

# Queer Exceptions

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Under the conditions of neoliberalism, the desire to acknowledge difference may blur with a contemporary demand for the same. How might queer solo performance allow us to historicize the cultural and political exigency of exceptional subjects? An example: in recent weeks, I have been preoccupied with British writer and director Neil Bartlett and designer Robin Whitmore's *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep*. The piece is a sequence of devised works staged between 1987 and 1990 dedicated to the memory of Simeon Solomon, a 'short, red-haired, ugly and flagrant Jew' and contemporary of Oscar Wilde born to a good family whose 'fallen life' was dedicated to the pleasures of alcohol and rough trade.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by Solomon's paintings and his prose poem from which the work takes its title, the performance is drawn from fragments of text and (auto)biography: images and words from the late nineteenth century colliding with the experience of being a gay man in the late 1980s in the midst of the AIDS crisis. Originally presented as a solo work, later iterations were performed by Bartlett alongside three London queens: Bette Bourne, Regina Fong and Ivan.<sup>2</sup>

In exploring this production, I have become interested in the ways in which Solomon may function as a figure of necessity, whose status as a pariah is simultaneously challenged and reasserted. On the one hand is my sense of the telling of Solomon's historical persecution as an act of reparation, a means of addressing loss and privation. On the other hand is an awareness of how Solomon is framed as a persistently 'unacceptable face of gay history' whose resistance addresses both (homo)normative cultural values and contemporary violence directed towards the queer subject.<sup>3</sup> Though the work challenges a straightforward narrative of virtuous martyrdom, it does not wholly abandon the logic of the martyr as a public figure whose suffering and recalcitrance make possible a community of identification. As such, I have begun to understand Solomon as a figure of exception, simultaneously called upon as a subject of valorization and excoriation. My understanding of exception here is informed both by the idea of exceptionality as that which exceeds – and is thus not bound by – the norm, and, more pointedly, by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's account of a kind of exception from the general rule that does not operate absolutely without reference to the rule. It is, rather, the presupposition of the rule 'in the form of its suspension'.<sup>4</sup> As a queerly exceptional subject, then, Solomon is both excluded from and drawn back into the space of cultural intelligibility.

This notion of suspended legitimacy has provoked a reflexive critique of the ways in which the diverse field of queer studies has oriented itself on difference. If we are to understand heteronormativity 'as a straightening device, which rereads the "slant" of queer desire',<sup>5</sup> might we also acknowledge the significance of a queer counterimperative to twist or turn? My observation here is not that queer theorists and performers conceive

of queerness-in-difference in the same way, or that we need to disambiguate queerness from discourses of difference. To be clear, diverse critiques seeking to reformulate notions of failure, optimism and temporality (for example) continue to offer powerful means for examining how norms distribute recognition and value differentially, and for imagining alternatives.<sup>6</sup> My contention, rather, is that such tactics are not immune from (re)appropriation in turn.

Following conversations in the Queer Futures working group at IFTR 2013, I have been considering how a preoccupation with difference may mark an uncomfortable shared conceptual territory between queer elaborations of non-normative subjects, and the demands for differentiation that sustain the logics of neoliberalism. As performance scholars Matthew Causey and Fintan Walsh argue in their introduction to *Performance, Identity, and the Neo-political Subject*, ‘capitalism sees in the fracturing of identity a wonderfully lucrative commercial project, to the extent that it does not simply respond to identitarian distinctiveness, but actively cultivates it for its own purposes’.<sup>7</sup> I am, then, concerned with how logics of performative differentiation which might characterize queer ontologies – tactics for agency, value and self-nomination within normative cultural spaces – may be highly compatible with the forms of social and economic mobility prized by late capitalism.<sup>8</sup> Rather than advancing the interests of marginalized groups, such tactics may come to naturalize the conditions of precarity that sustain structural inequalities.

