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The Queen's two bodies: Panti at the Abbey

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Abstract

This article reads Panti's Noble Call at the Abbey theatre on 1 February 2014 in the light of Didier Eribon's work on the experience of insult as constitutive of gay subjectivity. However, it goes on to argue that Panti's narrated experience of stigma, internalised shame and failed self-discipline also reflects the young Irish postcolonial nation's self-imposed task of performing heteronormative modernity. The drag queen's performance, turning shame into exhibitionism, points to alternative ways of performing Irishness which reconnect with traditional, non-modern forms of Irish performative practices.

Keywords: Panti, Abbey, shame, insult, performance, body.

Résumé

Cet article propose une lecture de la performance de Panti sur la scène de l'Abbey Theatre le 1er février 2014 à la lumière du travail de Didier Eribon sur l'insulte comme expérience constitutive de la subjectivité gay. Il suggère que l'histoire de Panti, qui parle de stigmatisation, de honte intériorisée et de son échec à discipliner son corps selon la norme hétérosexuelle, ne reflète pas seulement une expérience spécifiquement homosexuelle, mais fait aussi écho à la performance de la modernité hétéronormative à laquelle est confrontée l'ensemble des membres de la jeune nation irlandaise post-coloniale. La performance de la drag queen, qui renverse la honte en exhibitionnisme, montre qu'il existe d'autres manières de jouer l'Irlandicité, et renoue ainsi avec des pratiques performatives irlandaises traditionnelles qui n'ont pas trouvé leur place dans la modernité hétéronormée.

Mots-clés : Panti, Abbey, honte, insulte, performance, corps.

This article is part of a fledgling project that tries to connect notions of shame, queer identities, postcolonial identities and performance. It is grounded in the substantial and growing body of queer theory and queer activism which has been engaged in an effort to resignify shame not just as a normative force of social regulation and censorship, but also as a potentially liberating emotion capable of releasing creativity and of providing an impetus for theatrical self-(re)construction. One point of origin was Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's oft-quoted article "Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James' *The Art of the Novel*",

first published in 1993 in *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*¹ and republished in David Halperin and Valerie Traub's 2009 edited volume *Gay Shame*. Other landmark publications which look at a specifically Irish context include Sally Munt's *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (2009)², and more recently Joe Valente's article "Self-Queering Ireland" in the "Queering Ireland" issue of the *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* in 2010³. In this article I return to a well-known piece of queer Irish autobiographical performance, one which occurred on the stage of the national theatre but was captured on video and, as the hackneyed phrase goes, "went viral" in 2014: Panti's "Noble call" at the Abbey theatre⁴, in the wake of the public scandal known as "Pantigate". What, I ask, is the particular significance of this queer Irish autobiographical performance? What work does it perform within Irish culture? To continue with clichés, I suggest that the drag queen's performance on the Abbey stage holds a (facetiously distorting) mirror to the nation, that under cover of being "about" the intimate, subjective experience of internalised shame which is constitutive of queer identity, it also says something both disturbing and liberating about the performative nature of heterosexuality.

The context of Panti's performance needs to be recalled briefly. In January 2014, in the midst of the campaign for marriage equality, Rory O'Neill, performer and gay rights "accidental activist", as he defines himself, best known as his drag persona Panti, was invited to appear on RTE's popular talk-show *Saturday Night Live*, hosted by Brendan O'Connor. When asked to comment on his experience as a gay man in contemporary Ireland, O'Neill said he considered certain prominent people in the media and political circles to be homophobic. After the show those who had been named, including high profile *Irish Times* reporter John Waters, threatened both RTE and O'Neill with legal action, prompting RTE to edit that part of the interview from the RTE archive, to issue a public apology and to pay out some 85000 € to offended parties, thus, as Fintan Walsh comments, "effectively imply[ing] that homophobia could not be called out in public"⁵. While traditional media in Ireland barely documented the event, the story was widely shared by the social media and evolved into a global furore which became known as "Pantigate". These events, in January 2014, coincided with the begin-

1. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James' *The Art of the Novel*", *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, Vol. 1-1, 1993, p. 1-16. Republished in David. M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (eds.), *Gay Shame*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2009, p. 49-62.

