



## Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 17 | Issue 1

Article 5

Jan-2016

# Trauma, Shame and Performance: Towards a New Topography of Affects in Black Queer Identities

Maite Escudero-Alías

---

### Recommended Citation

Escudero-Alías, Maite (2016). Trauma, Shame and Performance: Towards a New Topography of Affects in Black Queer Identities. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 17(1), 62-75.  
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol17/iss1/5>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

## **Trauma, Shame and Performance: Towards a New Topography of Affects in Black Queer Identities**

By Maite Escudero-Alfás<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Haitian American feminist and lesbian activist MilDred Gerestant has become one of the most acclaimed gender performers who best illustrates the malleability of gender, race and sexuality in the reconstruction of black queer identities. Drawing on interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks like trauma studies, queer theory and affect theory, my contribution analyses MilDred's gender performances as creative attempts to surpass negative affects often attached to minority identities. By exploring the affect of shame as a productive enactment of transformation and hope, rather than as a source of numbness and suffering, this article aims to offer an alternative epistemological paradigm of feminist feeling and thinking, thus challenging mainstream discourses of identity and affective normalcy.

*Keywords:* Shame, Melancholia, Performance, Recovery.

### **Introduction**

Winner of several drag king contests, Haitian American educator, gender alchemist and lesbian activist MilDred Gerestant is nowadays one of the most acclaimed gender performers who best illustrates the malleability of gender, race and sexuality in the (re)construction of black queer identities. MilDred's performances differ from the representations of female black masculinities embodied by other performers not exclusively because she uses theatre, poetry and cultural history to defy cultural standards of gender, race and sexuality with an often humorous and ironic twist, thus playing with racial and social stereotypes such as those found in blaxploitation films. Most revealingly, the success of MilDred's performances also attests to her devotion and ethical involvement in sending an eloquent message to her audience about the freedom to love one's self, as well as respect towards gender, sexual and racial diversity. Moreover, MilDred's pedagogical and spiritual goals are often combined with great doses of eroticism and creativity, all of which strike the audience and force the spectator to read gender identity categories differently: now she can be seen as a black lesbian woman, now as a black man, drag king, drag queen or gay man.

Drawing on interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks like trauma studies, queer theory and affect theory, my contribution analyses MilDred's performances of masculinity and femininity as creative and successful attempts to surpass traumas and negative affects attached to the formation of minority identities. For this purpose, I shall concentrate on the exploration of the affect of shame for several reasons. Firstly, because shame has been all too often disregarded as a worthwhile affect by both psychoanalysis and trauma studies; secondly, because, unlike other affects like guilt or disgust, shame attacks the global system of self-esteem and points to an individual and social

---

<sup>1</sup> Maite Escudero-Alfás is tenured lecturer in the Department of English and German Philology at the University of Zaragoza (Spain), where she teaches 19<sup>th</sup> century British Literature. She has published widely on her main research interests, which range from feminism and queer theory to trauma studies and affect theory.

failure of the person who suffers it and, lastly, because I will refer to a type of invisible shame which, due to its structural resemblance with melancholia, recalls a highly painful affective reaction since it involves painful self-scrutiny, and feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness. Although these are universal human feelings that most people may suffer occasionally, the effects of heterosexism, homophobia and racism often contribute to a more negative topography of affects and emotions. As Sara Ahmed has argued, “such forms of discrimination can have negative effects, involving pain, anxiety, fear, depression and shame, all of which can restrict bodily and social mobility” (Ahmed *Cultural Politics* 154). In a similar vein, in her critique of the sovereign subject, Wendy Brown alerts us to the “wounded attachments” (Brown 52-77) that those who have historically been denied sovereignty inhabit as a consequence of subordination and exclusion that comes out of histories of racism, sexism and homophobia. Such wounded attachments, I would like to argue, create wounded subjects who threaten the epistemological and ontological boundaries of normalcy and humanity required by the status quo. Those injuries may produce, in turn, negative feelings like rage, aggression and resentment. Not coincidentally, Brown elaborates on Nietzsche’s logics of *resentment* in *On the Genealogy of Morals* as an ambivalent site for identity politics: while *resentment*, “the moralizing revenge of the powerless” (Brown 66) entails suffering and pain and prevents the human being from moving on, in its attempt to displace its own suffering, it is also rooted in reaction. In Ann Cvetkovick’s words: “the goal is to depathologize negative feelings so that they can be seen as a positive source for political action rather than its antithesis” (Cvetkovick *Depression* 2). What is at stake here is how to transform those negative feelings and their wounded yet melancholic attachments into a politics of possibility and hope that challenges academic and cultural discourses of racialization, heteronormativity and affective normalcy.

