by the politics of hope and optimism that is enacted in this work? In relation to this question it might be instructive to consider what arguably might be understood as a schism between Butler (1990, 1993) and her work on performativity associated with the circulation and production of particular kinds of affect – melancholia, loss, mourning etc., and the work of more Deleuzian-inspired
feminists such as Rosi Braidotti (2002, 2006) with her emphasis on plenitude, the multiplication of feminist and queer desires and our possible joyful becomings. What is interesting about these debates is their reliance on rather different deployments and understandings of psychopathology. Butler’s work arguably is more focused on resistance to change (coming out of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis), our becoming-stuckness (our investment in certain norms) and the difficulties in transforming and creating liveable lives in relation to normalization. There is always a spectre of loss, mourning, depression and psychic cost which haunts performativity and therefore our enactment of subjectivities. This could be understood as a depressed logic which understands subjectivity as formed primarily through loss, splits and lack. In this sense there is an intimate connection between heteronormativity and a particular staging of psychopathology. Psychopathology, in the form of melancholia, haunts heterosexual desire through the embodiment of repressed desires for that which has been denied and located within the Other. The invocation of lack which governs otherness produces queer desire as a form of negativity associated with a lack of futurity (Edelman 2004).

Psychopathology also figures within the work of Braidotti (2002, 2006), but this time operates in relation to a rather different logic. Braidotti, like Deleuze and Guattari (1988) was fascinated with the staging of madness in the theatre performance of Antonin Artaud and particularly his Theatre of Cruelty. His staging of his own mania through gestural and bodily interruptions has been deployed as a motif for understanding the production of subjectivities in the context of becoming. Artaud was a poet, a writer, an actor and theatre practitioner who struggled with and against the psychiatric system that had incarcerated him for his experiences of psychopathology. As Steve Brown (2005) argues, Artaud himself described these experiences in his published letters as being due to his ‘nerves’ or his nervous exhaustion. Brown suggests that nerves ‘are shorthand in Artaud’s texts for physically, psychologically and socially tormented relations’ (p. 236). He chose theatre as well as poetry as sites for enacting his anger and disgust at the complex system of relations which had produced his collapse. He wanted to liberate these nervous intensities and as many have argued, the particular form of human embodiment he felt trapped within was the main obstacle or blockage to the flow of intensive energies. He championed what Deleuze (1990) in The Logic of Sense termed an ‘organ-less vitality’ (p. 131) and became an influential figure in the Deleuzian concept of BwOs (Body without Organs). Many have championed his work as both an aesthetic and revolutionary project which was anti-psychiatric and anti-molar forms of traditionalization (see Deleuze & Guattari 1988). Indeed, Brown suggests, that Artaud’s deployment of nerves to describe his experiences create ‘ambivalence around the boundaries of embodiment’ (2005, p. 237). He suggests that nerves were part of a discursive complex in the early twentieth century which opened the individual
to the outside, operating a shifting interface or more porous exchange between
the self and other and the inside and outside.

When Artaud was on the stage performing his *Theatre of Cruelty* he did not
simply recount his experiences of mania in either a poetic or literal sense, but
rather enacted their felt intensity through the materiality of his body. The
intoxicating sounds, images and thought which leaked in often quite brutal and
violent ways pointed to the impossibility of deciding whether they were real or
imagined; whether he was recounting through a strategy of performative
deliberation, or allowing the audience to witness the process of a further
breakdown which would end in his ‘histrionic collapse’ (Dale 2002, p. 85).
Artaud’s performances were attempts to use his suffering and ‘nervous energy’
as a conduit to channel what he felt were the intensive energies which flowed
through the social body and which he registered in an extreme and raw way
Change* (Zournazi 2002) that Artaud represents the multiple possibilities of
becoming-other, where our capacity for becoming is linked to our potential
connections and our capacity to multiply and intensify these connections with
others; human and non-human. As he suggests:

His artistic practice was all about intensifying bodily potential, trying to
get outside or underneath the categories of language and affective
containment by those categories, trying to pack vast potentials for
movement and meaning in a single gesture, or in words that burst apart
and lose their conventional meaning, becoming like a scream of
possibility, a babble of becomings, the body bursting out through an
opening in expression.