In response to these concerns, I have begun to reconsider some of the earliest political claims made for solo queer performance as a space of radical collectivity, and the ways in which they imagine the distinctiveness of the queer subject. Historian of AIDS and performance David Román suggests in his introduction to *O Solo Homo*, for example, that ‘I don’t think it’s too much of a stretch to suggest that all of us who are queer can loosely be described as solo performers insofar as we have had to fashion an identity around our gender and sexuality’.<sup>9</sup> For Román, the self-willed performance of queerness also describes the possibility of egalitarian belonging; it ‘comes out of a sense of community and thus helps inform and shape our understanding of identity and community’.<sup>10</sup> Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz’s *Disidentifications* opens in parallel affirmation of ‘the spectacle of one queer standing onstage alone . . . bent on the project of opening up a world of queer language, lyricism, perceptions, dreams, visions, aesthetics, and politics’.<sup>11</sup> For Muñoz, the queer soloist offers a singular perspective – ‘being queer at this particular moment’ – and a plural publicity whose horizon cannot be determined in advance – taking on an ‘ever multiplying significance’.<sup>12</sup> How might we understand these affirmations of pluralistic sociability in the light of neoliberalism’s appropriation of the same impulses?

As I consider the ways in which claims of this kind have been problematized, as in trans performer and director Lazlo Pearlman’s practice-based exploration of confessional culture (see Pearlman’s article in this forum), I am also struck by my own response to recent solo works and the alternative logics of identity and collectivity which they may describe. Performer and *Duckie* co-founder Amy Lamé’s frantic back-combing of an already impressive quiff in her 2012 ‘party-slash-show-slash-party’ *Unhappy Birthday*, for example, seemed to direct me to more than her always and necessarily absent idol

and guest of honour, Morrissey. If the critique of performativity depends on a certain knowingness, Lamé's fleeting resemblance to Morrissey and a kind of drag version of herself challenged my ability to 'know' who I was looking at (or, indeed *how* I was looking), while also inviting me to share in a particular community of affect, as the audience made eye contact with the performer and with each other across the space of the stage. The quality of this encounter and others like it – describing an intelligibility that seemed to proceed from, exceed and withdraw from the moment of performance – has led me to consider semblance as a possible model for conceptualizing the circulation of exceptional queerness in performance in resistance of the neoliberal logics described above.

More precisely, the next stage of my work involves an exploration of a distinction between sameness and semblance on the terms offered by philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler's discussion of recognition and apprehension within her study of media portrayals of state violence.<sup>13</sup> Butler offers this distinction as the basis for a critique of norms of recognition: apprehension is understood as a form of 'knowing' which precedes recognition proper, and which allows us to acknowledge when subjects are not recognized by recognition. Though apprehension might be facilitated by norms of recognition that precede it, it is not limited by them: it is less precise than recognition, and can imply 'marking, registering, acknowledging without full cognition'.<sup>14</sup> Might we conceive of the dynamics of semblance in performance in a similar manner? Not as an essentializing antidote to difference, but as a way of thinking about practices of identity and community that evade commodification?

## NOTES

- 1 See Neil Bartlett and Robin Whitmore's original programme notes for the 1987 staging. Battersea Arts Centre Digital Archive, at [www.bacarchive.org.uk/items/show/4803](http://www.bacarchive.org.uk/items/show/4803), last accessed 1 May 2014.
- 2 The first version of the piece – subtitled 'part one' – was staged at the Battersea Arts Centre, London, in 1987; later iterations were performed in Copenhagen, Hamburg, Glasgow, Nottingham, Oxford, Edinburgh and Sheffield.
- 3 Neil Bartlett, 'A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep (Part Three)', in Michael Wilcox, ed., *Gay Plays 4* (London: Methuen Drama, 1990), pp. 81–112, here p. 83.
- 4 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 21.
- 5 Sara Ahmed, 'Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 12, 4 (2006), pp. 543–74, here p. 562.
- 6 See, for example, Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011); Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011); E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen, eds., *Queer Times, Queer Becomings* (New York: SUNY Press, 2011).
- 7 Matthew Causey and Fintan Walsh, *Performance, Identity, and the Neo-liberal Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 2.
- 8 For a related critique of the complicity between neoliberal values and queer theory's anti-moralism and anti-statism, see Martha T. McCluskey, 'How Queer Theory Makes Neoliberalism Sexy', in Martha Albertson Fineman, Jack E. Jackson and Adam P. Romero, eds., *Feminist and Queer Legal Theory: Intimate Encounters, Uncomfortable Conversations* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 115–34.

- 9 David Román and Holly Hughes, *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance* (New York: Grove Press, 1998), pp. 6–7.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 11 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 1.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- 13 See Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), pp. 3–7.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

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