Admittedly, being black and lesbian is also to be positioned on the margins of social and cultural recognition with the subsequent psychic cost that it implies; that is, persons who live a life that does not comply with white heteronormative practices are more prone to suffering states of melancholia, pain, depression and shame than others who follow the linear axes of birth, marriage, reproduction and death. Ahmed has repeatedly argued that the feeling of being outside the limits of cultural and social intelligibility often brings about both a personal alienation and a feeling of disorientation that encapsulate a “politics of discomfort” (*Queer Phenomenology* 148) because “heteronormativity functions as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape” (148). Such an awkward position, that is, the status of being queer, reminds us that life is not always linear and that there are certain spatial restrictions, which can mark a failure to reproduce the expected desires, affects and emotions. The affects resulting from not following the right paths, from “loving a body that is supposed to be unlovable for the subject I am” (146) are multiple, among which shame and melancholia are always included (Braidotti 1993; Butler 1997).

Yet, the embodiment of such politics of discomfort may result in more creative and productive paradigms of subjectivity, thus opening up new epistemological and ontological configurations of identity. In examining the affect of shame as a narrative of possibility within the fields of trauma and queer studies, the present article relies on interdisciplinary theoretical insights that seek to challenge classical psychoanalytic accounts of affects, mourning and melancholia: namely, from Silvan Tomkins’ revolutionary theory of affects, coined in the 1950s, through more recent elaborations of affects defined not only as powerful spatial emotions “effecting displacement and effacement in its subjects” (Munt *Queer Attachments* 80) but also as structures of feeling which can incorporate a productive account of personal, communal and national

identities (Sedgwick 2003; Ahmed 2004, 2010; Munt 2008; Muñoz 2009; Gregg and Seighworth 2010; Eng 2010; Cvetkovick 2012).

So, after offering a theoretical section, I will explore how, by performing different genders and sexualities throughout the last fifteen years, MilDred has enacted a new topography of feeling within (black) queer audiences, ranging from painful feelings of worthlessness, self-beratement and shame to empowering affects such as higher self-esteem, pleasure or happiness.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, her performances invert and queer the foundations of heterosexual desire, often grounded on the premises of a stable sex and gender. This is so when MilDred, as a black drag king, performs as a black drag queen, thus questioning the spectators' own identifications as stable gendered, sexualized and racialized human beings. On the other hand, such a performative status of identity and desire can also contribute to underlining the potential of language to enact new definitions of identity. Not coincidentally, one of her main goals is to teach and heal through the power of performance and speech, deconstructing hegemonic representations of blackness and exposing new paths of feeling differently. The disruption of dominant discourses of identity, affects and power is interestingly mingled by MilDred with an emphasis on her inner strength to transform pathos into laughter, ugliness into beauty or shame into pride, thereby featuring powerful sources for identification and desire.

### **Surpassing Trauma, Melancholia and Shame through Queer Performance**

When queer theory reached its golden peak in the mid-1990s, there was a parallel growth of trauma studies in literary criticism, sociology, anthropology and cultural studies, to name but a few. This irruption of trauma theory into the field of humanities was to be conceived of as a new epistemological and ontological tool with which to find alternative readings and interpretations to the otherwise settled and fixed semantics on traumas related to both national and personal identities. Although trauma theory was first applied to shell shock narratives associated to the different wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in which a new type of male hysteria emerged out of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) and other symptoms defined as “actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a physical threat to the physical integrity of the self” (Luckhurst 64), it was in the 1980s and 1990s that the notion of PTSD included other types of traumas related to identity politics; namely, rape trauma syndrome, child abuse and incest trauma syndrome and violence against women among others. While the decade of the 1990s was essential for the medical and social recognition of such gender traumas, they were outstandingly included in the *DSM IV* (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders), at the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century other traumas pertaining to non-white and queer women, transgender and transsexual persons are increasingly being rendered visible and theoretically approached within the field of queer studies and to a lesser extent from a postcolonial perspective.<sup>3</sup> In this context, we are witnessing how key

---

<sup>2</sup> Since 1995 MilDred has been performing several theatrical pieces and gender performances, which attest to her continuous labour of teaching while performing. Under the rubric of *D.R.E.D.*, her pedagogical acts have moved from the most provocative and challenging “Daring Reality Every Day” up to the spiritual tone of her latest “Divine Reality Every Day”. (In <http://www.dredlove.com>. Accessed 20 December 2014)

<sup>3</sup> The recent publication on trauma by Stef Craps (2013) deals with Frantz Fanon's work on the psychological effects of racism and colonialism as specific forms of insidious trauma that “can result insidiously from cumulative micro-aggressions: each one is too small to be taken as a traumatic stressor, but all together can create an intense traumatic impact” (26). This acknowledgment of racism as a source of trauma encourages an ethico-political practice of exploring events and experiences that “take as their starting point the multicultural and diasporic nature of contemporary culture.” (13-14)

concepts of trauma studies stemming from psychoanalysis – i.e. mourning, melancholia, working through, acting out, depression, self-concealment – are endlessly contested from various perspectives, in an attempt to erase their inherently negative connotations and highlight, instead, new productive frameworks of identity formation.