(Massumi 2002, p. 241)

This somewhat romantic proclamation is tempered by Massumi with the
caveat that these joyful becomings might also destroy you! This is clearly a
reference to both Deleuze’s alcoholism and eventual suicide, as well as
Artaud’s continual courting of death as the only reasonable and realistic
response to the organizational logics of modernity. It is tempting to read
Artaud as a forefather to process-ontologies, and for his visceral performances
as an example of the primarily affective basis of embodied theatre practices.
Indeed Artaud is often cited as a founding figure of ‘In-Yer-Face Theatre’,
which is theatre that grabs the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it
until it gets the message (Sierz 2006). Sierz discusses the characteristics of ‘in-
yer-face’ theatre that have produced a new aesthetic sensibility that works with
affective transmission, preferring audiences to feel shocked, upset and offended
on a deeply visceral level. It tries to engage audiences in an affective register
such that they are unable to position themselves as detached spectators. Artaud
used theatre as a form to explore this affective transmission preferring
audiences to leave the theatre feeling much like they might if they had just left
the dentists chair.

Perhaps what is instructive about Artaud and his position in cultural theory
and theatre-studies is that we do need to explore forms of experimentation and
invention that afford or enable new attachments and configurations,
particularly in relation to the question of queer negativity or psychopathology.
This takes us beyond either affirming queer desire as creative and joyful, or
conversely embracing negativity as a political strategy (see Edelman 2004).
These logics that are seen to operate oppositionally perhaps miss some of the
more inventive stagings of psychopathology within queer performance which
might afford a different understanding of relational and particularly inter-
generational relational dynamics. This problem of how to approach the relation
between queer lives and psychopathology is also repeated and enacted within
social science research and should be considered here as a particular example of
the problem I am trying to give a name to.

Gay affirmative research

I want to address this problem by considering the moment in which I was
introduced to the significance and importance of the ways in which queer
desires had been produced as particular kinds of research objects in an area of
study known as gay affirmative research. This was particularly in the traditions
of feminist and discursive psychologies, and primarily through the work of
of Lesbianism*. Kitzinger’s social constructionist approach to the production of
queer subjectivities was oriented primarily towards critiquing gay affirmative
research. This is research produced across the social sciences that subscribes to
the view that queers are no different to straights (that it is just a matter of who
you fall in love with). Kitzinger, writing from a social constructionist position
as it was enacted within critical psychology rather emphasized the ‘role of
culture, history, place and meaning-making’ in the production of the
diversity of queer subjectivities (Russell & Gergen 2004, p. 513). This very
politicized focus, which was framed through radical feminist concerns, saw gay
affirmative research as confirming heteronormativity (as being based on
similarities rather than differences); as being assimilationist (i.e. providing no
challenge to the *status quo*), and normalizing and naturalizing the liberal-
humanist subject; that is making certain assumptions about what constitutes
normal healthy psychological functioning (rooted in discussions of mental
health), and ignoring the specific circumstances and complex psychological
issues particular to queer lives which might produce mental health
difficulties: homophobia, isolation, harassment, victimization, self-loathing
and so forth (cf. Coyle & Kitzinger 2002). It is important to understand the
historical position of gay affirmative research in relation to predominant understandings produced through sexology and the psy disciplines in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which enacted queer desire through a discourse of pathology and deficit: as an inversion and expression of degeneracy (Foucault 1990). Gay affirmative research in contrast emphasized strengths rather than weakness and was based on essentialist arguments which promoted queer subjects as psychologically healthy and well-adjusted — the happy queer.