2. Sally Munt, *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007.

3. Joseph Valente: "Self-Queering Ireland", *Queering Ireland*, special issue of *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Sean Kennedy (ed.), 2010, p. 25-44.

4. The performance can be seen online at [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WXayhUzWnl0>]. Accessed 18 February 2018.

5. Fintan Walsh, *Queer Performance and Contemporary Ireland: Dissent and Disorientation*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016, ebook [1043].

ning of the decade of commemorations of the revolutionary events which led to the independence of Ireland a hundred years ago. One early celebration was the production at the Abbey of James Plunkett's 1958 play *The Risen People* which chronicles the Dublin Lockout of 1913. After each performance, the cast invited a surprise guest to give a "Noble Call" in the form of a short address reflecting on the play's relevance to the state of contemporary Ireland. On the night of the play's final performance on 1 February 2014, three weeks after Rory O'Neil's appearance on *Saturday Night Live*, Panti was invited to give her Noble Call, and she gave a resonant speech in response to "Pantigate", drawing on her own experience of homophobia in Ireland and exposing the redoubled violence inherent in the attempt to silence anyone who dares to speak of homophobia in the public sphere. The speech was greeted with a standing ovation, and the video hit the internet and achieved instant, massive success. How instrumental it was to the eventual success of the Equality campaign can only be a matter of speculation; but I want to suggest that it also works at another level, not just as a (brilliantly effective) piece of gay rights activism, but also as a sympathetic comment on the performative nature of what has become known, after Adrienne Rich, as "compulsory heterosexuality"⁶.

When she is called on the stage at the end of the performance, Panti appears in a fur-lined, high-necked burgundy dress in the usual high heels and curly blonde wig, towering above the rest of the cast who stand behind her on the Abbey stage in their 1913 workers' costumes. She then introduces herself, redundantly making sure that everyone in the audience is aware of the constructed nature of her gender: "Hello, my name is Panti, and for the benefice of the visually impaired or incredibly naïve, I am a drag-queen". What produces both a certain epistemological anxiety and the unique performative strength of the Noble Call is that the rest of the performance proceeds as if this was Rory, rather than Panti, telling very intimate stories of his experience of homophobia as a gay man in contemporary Ireland. Though she is, in her own words, "painfully middle class" and has never experienced the "abject, grinding poverty" represented in the play, she feels legitimate to give a speech about "oppression" because, she says, "I do know what it feels like to be put in my place"—an important phrase that I'll return to shortly.

The speech starts with the evocation of a foundational, traumatic yet banal event, to which Panti relentlessly returns subsequently—the story of how she once stood at a pedestrian crossing and was abused by a "bunch of lads" in a passing car:

6. Cf. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*, New York, Norton, 1986, p. 23-75.

Have you ever been standing at a pedestrian crossing when a car goes by, and in it are a bunch of lads, and they lean out of the window as they go by, and they shout “Fag!” and throw a milk carton at you? Now, it doesn’t really hurt. I mean, it’s just a wet carton, and in many ways, they’re right: I *am* a fag. So it doesn’t hurt, but it feels oppressive. And when it really does hurt is afterwards. Because it’s afterwards that I wonder and worry and obsess over, what was it about me? What did they see in me? What was it that gave me away? And I hate myself for wondering that. It feels oppressive. And the next time I’m standing at a pedestrian crossing, I hate myself for it, but I check myself to see what is it about me that gives the gay away. And I check myself to make sure that I’m not doing it this time.