One of the key terms that has been and continues to be approached within interdisciplinary fields of research is that of melancholia. The notion of melancholia as an ambivalent site of refusal and incorporation of a loss the ego cannot grieve stands as the primary framework for affective human development. In his oft-cited essay “Mourning and Melancholia” Freud writes that “mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal and so on” (Freud “Mourning and Melancholia” 243). By contrast, in defining melancholia as “a mourning without end” (243), as an enduring devotion of the ego to the lost object, melancholia results from the inability to mourn or resolve the grief. Those who fail to resolve those losses, which for minority groups may be the reiterated loss of heterosexuality, whiteness and Western middle-class values, are more prone to suffering permanent conditions of melancholia. Yet, the enactment of an alternative paradigm of melancholia and feeling can give rise to productive sites of identity configuration, especially for queer and black lesbian subjects because they are more likely to inhabit oblivion and erasure from the realm of the politically possible. Interestingly, MilDred’s performances are endowed with a politics of possibility which attest to the important role that queer performance plays in the reconfiguration and depathologization of melancholia and shame.

Ann Cvetkovick’s *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003), thoroughly analyses feminist contributions to trauma studies if only to denounce their overt omission of lesbian sexuality. Moreover, Cvetkovick launches a sharp critique on to the pathologization of lesbian trauma, as if it were an indissoluble category from the realm of psychiatry and medicine. In her analysis Cvetkovick mingles feminism, race studies, Marxist and queer theories and offers an alternative model of subjectivity in which the impact of a sexual trauma can be twisted performatively. She also questions the epistemological boundaries of official genres that establish trauma taxonomies according to a hierarchy of feelings and emotions: “the memory of trauma is embedded not just in narrative but in material artefacts, which can range from photographs to objects whose relation to trauma might seem arbitrary but for the fact that they are invested with emotional, and even sentimental value” (Cvetkovick *Archive of Feelings* 7-8). Such an expansion of traumatic genre allows Cvetkovick to tackle an eclectic collection of materials, including novels, poems, essays, memoirs, videos, films, performances and photography, all of which can generate creative responses revolving around the public and political dimension of queer traumas. In her latest work, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), Cvetkovick delves into the concept of depression as a cultural and social phenomenon rather than a medical disease. In seeking to forge a new topography of feelings in which shame, failure, melancholia and depression can be rethought as a new affective politics, she suggests that creativity and imagination are also forms of “agency that take the form of literal movement and are thus more e-motional or sensational or tactile” (Cvetkovick *Depression* 21). Indeed, MilDred’s queer performances follow Cvetkovick’s premises inasmuch as they claim the recognition of cultures of resistance from which to transform feelings of anxiety, depression, rage or shame into excitement, interest or joy through a juxtaposition of body movements and gestures. Moreover, MilDred engages in spiritual practices such as yoga and healing speeches in an attempt to bring spirituality back to the political. The encounter between politics and affective relations is thus invoked here by means of performance art as a response to racism and homophobia.

Such transformation, then, should not be merely an aesthetic change resulting from the inclusion of new genres; i.e. queer performances peppered with spirituality, but rather, it must be deeply conceptual. As is well known, one effective method to achieve a semantic and epistemological change is through iterative practices of repetition with a difference. Judith Butler coined the term performativity “not as a singular act, but rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects it names; performativity is a renewable action without clear origin or end; the subject is not constrained by its originating context” (Butler *Bodies that Matter* 234). Remarkably, Butler uses the concept of drag to exemplify the constructive and imitative structure of gender, as well as its contingency. As a theoretical weapon, queer performativity can be converted into a discursive strategy to alter the meaning not only of gender, but also of terms like trauma, melancholia or even shame, which lie at the core of most queer feelings in terms of a low self-esteem, indignity, humiliation, alienation, etc. The ultimate task would be to shatter their conventional meanings so that a new semantic and conceptual dynamics may arise. Similar to identity categories, then, trauma paradigms can be endowed with subversive repetitions that favour unexpected affects and norms or, else, the transformation of negative affects into positive ones. In this light, one of the most efficient methods to counteract the pernicious effects of trauma is using humour, irony, parody or camp strategies, concepts widely explored by postmodernist, feminist and queer theorists alike.<sup>4</sup>