Lisa Duggan (2003) in her book, The Twilight of Equality, has charted the success of gay affirmative research in the United States for providing the underpinnings of particular strategies and interventions which promote the happy queer as being no different to the straight (couple) and simply seeking the same rights and legal redresses. Duggan coined the concept of ‘homonormativity’ to describe this enactment of queer subjectivities. Homonormativity is a politics that does not contest heteronormativity but rather sustains these normalizing practices through aligning the queer and straight through their private acts of consumption and domestication. Homonormativity thus describes social movements and queer policies that do not ‘contest heteronormative assumptions and institutions’ (Duggan 2003, p. 51). This is considered by many as a ‘mainstreaming of gay culture’ which is increasingly underpinned by a positivist science of happiness (Love 2008, p. 53). As Love argues: ‘In the era of gay normalization, gays and lesbians not only have to be like every else (get married, raise kids, mow the grass, etc.), they have to look and feel good doing it’ (p. 54).

One issue raised by the rise of homonormativity is what I want to call the paradox of queerness: that is how to understand the promotion of queer health and happiness in the context of the huge production of facts, statistics and figures which align queer desires with higher incidences of mental health difficulties: depression, anxiety, alcohol and substance misuse, homelessness, domestic abuse, suicide risk, etc. We might want to think about the political and discursive effects of making these kinds of arguments, but nevertheless it is these concerns which drive many of the campaigns of charitable organizations in London who tell rather different stories about queer lives, which emphasize misery and queer unhappiness. These organizations are at odds with campaigning groups like Stonewall (who do get funding and were behind the lobbying for same-sex civil partnerships in the UK), who champion the happy queer: the conventional albeit white, gay, middle-class male concerned with the reproduction and protection of property and money, and whose policies are entirely compatible with the workings of neo-liberalism. Other charitable organizations are politically excluded from such debates through being seen as having an unhealthy attachment and concern with ‘victimhood’ (whether that is constituted as sexism, homophobia, racism, and class discrimination for example).
What I want to do in the final section of this article is turn to work from performance studies which has considered the relationship of autobiography to the live performance of experiences of psychopathology, and to queer scholarship which is considering the more ‘serious’ role that queer performance might play in reconfiguring the relationship between queer lives and psychopathology. I will also re-consider and return to work across the humanities that have begun to tackle the inter-generational transmission of trauma. I will situate my discussion within a consideration of how we might approach the complex affective and relational dynamics that circulate, produce and sustain queer forms of becoming.

Care in the community

Gavin Butt has argued that queer culture, and particularly queer theatricality, has largely been associated with the ‘campy and the trivial’ (Butt 2007, p. 90). This de-values queer performance as inauthentic or insincere and obscures the ways in which the incongruities and ambivalences expressed in queer theatricality might move audiences in ways which allow the circulation of affects which are difficult and distressing to comprehend, and yet historically have been aligned to queer lives. These include mental health difficulties, alcohol and substance misuse and HIV and Aids for example. Butt therefore urges a consideration of queer performance as a ‘serious’ form of scholarship that cannot be understood through some of the oppositional categories that we have already encountered throughout this article. One contemporary British example of queer performance that should be considered for its seriousness is that of David Hoyle. Hoyle is a queer performance artist known for his mental collapse and nervous breakdown which led to him abandoning his queer persona, Divine David, retiring for some years and reappearing recently with his Magazine show and Dave’s Drop-In Centre which are both staged at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern in London. Magazine combined a tragic-comic reworking of his autobiographical narratives of ‘unhappy affect’ (of loneliness, abuse, mental collapse and alcohol and substance misuse) as enactments of issues that have particularly confronted gay communities, locally and globally. These included shows organized around mental ill-health, HIV and Aids, the media, the women’s issue, alcoholism, the antiques roadshow, immigration, crime and punishment and dogging. A Guardian theatre critic described the shows as raw, frightening, thrilling and reckless (Gardner 2007). Indeed what characterizes the shows is their combination of Hoyle’s inimitable wit with the confrontation of serious issues. One cannot be failed to be moved, and often audiences are moved in ways which produce heckling, anger, disgust, disbelief, insult as well as feelings which may be more difficult to articulate but are nevertheless expressed viscerally and communally throughout the evening.
The shows are live and take on the characteristics of liveness, which might include their immediacy, their ephemerality and irreproducibility. However with the proliferation of social networking sites, footage from the shows and reactions and responses to the shows produce an archive of felt dispositions that can be traced and mapped (see Auslander 1999). Indeed, perhaps this is what is so significant about the shows and offer clues as to how we might understand their queer performativity. Elaine Aston (2002) has argued that the concept of performance as archive, following the work of the performance studies scholar, Schneider (2002), is one that can be used particularly to understand the relationship between autobiography and in this case queer forms of performance or theatricality. Aston considers the performances of the London based feminist performance artist Bobby Baker, who has staged a range of performances over the last decade which weave her autobiographical experiences of mental ill-health with being a Mother, a woman and an artist. Aston suggests that what Baker is performing, above and beyond the live, staged events themselves, are a form of feminist archive. In other words the events remain, but they remain differently, and it is this difference that orients us towards the affective and relational dimensions of performativity.