Then she goes on to evoke other banal experiences of homophobia, but always returns to this crucial moment: “but the next time I stand at a pedestrian crossing, I hate myself for it, but I check myself.” The pedestrian crossing thus becomes the metonymic space of trauma, instantly inducing feelings of fear, shame and internalised self-hate, and a reflex of self-discipline. In his 1999 book *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* (transl. 2004)⁷, Didier Eribon argues that the experience of being insulted is an inevitable and crucial part of the identity-making process of gays and lesbians; that it is in fact, by necessity, a foundational experience: “It all begins with an insult”, he claims (15). An insult, he goes on to argue, does not aim to convey any informative content, to tell me anything about myself, but aims only “to hurt me, to mark my consciousness with that hurt, inscribing shame in the deepest levels of my mind.” (16) In doing this the insult pins me down and tells me where I belong in the social hierarchy: “Insult is a linguistic act — or a series of repeated linguistic acts by which a particular place in the world is assigned to the person at whom the acts are directed.” (16) Panti’s speech captures both the foundational character of insult and its performative, place-assigning power: “I do know what it feels like to be put in my place”. The scene is made brilliantly real with a few, vivid touches: the vulnerable space of the pedestrian crossing, the untroubled masculinity of the “young lads” in the car, the grotesque choice of projectile—a “wet carton of milk”—with its humiliating connotations of abject femininity, limpness and wasted fluids, and the monosyllabic insult that defines and confines: “Fag!” But the reason why the speech is so resonant is that the isolated incident is metonymic of the constant exposure to insult which LGBT people suffer. As Eribon points out, “Insult can be found anywhere: linguists have expanded this category of performative utterances to include allusions,

7. Didier Eribon: *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, transl. Michael Lucey, Durham (NC): Duke University Press, 2004.

insinuations, irony, metaphor, and so on.” (16) In fact, he argues persuasively, the stigmatising, place-assigning power of insult pervades the whole structure of language, which is always already shaped by heterosexual prejudice:

Thus do gay people live in a world of insults. They are surrounded by a language that hems them in and points them out. The world insults them; it speaks of them and of what is said about them. The words of day-to-day life as well as of psychiatric, juridical, and political discourse assign each of them individually and all of them collectively to an inferior place within the social order. And yet this very language preceded them: the world of insults preexisted them, and it takes hold of them even before they know what they are. (56)

Insult is foundational in the constitution of LGBT identity because it precedes the emergence of the self: it is always already there, in the very texture of the language with which I will apprehend the world around me and articulate a sense of who I am. Having related the “pedestrian crossing” incident Panti goes on to give other instances of feeling “oppressed.” Each story starts with the anaphoric phrase “Have you ever”, which makes the point that the experience of an audience which can reasonably be assumed to be largely straight, however sympathetic to LGBT people, diverges radically from the lived experience of insult which is constitutive of LGBT subjectivity. Her other examples include being the object of a whole range of “expert” discourses and uninformed yet publicly expressed opinion, travelling on a crowded bus with her best friend and cringing because he is “being so gay”, and being aware at all times that in other countries LGBT people may be beaten up, imprisoned and even killed for being what she is. Every story thus reveals the homophobic violence at work in the very fabric of LGBT experience, a violence of which the foundational incident of the pedestrian crossing is only the most visible and quintessential manifestation.

Obsessively, Panti returns to the traumatic incident, and to her subsequent attempt to fend off the violence of insult by normalising herself: “I check myself” (in both senses: inspect, and restrain). Life as a gay man is described as a poignantly ineffective struggle to act straight. Like a Method actor, she submits her body to constant training, but the body refuses to be disciplined and always threatens to “give the gay away”. There is one particularly interesting moment in the performance, when she is talking about her distressed self-inspection after the incident: “what did they see in me, what was it that gave me away?”, and a few people in the audience laugh, but with a split second’s lag, and she looks briefly unsettled, as if she hadn’t anticipated the laughs here, hadn’t intended this to be funny—and indeed it isn’t funny as such: she is talking about a moment of extreme anxiety. The reason why some people do laugh, I argue, has to do not