The use of self-conscious humour as a pedagogical tool can provide the necessary distance effect when facing racist, sexist and homophobic prescriptions. Cultural critic José E. Muñoz (1999) defends the use of humour and camp aesthetics within the genre of queer performances as they permit to express what is unthinkable and unrepresentable; that is, all that has been silenced and excluded from heteronormative epistemology. In particular Muñoz highlights the concept of “disidentification” as a survival strategy for sexual and racial minorities as it implies an identity positioning based on the repetition of stereotypes with humour and parody. In his own words: “disidentification is the third mode of dealing with the dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against the dominant ideology” (Muñoz 11). This concept becomes relevant for my argumentation inasmuch as the attitude of “working on and against” brings about a tactic of cultural transformation that would enable the re-articulation of traumatic harmful effects. Through disidentification, the subject does not only accept the contradictory components that make out identity but also embrace feelings of shame in order to invest them with a conceptual twist. What is interesting here is the relationship between Muñoz’s concept of disidentification and the Freudian notion of melancholia, for while Freud endows melancholia with a pathological sense, Muñoz opens it up towards ambivalence and resilience. Although both terms share ambivalent structures that work to retain the problematic object, for authors such as Cvetkovick, Butler or Muñoz, melancholia is not a confrontation with loss through a refusal of closure, but rather, a necessary and not always negative structure of feeling or an ‘identity-affirming melancholia’ that in Muñoz’s words is defined as a:

melancholia that individual subjects and different communities in crisis can use to map the ambivalences of identification and the conditions of (im)possibility that shape minority identities [...] This melancholia is a productive space of

---

<sup>4</sup> The development of these strategies of resistance as acts of survival has been discussed, among others, by theorists such as Newton 1979; Hutcheon 1985; Case 1988; Butler 1997; Halberstam 1998; Muñoz 1999; Dyer 2002 and, most revealingly, by MilDred herself.

hybridization that uniquely exists between a necessary militancy and indispensable mourning. (Muñoz 74)

One of the characteristics of this ambivalent melancholia is that it addresses collective as well as individual memory, which allows us to recapture an archive of affects pertaining to black and queer communities. It is important to bear in mind that only when certain queer affects are rendered visible they become part of the social and the political, thereby enacting new historiographies of identity politics. Correspondingly, David Eng and David Kazanjian define this melancholia as “productive rather than pathological, abundant rather than lacking, social rather than solipsistic, militant rather than reactionary” (Eng and Kazanjian ix). The resignification of melancholia brings about a parallel reconsideration of the affect of shame, especially due to its structural resemblance with melancholia. Part of this similitude has been pointed out by the recent renaissance of exploring affects in the realm of queer studies.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the conceptualization of shame as the affect of “indignity, of defeat, of transgression, and of alienation” (Tomkins *Shame and Its Sisters* 133) and its potentiality to be transformed into positive affects was firstly theorized by Silvan Tomkins in his groundbreaking work *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (1962-1992).<sup>6</sup> Before Tomkins’ work, shame was basically considered as a visible emotion that could be easily identified by its physical manifestations. Thus, from Charles Darwin to Sigmund Freud, the study of shame had been reduced to emphasizing its physiological traits. In his text *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) Charles Darwin offered a pioneer physiological description of shame as a blushing of the face or an averted gaze with a “strong desire for concealment” (Darwin 319). Sigmund Freud, on the other hand, overlooked the importance of affects in the formation of the subject and considered shame as a reaction formation to maintain the repression of forbidden exhibitionistic impulses, as a kind of moral watchman “who maintains repressions [...] as a dam against immoral, exhibitionistic excitement, organically determined and fixed by heredity” (Freud *Three Essays on Sexuality* 138). Freud’s premise that such moral dams are genetically determined, restricting human dignity and emotions to basic drives of survival, has brought about important limitations on both his own theories and one’s free will, a freedom that rises from the complexity of the human affect system itself. Moreover, Freud’s overestimation of guilt over shame has historically relegated the latter to academic and social oblivion. So, whereas guilt attaches to what one does, therefore signaling a punctual experience, shame attaches to and sharpens the sense of what one is, enacting an ontological and phenomenological topography which can last throughout our whole lives.

As a response to Freud’s trivialization of the affect system, Tomkins elaborated on this theory of affects and, particularly, on the shame-humiliation dyad. In contrast with the Freudian centrality of drives, Tomkins’ most valued contribution lies on the primacy of affects as the main motivational system of human life. Thus, unlike drives, which are more limited in time and in density due to their instrumentality, affects can be endowed with a greater motivational freedom involving an extraordinary competence to develop cognitive and emotional learning. Another key distinguishing feature is that whereas drives are primarily self-fulfilling, affects can be autotelic;

---

<sup>5</sup> Although in the past few years there has been an affective turn (Ahmed 2004, 2010; Ngai 2005; Munt 2008; Flatley 2008; Eng 2010; Gregg and Seighworth 2010) there exist previous works thoroughly engaged with the theorization and analysis of affects as core structures of psychological and social transformations (Tomkins 1952-1992; Sedgwick and Frank 1995; Massumi 1995; Sedgwick 2003).