We might think of the archive as the documentation and recording of particular kinds of knowledge preserved through specific coding devices and organized within particular nosographies. This is the objectification of knowledge usually performed through scientific modes of knowledge which are about capturing and rendering experience, bodies and people tangible, through particular authorized categories. Aston (2002) suggests that what Baker is performing is a form of counter-memory where what remains or is recorded is not an object, but a shared experience. Aston makes a link to feminist studies of female hysteria, and refigures the hysterical as somebody who performs shared experiences of suffering and trauma allowing the archiving of the memory. These memories, as with the Sem’s performance of Cambodian dance, are embodied and felt, rather than clearly articulated and understood. As with Hoyle, Baker’s performances are often aligned to comedy, with Hoyle his ascerbic wit, and with Baker, as a funny ‘mad’ woman (Aston 2002). This focus on the comedy elides the more serious modes of communication being performed, enacted and shared between the performer and his/her audiences. The knowledge that circulates is not self-contained (Aston uses the analogy of the box), but rather circulates in a more affective register allowing the re-enactment of mental ill-health beyond the confines of the singular body. The hysterical as performer could be understood as the host or conduit that gets the affect moving.

This shift to focusing upon the more relational dimensions of queer performance, and the importance of practices which enact connections at a more affective level, take our discussion of the relationship between queer lives and psychopathology in a rather different direction. The focus shifts from ‘meaning-making’ and the relationship of meaning-making to representational
practices, which has been central to the discursive turn across the humanities, to posing different questions about the production of subjectivities which privilege process, movement, affective and intensive relations, bodies and practices. This work is under-explored both in cultural studies and queer scholarship and might be augmented by turning to work in relational psychoanalysis on matrixial forms of communication (Ettinger 2006) and work on affective communication which focuses upon the ecology of communication(s) (see Blackman 2008, 2010, Bateson 2000, Laing 1970). Bracha Ettinger (2006) uses the concept of ‘border-linking’ to describe the way bodies become linked at a psychic level, where affects are shared, which include the trauma and desires of others. These affects can be bound through particular practices which circulate through inter-subjective relations. For Ettinger, we are neither fully self-contained nor exist in affective symbiosis, but become weaved together in complex, relational ways. Ettinger, through her practice as an analyst and in her artwork is interested in these ‘invisible’ relations, those that are felt and registered through an infra-language and primarily in a non-optical register as ‘nonverbal intensities’ (p. 51). Certain practices function as affective carriers of trauma, and Ettinger is particularly interested in the inter-generational communication of trauma through the unsaid and unrepresentable. She uses the term artworking rather than artwork to move beyond a static representational logic. In this sense, we might use the term queer performancing rather than queer performance to capture the movement of affect that Ettinger is directing our attention to. Thus forms of queer performancing, and particularly those that enact autobiography marked by trauma and shame, might be re-framed as forms of ‘subjectivity-as-encounter’ (p. 64). In this sense the unconscious and in this context the queer unconscious that is being enacted is always partial, plural, shared and co-emerges between subjects. As Ettinger suggests;

A matrixial encounter engenders shared traces, traumas, pictograms, and fantasies in several partners conjointly but differently, accepted and partly created by diffuse matrixial affects; it engenders nonconscious readjustments of their connectivity and reattunements of transsubjectivity.