with what she is saying but with who is saying it: the man who is telling us that he is constantly trying to look as straight as possible, as inconspicuous as possible, is wearing high heels, a fur-lined burgundy dress, a Dolly Parton-style wig and enough lipstick to paint the Abbey building red. The radical dissonance between the performing body and the spoken body, neither of which is a more authentic version of Panti/Rory than the other, is a striking metaphor of the impossibility of self-adequation which Eribon sees as a characteristic of gay subjectivity. This inevitable split is induced by heterosexual domination and the way it pervades all social relations and institutions, proclaiming that civilisation itself rests on the principle of “sexual difference” and thus relegating same-sex relations out of juridical institutions and of cultural intelligibility itself⁸. Social institutions thus “work to establish and to reproduce an uncrossable divide between the norm and homosexuality—and another form of self-division within a gay person.” (116) Being divided from themselves, LGBT people must therefore strive towards the unreachable goal of identity, and embark on a lifelong course of self-fashioning. This was perhaps most flamboyantly expressed in Wilde’s determination to make his life a work of art, a project taken up by Panti who in her earlier, eloquently titled show *A Woman in Progress*, defined herself as “a big, drunk, devastatingly attractive, theatrical device,” adding in true Wildean fashion: “I am my own life’s work. The fruit of my own creative endeavours⁹.” The buried pun on “fruit” facetiously drives home the point that you can never be a “fruit” unless you have grown it yourself. Eribon’s analysis of the paradoxically creative effect of insult intersects with Sedgwick’s reading of shame as a transformative force intrinsically linked with performance:

Shame turns itself skin side out; shame and pride, shame and dignity, shame and self-display, shame and exhibitionism are different interlinings of the same glove. Shame, it might finally be said, transformational shame, is performance. I mean theatrical performance. Performance interlines shame as more than just its result or a way of warding it off, though, importantly, it is those things. Shame is the affect that mantles the threshold between introversion and extroversion, between absorption and theatricality, between performativity and—performativity. (*Gay Shame*, 51-52)

The performativity of insult, encapsulated in the stigmatising phrase “Shame on you!”, makes me cast down my eyes and turn away my face in shame—

8. French edition: *Réflexions sur la question gay* (1999), Paris, Flammarion, 2012, p. 176. The passage is omitted in English.

9. Panti, *A Woman in Progress*, in *Queer Notions. New Plays and Performances from Ireland*, Fintan Walsh (ed.), Cork, Cork University Press, 2010, p. 245.

it makes me lose face. But in the process it invites me to recreate my face, my persona, to perform my chosen, ever inchoate version of who I am or will be. As both Sedgwick and Eribon point out, queer identities, anchored as they are in the experience of shame, are bound to emerge theatrically, as invisibility is reversed into exhibitionism (Eribon 106).

However, what Panti's Noble Call makes poignantly clear is that there is no alternative to theatricality: "Panti" may be a gloriously histrionic "theatrical device", but the other body she conjures up in her speech, the body of the gay man who is desperate to act straight, is no less the product of a performance—if a failed one. As I suggested earlier, the act of "checking himself" evokes the discipline of the Stanislavski tradition, or indeed of the sort of restrained naturalism which the Fay brothers cultivated in the early days of the Irish Literary Theatre. As Adrian Frazier has shown, what became known as "the Abbey style of acting" evolved largely as an attempt to counter the perceived vulgarity of the English acting tradition, which gave free rein to star actors and tended to encourage over-acting and facile, emphatic effects. By contrast, the Fays cultivated ensemble rather than solo performances, and imposed a form of gestural minimalism on their actors. Frazier quotes the English critic E. C. Montague:

Throughout one half of Lady Gregory's *Rising of the Moon* there is scarcely a movement: merely that no-one should strut or fret tickles you. Miss Maire O'Neill, as Nora, in *The Shadow of the Glen*, stands almost stock still through a scene where most English actresses would pace the stage like lionesses in a zoo. The result is that when she does move you can see the passion propel her like a screw. In Mr Yeats's *Kathleen ni Houlihan* the average stage-manager would have thought everything under-acted¹⁰.