<sup>6</sup> All quotations from this work have been taken from a revised version selected and edited by Sedgwick and Frank in 1995.

that is, self-reinforcing agents with essentially affective responses. This means that the affect system has both self-rewarding and self-punishing characteristics that can be temporarily transformed into negative and positive responses respectively. Accordingly, any negative affect can be invested in another positive affect as well as being capable of restructuring the emotional charge of such effect. In Tomkins' words:

affects may also be invested in other affects, combine with other affects, intensify or modulate them, and suppress or reduce them. In marked contrast to the separateness of each drive, the emotions readily enter into combinations with each other and readily control one another. (Tomkins 56)

The potential of affects to be attached and connected to other affects provides a new epistemological outline from which to counteract the negative and pernicious effects of personal and collective traumas. Not coincidentally, Tomkins' theories have been thoroughly analyzed by literary and cultural critics such as Eve K. Sedgwick (1995, 2003), Sara Ahmed (2004, 2010) or Sally Munt (2008), all of whom have focused on the malleability of shame as a key trait to explore a promising structural and semantic freedom for non-teleological thought. Sedgwick, for instance, insists on how the predominant role of shame over other affects in the formation of identity and its potential to alter pathological accounts of minority identities based on their race, sexuality, class or nationality must be seen as meaningful clues possessing a contingent orientation towards the healing and flourishing of traumatized individuals and communities. Likewise, Munt theorizes on the notion of shame as produced by the circulation of different emotions that can be easily attached to "envy, hate, contempt, apathy, painful self-absorption, humiliation, rage, mortification and disgust" (Munt *Queer Attachments* 2). Furthermore, she considers shame as a mobilizing agent of the self and communities that "can also produce a reactive, new self that has a liberatory energy" (80). If the forms taken by shame are available for the work of metamorphosis and transfiguration, a distinction can be drawn, then, between shame as a monolithic entity that prevents any productive effect on trauma and as a malleable affect that can be turned back against itself to re-create a new narrative of recovery.

In her elaboration of a queer phenomenology, Ahmed emphasizes that following lines of resistance and rebellion against heteronormativity may give rise to new impressions of reality. Thus, for a lesbian to live a disoriented life does not exclusively mean inhabiting a body that is not recognized by the social and political order, but also embodying a politics of hope which might generate new paths of desire and different routes. Even though maintaining a permanent positive transgression is not psychically, socially and materially possible for some individuals, Ahmed points out that the ambivalence of these discriminatory structures may indeed allude to a self-rewarding component because "the non-fitting or discomfort opens up possibilities, an opening up which can be difficult but exciting" (Ahmed *Cultural Politics* 154). In the same way that the feminist movement has been historically peppered by negative affects such as anger, humiliation or pain transforming them into love, hope and courage, Ahmed states that racial and sexual minority cultures should reinforce creativity and dynamism so as to articulate more hopeful affective attachments. Given the malleability of affects, then, lesbian bodies can be reoriented towards unofficial yet fulfilling paths of love, hope and endurance that may counteract the pernicious effects of shame.



## MilDred Gerestant's Queer Performances: From the Malleability of Gender to the Resignification of Shame

Considering the theories exposed above, this article moves now on to the way(s) in which MilDred's performances of queer masculinities and femininities attest not only to the malleability of gender categories but also to that of the affect of shame, thus engaging with an ethics of love and restorative care towards female and lesbian identities. MilDred's acts differ from other drag kings' not only in that she performs acts of queer masculinity and femininity but also in the pedagogical and healing aim of her performances. Not coincidentally, MilDred is presented in her website as a:

Healer, creator, actress, Haitian-American, multi-spirited, performance-artist, poet, educator, activist, singer, gender harmonizer and a gender-illusionist Wo-Man. Healing, Teaching and Performing all over the U.S. and abroad, her shows are spiritual, visually stimulating, thought-provoking, funky, fly, supernatural-high musical and spiritual performances on freedom of selves and self love, as well as gender fluidity. (Gerestant *D.R.E.D* 1)

Using theatre, spirituality, humour and cultural history, MilDred defies cultural standards of gender and race with an often humorous and ironic twist, playing with racial and social stereotypes such as those of the Mac Daddy or pimp, traditionally defined as sexist, racist and homophobic. MilDred skilfully shifts on stage from gender to gender, with each shift in music she switches her character, her costume and her voice. Her creativity is so fluid that one of MilDred's idiosyncrasies is her enactment of unorthodox genders: now she is portrayed as a black lesbian woman, now as a black man, black drag queen or black gay man. Such body transformations articulate histories of oppression that connect collective suffering to individual feelings, suggesting new models of affective politics that move beyond normative understandings of gender, race, trauma and shame. By embracing the physicality of both body and affect, she develops unusual tools and imaginative forms of psychic and social reparation to pursue new cultural paradigms of being queer and black.