(Ettinger 2006, p. 65)

Performancing is therefore particularly potent as an affective practice because of its embodied nature. Audiences are not simply cognitive, rationalist subjects, but are ‘sensational subjects’ engaging through their senses and feeling the performance in a visceral way. Indeed, Hoyle and Baker’s performances are often described in this way by theatre critics as we have seen. The performer is not simply expressing their own ‘symptoms’ but is connected to a shared history or counter-memory that exists inter-generationally and is felt inter-corporeally. Perhaps Hoyle needs the audience to be able to process the traumatic events, and we need Hoyle to register and
enact what is shared and obscured by the contemporary focus on the 'happy queer' (Love 2008). In this sense perhaps Hoyle’s performances have achieved cult status because of the ‘with-ness’ afforded by his stagings and what is enacted and communicated beyond language and representation.

Conclusion: increasing connections?

Having more potentials available intensifies our life.

(Massumi 2002, p. 214)

The notion of the matrixial as a way of understanding the circulation and transmission of affect is increasingly being used to understand the potency of artwork (see Venn 2009). Venn takes the subject of diasporic artworking to re-pose the question of subjective change and transformation. Walkerdine (2010) has developed the matrixial as a way of understanding blocks to community regeneration in South Wales ex-steelworker communities drawing attention to the creative and defensive relations in the communities being and becoming. In my current research I am developing a method for analysing affect and performance by drawing on the work of ecological psychologists such as Gregory Bateson with R.D. Laing’s concept of the knot (see Blackman 2008, 2010, forthcoming). I am looking at a range of queer and feminist performance including the writing of the Black British playwright, debbie tucker green (see Goddard 2008). debbie tucker green who is described as part of the genre of in-yer-face theatre, also primarily mobilizes an affective register to transform our comprehension of difficult, painful and politically sensitive issues, such as gun crime, sex tourism, domestic and sexual abuse, Aids genocide to name a few of her subjects. She does not use a didactic address and like Hoyle merges irony and sardonic wit and humour with the staging of these very serious issues which are transformed as they are witnessed, felt and registered — perhaps through shock, horror, disbelief and perhaps even through not quite knowing what to think but feeling their gravitas. These experiences are ‘worked through’ as they are shared and circulate between members of the audience. This is a working through that connects and draws attention to both the practices that enable the co-ordination and doing of subjectivities (particularly in the context of how we ‘hang together’), but also foregrounds affective communications as being of central importance in community-binding rituals.

Queer performance could therefore be enriched and extended by moving beyond seeing performativity as either the reproduction or contesting of norms. This oscillation between fixity and fluidity, mirrored in the pendulum like swing between melancholia or our possible joyful becomings elides the matrixial. Practices which can hold the tension between happiness and
unhappiness (between becoming and becoming-stuck) in close proximity perhaps disclose the inventiveness within queer communities that demands more scholarly attention. This might shift the ground to exploring queer desire in the context of different communities of affect, rather than aligning queer subjectivities with either mental ill-health or healthy happiness, neither of which I think are satisfactory answers to the problem of queer subjectivities.

Note

1 Bobby Baker has recently had an exhibition at the Wellcome Institute in London, Bobby Baker’s Diary Drawings: Mental Illness and Me, 1997–2008. The exhibition displayed 158 of Baker’s diary drawings that depict her experience of mental health difficulties and psychiatric incarceration. The exhibition ran from March to August 2009.

References