However, as Lionel Pilkington has argued, this self-imposed discipline contrasts not just with English histrionics, but also with alternative Irish performative practices which were perceived as incompatible with the modern norms of bodily restraint that the Abbey embraced as part of its modernising agenda:

One valuable effect of the naturalistic style of acting championed in the 1900s by the Fay brothers, Frank and William, and for which the Abbey theatre was so famous, was its presentation of Irish actions and forms of behaviour as decorously familiar. [...] In striking contrast, for example, to the weird gesticulations of a ululating funeral keener, the straw-masked performances of a mummer or the grotesque and often

10. C.E. Montague, qtd. by Adrian Frazier, "Irish Acting in the Early Twentieth Century", in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre*, Nicholas Grene and Chris Morash (eds.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, 231-45, p. 236.

crudely sexual and violent indecorousness of a wake game, acting in the institutional theatre rendered behaviour that was reassuringly and instantly recognisable as modern¹¹.

As it achieved a hegemonic status, the Abbey's embrace of modern norms delegitimised and marginalised those alternative performative traditions which remained, in David Lloyd's felicitous phrase, "recalcitrant to modernity". The bodies that were allowed on the Abbey stage were bodies that did not "strut or fret"—restrained, disciplined bodies, modern bodies—normal bodies. In conjuring up her repeatedly failed performance of heterosexuality, however, Panti denaturalises the norm and exposes it for what it is: another performance, which depends on the painstaking internalisation of dominant codes. Her failed performance, and the shame that attends to it, nevertheless produces in return the flamboyant drag queen who struts and frets upon the Abbey stage. If "queer" is, as Michael Warner defines it, "resistance to regimes of the normal"¹², than it could be argued that Panti metonymically performs the return of the repressed queer. Inviting the Abbey audience to recognise that their (assumed) normality is a performance like hers (and one which is just as susceptible to failure), she queers the institutional space of the national theatre, and metonymically revives the repressed performative traditions which resisted absorption into the normalised idioms of modernity.

There is something openly confrontational about the performance: this is not confessional theatre, as in most autobiographical performances which rely on the creation of a special intimacy between performer and audience (the size of the Abbey stage, and the presence of the whole cast of *The Risen People*, would make this very difficult anyway). Rather, at the end of her speech Panti states her belief that "almost all of you are probably homophobes" and, evoking yet again her self-loathing for "checking herself" at pedestrian crossings, she blurts out, "and sometimes I hate you for doing this to me." However I would argue that in confronting the audience with her painful story of stigma and internalised shame, she offers an empathetic mirror-image of their own perpetual endeavour to perform the norm, a task inherent in the project of heterosexuality everywhere but perhaps particularly mandatory in a postcolonial context, where the narrative of the young nation still needs to be stabilised by an on-going process of policing of bodies. As Helen Munt comments in the context of Irish-American nationalism:

The concept or figure of a nation depends upon an account of 'oneness' that requires by default compulsory heterosexuality. Because heterosexuality is naturalised and assumed, accordingly homosexuality is read

11. Lionel Pilkington, *Theatre and Ireland*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2010, p. 67.

12. Michael Warner, "Introduction", in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Michael Warner (ed.), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, p. xxvii.

as antithetical to the nation and its political embodiment within nationalism¹³.

Finding one's place within the national narrative is thus dependent on one's ability to perform the heterosexual norm, an arduous task of constant self-policing to which everyone, not just the impossibly conspicuous gay boy, must submit themselves. Yet in confronting the audience not with the shamed body who fails to achieve invisibility, but with the most conspicuous body of the drag queen born out of this shame, she ushers them, too, towards a liberating performativity which needs not be perceived as antithetical to the national narrative, but rather reconnects metonymically with a whole body of repressed Irish performative traditions.

13. *Op. cit.*, p. 56.