Thus, MilDred's performances range from the depiction of black masculinities as embodied by pimps, aggressive drug dealers or violent heroes as found in Blaxploitation films like Gordon Park's *Shaft* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972) through the representation of hip-hop artists such as Ice-T Cube or Isaac Hayes up to contemporary embodiments of black drag queens as depicted in films like Jenny Livingstone's *Paris Is Burning* (1990). It is precisely MilDred's embracement of such different genders that has enabled her to empathize with male black roles that *a priori* were a source of shame and *resentment*. For instance, MilDred recalls that when dressed up off stage as a man at night, she had a hard time catching a cab, thus feeling more sensitive to the discrimination most black men suffer because "the cabs would come up to me and they'd slow down, and then they'd rush off" (Munt *Butch/Femme* 154). Thereby, one of the issues in her show is what it means to be a black man in terms of racial and gender identity and the choice of rap and hip-hop embodiments of black masculinity is deliberate and meaningful. On the one hand, MilDred wants to send us an eloquent message about the constructed status of black masculinity, playing upon stereotypes that "rely on those already ostracized within African American communities: i.e. 'at risk' youth of the hip-hop generation of men 'on the down low' alone" (Neal 3). On the other, the incorporation of a queer twist, embedded with humour and irony, in her performance allows room for launching a critique upon the sexist, misogynist and homophobic connotations of such depictions. Apart from questioning these stereotypes, there is in MilDred's acts a fuelled impulse

to paying homage to such masculinities with admiration and respect if only because, although those black men have survived a long history of brutal violence and discrimination, they have become idols in their African American communities. Such resignification of masculinities allows MilDred to defamiliarize negative affects such as shame or disgust traditionally attached to them and, in turn, it enhances pride or enjoyment, positive affects that can be clearly appreciated in the audience's cheerful responses. Furthermore, when performing the character of "Shaft", she deconstructs his concomitant gross pimp masculinity by incorporating explicit feminine devices such as the holding of a fan or the wearing of a fuchsia foulard over his shoulders. The result is that the taken for granted feelings of aggressiveness and repudiation of violent black masculinities are turned into a self-consciously articulated queer masculinity which can forge new aesthetic, ethic and political subjectivities.

The metamorphosis of hegemonic genders, sexualities and affects is carried out by the appropriation of stigmatized gestures and embodiments that clearly point to an effeminate queer identity. MilDred's ethical stance is clearly shown in her recurrent and omnipresent mantra citing: "Remember to always love yourself and find your true path. Life is too short to be afraid. Don't let people tell you how to live your life" (Gerestant *D.R.E.D* 1). Likewise, when her act comes to an end she sings "Who I Am", a spiritual and emotive hymn celebrating the power of life, which both reflects the ostracized lives of black queer people and upholds an optimistic impulse encouraging them to live their lives and caring for each other. There is in MilDred's project a pervasive defence of difference and freedom of expression as key agents for sociocultural change. This potential freedom, which she somehow links to queer politics, can be related to an inner strength of spirituality that transforms her performances into powerful sources of identification and desire.<sup>7</sup>

Undoubtedly, there is in MilDred's performances a revival of spirituality as a new epistemological category that, as Cvetkovich suggests, "lends itself to the project of rethinking the relation between feeling and politics so that organized political collectivity or action is not an idealized or predictable horizon to which spiritual and affective life must aspire" (Cvetkovich *Depression* 111). Likewise, Eng has elaborated on structures of feeling that are ephemeral or difficult to name in our colourblind age. These forms of feeling remain crucial to examine privileged narratives of our history and culture since they often mark the presence of race in our colourblind age. By focusing on the concept of racial melancholia, Eng aims to further expand the Freudian notion of melancholia and incorporate race "as constitutive of the earliest form of object relations and subjective development" (Eng 163). Race must not be seen as an additional element in the psycho-sexual-affective formation of the subject but rather as an essential part of our identities that prompts individuals to embracing profoundly decisive affects. The racial melancholia to which some non-white people are subjected and their inability to surpass the loss of a "contagious white heterosexuality" (Eng and Kazanjian 343), must oblige us to search for racial reparation as a collective political enterprise, "rethinking, in turn, Melanie Klein's theories of infantile development in terms of good and bad *racialized* objects" (Eng 21).<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> This turn to spirituality as a source of inner and social transformation has been explored, among others, by Sedgwick in "Pedagogy of Buddhism" (Sedgwick 153-181). Although Sedgwick's interest in Buddhism is prompted by her diagnosis of a serious illness, she focuses on Buddhist literature as a pedagogical tool to picture one's life otherwise than it is, thus holding metamorphosis as an essential phenomenon.

<sup>8</sup> The notion of "reparation" refers to Klein's basic psychoanalytical model that consists of two main innate conflicts in the development of the infant: love and hate, both echoing frustrating and satisfying feelings towards the mother/breast external world. This oscillation between hate and love allows the infant to feel guilt and reparation respectively with the resulting drive to undo the harm or to make reparation. According to Klein, the tendency to

This racial melancholia is also conveyed in MilDred's performances through the use of autobiography and memoir for she always claims her identity as a Haitian American woman who felt the nerdy and ugly duckling during her childhood, being rejected by other kids because of her skin colour and sexuality. Having always had a love for women, yet not loving herself, it became critical for her to accept what she was and embrace who she wished to become. She claims: "I was labelled, ridiculed, and ostracized for the way I looked and where I came from" (Gerestant *D.R.E.D* 1). That led to a hindering life of self-hate and suicide attempts for MilDred. What gave her the strength to rise up from this condition of self-hate was a deeper search into self and self-love. As asserted in her website:

She has found personal freedom from our culture's imprisoning belief systems through her spiritually uplifting performances as a drag king where she embraces the gift and range of human sexuality. Whether it's Dred in a man's suit, tie and beard with her female voice or MilDred in a white halter dress, it is the juxtaposition and exploration of masculine and feminine dynamics that has taught her to welcome everything about herself that she was trained to hate. (Gerestant *Discovering* 1)

MilDred's personal transformation from ugliness into beauty, from social rejection to over acclaim also mirrors the politics of possibility that affect theory foregrounds, one in which experiences of self-hatred and low self-esteem because of being black and lesbian can be seen as revitalizing paradigms of subjectivity. Due to their ephemeral and malleable condition, negative affects can be transformed into positive or yet-to-come affects, especially for queers and non-white people. Gaining such freedom would entail that affects such as shame, disgust or guilt – often attached to non-normative bodies – be revitalized by positive affects like interest, joy or excitement.<sup>9</sup> For the standpoint of the queer person, then, it is essential to develop sites for positive identifications and to launch a set of resetting affects capable of neutralizing the pernicious effects of trauma.

This resignification of trauma and affects through queer performance often involves the "turn to memoir and the personal in criticism as a sign of either the exhaustion of theory or its renewed life" (Cvetkovick *Depression* 3). By invoking autobiography, Cvetkovick follows the line of other cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall, who suggests that he "repeatedly used autobiography as a strategy for theorizing, [...] as a means of de-centering the 'grand narrative' of cultural studies" (Procter 4). Significantly, MilDred uses autobiographical elements with the purpose of contesting the grand narrative of gender identity categories. Not coincidentally, her own personal renaissance took place thanks to drag performance. As she recalls when her mum first saw her performing: "Mild, what's happened to you? You were so shy!" (Gerestant *D.R.E.D*, 1). Likewise, while a beam of light shines on her feminine silhouette in the centre of the stage, she utters the following words:

---

repair can result in creative acts, therefore showing empathy and generosity towards others. Interestingly, Eng incorporates race into the Kleinian discourse, challenging dominant paradigms of psychoanalytical and cultural discourses.

<sup>9</sup> Silvan Tomkins distinguishes between positive affects (i.e. interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy), negative affects (i.e. distress-anguish, fear-terror, shame-humiliation, contempt-disgust and anger-rage) and resetting affects (i.e. surprise-startle), which can neutralize the negative force of harmful affects (Tomkins *Shame and Its Sisters* 74).

I must keep following my dreams and stay on my path. Thank you madams and sisters for supporting, protecting, guiding, enlightening and loving me. Thank you so much for giving me another chance at life, for bringing me a drag performance, which kept me away from my job at the World Trade Center on September 11. On September 10 my guarding angels guided me to ask my boss to take the next day off. This confirms for me even more that I'm supposed to be helping people through my creativity, my performance. I can honestly say that drag saves lives.<sup>10</sup> (Gerestant *D.R.E.D* 1)

At this point, the audience remains quiet and solemn; MilDred then ends up her performance by singing again her own hymn to life "Who I Am". The power of music as a universal language that connects people everywhere as well as MilDred's personal story are enhanced here as symbols for love and solidarity, compelling the audience to rearrange their own identifications in terms of positive affects and desires.

## Conclusion

In arguing that the interdisciplinary theoretical framework of trauma studies, affect and queer theory can articulate new epistemological and ontological sites of identity formation, MilDred's performances serve the valuable function of rethinking individual and collective traumas of loss, homophobia and racism. The understanding of the affect of shame as part of the domain of the political brings about a modification in cognitive and emotional conditions of oppressed minority groups such as queer black persons. As an affect, shame has a higher degree of freedom to interact with other positive affects; hence its capacity to produce insight about new forms of feeling and thinking. Moreover, the theorization of a productive type of shame that resembles and rewrites the psychoanalytical concept of melancholia is enabled by the temporal logic of affect, the fact that, as Tomkins noticed, "it has the characteristic of freedom of time. [...] Theoretically, one could live a life entirely free of pain, or occasionally experience pain, or live in constant pain. These contingencies depend entirely on how often and how continuously the individual's pain receptors are stimulated" (Tomkins *Shame and Its Sisters* 47). Such a conceptualization of affect and melancholia insists on displaying antidepressant narratives as part of MilDred's personal and political project. By bringing her own creativity and autobiography into her performances she is also engaging in common practices for queer subcultures where "memoir has been an entry point into the literary public sphere for working-class writers, the backbone of solo performances, and a mainstay for small presses" (Cvetkovick *Depression* 74). These types of narratives, Cvetkovick suggests, can forge an alternative aesthetic and political site of identity formation to mainstream official discourses, which more often than not, deny agency to minority subjects. It is my conviction, then, that in order to achieve individual and collective reparation, and bring positively induced affects to the fore, a strong and collaborative effort must be made between personal commitment and communal responsibility. If such is the case, new topographies for

---

<sup>10</sup> Such an emotive speech on the power of performance as a healing catalyst is even more moving when one knows that on September 11 2001 MilDred should have been working as a computing data processor at the World Trade Center – her usual job at the time – but, as she recalls, she asked for a day off to perform as a drag king.

feeling, desiring and thinking can be fuelled as part of the will to acknowledge less racist, homophobic and painful prescriptions of existence.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> The research carried out for the writing of this article is part of a project financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (MINECO) (code FFI2012-32719). The author is also grateful for the support of the Government of Aragón and the European Social Fund (ESF) (code H05).

## References

- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. London, New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- . *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2006. Print.
- . *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010. Print.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *The Emotional Tie. Psychoanalysis, Mimesis and Affect*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003. Print.
- Brown, Wendy. *States of Injury. Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1995. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. London, New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- . *The Psychic Life of Power. Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997. Print.
- Case, Sue. 'Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic'. *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*, 11(1) (1988): 55-73. Print.
- Craps, Stef. *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013. Print.
- Cvetkovic, Anne. *An Archive of Feelings. Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003. Print.
- . *Depression. A Public Feeling*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2012. Print.
- Darwin, Charles. *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*. 1872. Introduced by Paul Ekman. London: Harper Collins and Fontana, 1999. Print.
- Dyer, Richard. *The Matter of Images. Essays on Representation*. London, New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Eng, David and David Kazanjian. Eds. *Loss. The Politics of Mourning*. Berkeley: U. of California Press, 2003.
- Eng, David. *The Feeling of Kinship. Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010.
- Flatley, Jonathan. *Affective Mapping. Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard UP, 2008.
- Freud, Sigmund. "A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality and Other Works". 1901-1905. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. II. Translated and edited by James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1962. 125-171. Print.
- . "Mourning and Melancholia". 1917. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XIV. Translated and edited by James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1957. 243. Print.
- Gerestant, Mildred. *D.R.E.D.: Daring Reality Every Day*. 2001. Amateur video. Available at: <http://www.dredlove.com> (13 Jan 2015)
- . (2010). "Discovering the man in me empowers the woman I really am". Available at: <http://www.dredlove.com> (20 Dec 2014)
- Gregg, Melissa and Gregory Seigworth. Eds. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010. Print.
- Halberstam, Judith. *Female Masculinity*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1998. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody. The Teachings of Twentieth-century Art Forms*. London, New York: Routledge, 1985. Print.
- Luckhurst, Roger. *The Trauma Question*. London, New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- Massumi, Brian. 'The Autonomy of Affect'. *Cultural Critique* 31, (1995): 83-109. Print.
- Munt, Sally. *Butch/Femme. Inside Lesbian Gender*. London, Washington: Cassell, 1998. Print.

- . *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame*. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications. Queers of Colors and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis, London: U. of Minnesota Press, 1999. Print.
- . 'Between Psychoanalysis and Affect: A Public Feelings Project'. *Women and Performance* 19, no. 2, 2009.
- Neal, Anthony. *New Black Man*. London, New York: Routledge, 1995. Print.
- Newton, Esther. *Mother Camp. Female Impersonators in America*. Chicago, London: The U. of Chicago Press, 1979. Print.
- Procter, John. *Stuart Hall*. London, New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky and Adam Frank. Eds. *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995. Print.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003. Print.
- Tomkins, Silvan. *Affect Imagery Consciousness*. New York: Springer. 1962-1992. Print.
- Williams, Raymond. 'The Analysis of Culture'. 1975. *The Long Revolution*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961. 57-58. Print.